

Idlib clashes stir debate over de-escalation deal

Author:

Sat, 2019-01-05 22:01

ANKARA: Escalating clashes between Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and Ankara-backed National Front for Liberation (NFL) in Syria's northwestern Idlib province have raised concerns about a deal to set up de-escalation zones in the region.

The deal was brokered between Turkey, Russia and Iran in September 2017.

The Al-Qaeda linked HTS, trying to control key roads in the province, has increased its activity in southern Idlib and the city of Hama and captured some villages from Turkish-backed militant groups.

The clashes led to the death of more than a 100 civilians and fighters, the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported.

A separate deal, signed last September in the Black Sea resort of Sochi, said the areas where the clashes took place were due to be cleared of heavy weaponry. The deal also required Russia to ensure the status quo in Idlib and avoid military attacks in the region.

But this deal is not yet fully implemented as Russia launched an airstrike in southern Idlib, resulting in significant damage.

In a joint declaration published Friday, local councils in Syria called for the establishment of a humanitarian corridor as a precaution in case the clashes spread to urban areas. The province is home to about 3 million people.

Turkey has 12 observation posts in the region and has raised the alert level as some of the posts, manned by Turkish troops, are close to areas where there has been fighting.

HTS, which dominates more than half the region, remains the most powerful rebel alliance in Idlib and is considered a terrorist group by Ankara.

Sinan Hatahet, an Istanbul-based expert on Syria, said clashes were expected because HTS has been trying to consolidate its power over Idlib.

"This is a major point of disagreement between Russia, Iran on the one hand, and Turkey on the other. Moscow and Tehran want Turkey to be more assertive to counter HTS in Idlib, but Turkey is not willing to spend any finances and resources for such a fight that is very complicated," he told Arab News.

Ankara had it made it clear that its strategic interest lay in northern Aleppo and some areas in northern Idlib, he added, but that the de-escalation deal was not currently under threat.

"The Syrian regime might exploit the chaos to attack certain areas to grab land around the demilitarized zone. But the de-escalation zone will remain even if the regime attacks, because the agreement is between Turkey and Russia and Turkey hasn't really intervened.

"It is an infighting spiral that will always keep on going unless Turkey gets guarantees that it stays definitely in Idlib. But even then Turkey's engagement in Idlib is only to prevent major refugee spillover," he added.

Dr. Kerim Has, a Russia analyst, said Moscow was sticking to its position of eliminating armed groups in the region with the help of the Turkish army and its proxies.

"I think it's not the end of the de-escalation agreement yet. But it demonstrates on what the last Turkish-Russian negotiations with high level officials were principally locked in Moscow, and what Russia prioritizes in Syria for now, namely the Idlib dossier, on the background of US withdrawal from Syria," he told Arab News.

"Besides, the Russian side is becoming more inclined to functionalize the Idlib deadlock as a Damocles' sword on Turkey's own security during the bargaining process with Ankara on the east of the Euphrates."

Turkey was determined to carry out a new large-scale military operation in northeast Syria, he said, and Russia was reminding it of the responsibility its leaders had taken for the "gigantic powder keg" Idlib in the Sochi deal.

Has said Moscow would deploy this tactic for a while, at least until negotiations between Russia and the US and talks between Damascus and the People's Democratic Party (PYD) and its armed wing, the People's Protection Unit (YPG).

"Russia's possible 'green light' to the Turkish side for a new military operation in northeast Syria is directly and substantially related to the results of these negotiations," Has added.

The increasing clashes in Idlib were weakening Turkey's position in terms of its negotiations with Russia, and also undermining its ambitious military offensive plans ahead of a high-level US visit to Ankara next week, he added.

Big hitters John Bolton, Gen. Joseph F. Dunford Jr., and James Jeffrey are due to meet their Turkish counterparts to discuss the latest developments in Syria.

"According to official statements, the Trump administration is aiming to keep the US' Kurdish allies, including YPG forces, which are the number one enemy of Ankara, in a 'safe basin' in Syria," Has said.

It would be harder for Turkey to realize its claims, he added, as requests would increasingly reflect US plans in Syria.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Syria](#)

[Turkey](#)

US warns Syria over chemical weapons ahead of troops withdrawal
US gives no timeline for Syria withdrawal as fighting continues

[Hamas arrests 5 over Palestinian government media raid](#)

Author:

AFP

ID:

1546709270405279500

Sat, 2019-01-05 17:01

GAZA CITY: Hamas authorities in the Gaza Strip arrested five men Saturday over a raid at the Palestinian Authority's media headquarters, in which valuable equipment was destroyed.

Five armed men attacked the offices of the Palestinian Broadcasting Corporation in Gaza City on Friday, trashing equipment worth thousands of dollars.

The media centre is funded by the West Bank-based Palestinian government and houses Palestine TV and the Voice of Palestine radio station.

Staff and a PA official initially blamed the raid on Hamas, which runs the Gaza Strip, but the movement said disgruntled PA employees were responsible. All five arrested are “employees of the Palestinian Authority whose salaries have been cut recently,” the Hamas-run interior ