

Rival powers vying for space to grab in Syria's east

Author:

Sun, 2019-01-06 21:22

BEIRUT: The planned US troop withdrawal opens up a void in the north and east of Syria, and the conflicts and rivalries among all the powers in the Middle East are converging to fill it. The sudden American decision to pull out its 2,000 troops has forced a reassessment of old alliances and partnerships. The Syrian government, the Kurds, Russia, Iran, Israel and Turkey have all had a hand in the country's nearly eight-year war – each in a way, fighting its own war for its own reasons within Syria. Now all of those conflicts play out in the territory being abandoned by the Americans, creating new tensions, potential chaos and bloodshed. Here is a look at what is at stake.

The territory

The area up for grabs is around a third of Syria, forming a rough triangle. To the north is the border with Turkey, to the east the border with Iraq, and the third side is the Euphrates River. This was the heart of the Daesh foothold in Syria until the US partnered with a Kurdish militia, creating a force of some 60,000 fighters – including some Syrian Arabs and Christian Assyrians – that wrested it away from the militants.

The territory is strategically important. For the Syrian regime of Bashar Assad and its allies Russia and Iran, regaining it means re-establishing sovereignty. The territory was once the source of Syria's wheat and barley, its dams generated electricity and it holds some of Syria's richest oil resources. Without it, Assad will have a harder time with reconstruction and operating long term. For the same reasons, it's been a source of income for the Kurdish militia.

Assad and Russia

Without the Americans, the door opens for Assad and his Russian backers to move in.

“The only obstacle preventing Assad from gaining control of the east was the US presence and the cover that it provided to the (Kurdish militia).

“With that gone ... there is simply no real challenge that would prevent the regime from re-establishing control over those areas,” said Ayham Kamel, of the Eurasia group.

Abandoned by the US, the Kurdish fighters are forced to move toward Russia and Assad for protection against their more feared enemy, Turkey.

Syrian officials boast that the withdrawal is a defeat to America. Controlling the east would help seal Assad's victory in the civil war. The American move also accelerates a trend by Arab states to normalize relations

with Assad, whom they shunned for years. The UAE, a close US and Saudi ally, recently reopened its embassy in Damascus.

Turkey vs. Kurds, Russia and Assad

Turkey's military, along with some 15,000 allied Syrian opposition fighters, is poised to launch an offensive in the east to break Kurdish control over the border.

But an offensive risks creating friction with Russia. In particular, it could wreck a cease-fire agreement the two reached over Idlib, the northwestern province held by rebels and extremist militants where Turkey has influence – enabling a Syrian government assault on the province. Russian and Turkish officials have been holding talks, trying to avert tensions.

Iran and Israel

A Syrian government move east means the spread of Iran as well. It will dramatically widen the land corridor where Iran enjoys free rein for its allied fighters, weapons and supplies across Iraq and Syria to Lebanon.

Already, Iranian-backed militias have expanded control over areas near Syria's border with Iraq and freely cross back and forth. That has alarmed Israel. The likely result will be increased Israeli airstrikes against suspected Iranian-linked targets in Syria.

US, Turkey and Daesh

President Donald Trump dismissed the idea that the US needs influence in the conflict, saying Syria was nothing but "sand and death." He claims the US mission there – to fight Daesh – has largely been completed. But Daesh still holds pockets and US-led coalition officials warn it could surge again.

There has also been growing unrest among Arab tribes in the east, disgruntled by the Kurdish-led administration. They too are likely to be a source of tension and may be leveraged by the different players for their own advantages.



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[Egypt closes 7 ports temporarily due to bad weather -sources, port official](#)

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Reuters

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Sun, 2019-01-06 17:34

ALEXANDRIA: Egyptian authorities have closed the major ports of Alexandria and Dekheila on the Mediterranean Sea and Ain Sokhna and Suez on the Red Sea due to bad weather conditions, maritime sources and a port official said on Sunday.

Authorities also closed three smaller ports along the Gulf of Suez, the sources said.

"Strong winds and high waves do not allow the safe passage of speedboats and the ascent and descent of the guide onto ships," a spokesman for the

Alexandria port authority said, adding it affected the arrival and departure of ships in the ports of Alexandria and Dekheila.



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[Fatah withdraws officers from Gaza-Egypt crossing](#)

Sun, 2019-01-06 20:28

GAZA CITY: The Palestinian Authority says it is withdrawing its officers from a key crossing point between the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip and Egypt. The announcement on Sunday came amid rising tension between the militant movement, which took control of Gaza in a 2007, and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas' Fatah party.

The Palestinian Authority says Hamas has harassed and detained officers as part of a weeklong effort to stop its rival from holding a rally in Gaza to mark Fatah's anniversary. The PA's withdrawal of its officers from the Rafah crossing apparently aims to put pressure on Hamas.

Hamas handed control of the crossing to Abbas's Palestinian Authority in 2017 as part of Egyptian efforts to reconcile the two parties.

Abbas met with Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah El-Sissi in Cairo on Saturday.



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Hamis arrests 5 over Palestinian government media raid
Fatah says Hamis arrests members in Gaza ahead of rally

[Trump confirms key plotter in USS Cole attack has been killed](#)

Author:

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Sun, 2019-01-06 16:50

WASHINGTON: President Donald Trump confirmed Sunday that the US military has killed one of the architects of the 2000 bombing of the USS Cole that left 17 American servicemen dead.

The military said Friday that Al-Qaeda operative Jamal Al-Badawi was believed to have been killed in a precision strike in Yemen.

Our GREAT MILITARY has delivered justice for the heroes lost and wounded in the cowardly attack on the USS Cole. We have just killed the leader of that attack, Jamal al-Badawi. Our work against al Qaeda continues. We will never stop in our fight against Radical Islamic Terrorism!

– Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) [January 6, 2019](#)

“Our GREAT MILITARY has delivered justice for the heroes lost and wounded in the cowardly attack on the USS Cole,” Trump tweeted. “We have just killed the leader of that attack, Jamal Al-Badawi.”

“We will never stop in our fight against Radical Islamic Terrorism!”

On October 12, 2000, a rubber boat loaded with explosives blew up as it rounded the bow of the guided-missile destroyer, which had just pulled into Aden for a refueling stop.

Seventeen American sailors were killed as well as the two perpetrators of the attack that was claimed by Al-Qaeda, in an early success for the terror group and its founder Osama bin Laden.

The chief suspect in the attack, Abd Al-Rahim Al-Nashiri, is being held in the US detention camp in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

Badawi was indicted by a federal grand jury in 2003 and charged with 50 counts of various terrorism offenses, including murder of US nationals and murder of US military personnel.

He was said to have supplied boats and explosives for the attack on the destroyer.

Badawi was also charged with attempting with co-conspirators to attack a US Navy vessel in January 2000, and was on the FBI’s Most Wanted list.

According to the agency, he was captured by Yemeni authorities but escaped from prison in April 2003. He was recaptured in March 2004, but again escaped in February 2006.



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US says key plotter in USS Cole attack may have been killed in Yemen
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[**New Palestinian party wants to 'unify resistance to occupation'**](#)

Sat, 2019-01-05 22:21

AMMAN: A new Palestinian political party wants to unify factions to increase resistance to the occupation, one of its members has told Arab News.

The Palestinian Democratic Group is the latest arrival on the territory's political scene, which is dominated by the rivalry between Hamas and Fatah.

It was formally launched on Jan. 3 in Gaza and Ramallah and comprises political parties and civil society organizations.

Qais Abu Layla said one of the group's most important goals was to unify Palestinian factions to increase resistance to the occupation, and to oppose policies designed to weaken Palestinian democracy and increase fragmentation.

A split between Hamas and Fatah, which has sometimes spilled over into deadly violence, has seen rival administrations run by Hamas in Gaza and by President Mahmoud Abbas' Palestinian Authority in the West Bank. Attempts to reconcile the two have failed.

"Our position is not only opposed to the PLO (Palestine Liberation Organization) leadership but also to Hamas. We feel both are responsible for the split and the negative results that it has produced," Abu Layla told Arab News.

"While we oppose the dissolving of the PLC (Palestinian Legislative Council) we believe that the idea of elections within six months can be a way out of the impasse for the reconciliation."

The elections must include Gaza and Jerusalem and they should be based on proportional representation, he added.

But the party's motives have been called into question by some.

Suheir Ismael, founding director of women's media NGO TAM, said the group's scope was too narrow.

"The group was created after people lost their salaries as members of the Palestinian Legislative Council. To be honest, most people are very skeptical of any political move that is largely on paper," she told Arab News.

"If they want to make a difference they need to address people's daily needs, such as the issue of the new social security law that has invigorated Palestinians more than any political position."

Najeeb Qaddoumi, a member of the Palestinian National Council and a senior Fatah leader in Jordan, said unity was an admirable goal but that the new party must be honest and take a stand if needed.

"Many of its policies are identical to those of Fatah and we call on this new coalition to denounce the undemocratic actions of Hamas especially their latest violent actions in Gaza and their destruction to the studios of the Palestinian Broadcasting corporation," he told Arab News.

Abu Layla said he was aware of apathy among Palestinians when it came to politics – and even hinted at the party's potential to flop.

"To be honest there is no guarantee that this group will succeed, but we have assembled a comprehensive group... we are realistic in our view and know that we have differences between us. But we need to find common ground that

is based on the minimum policies that we all agree to,” he said.



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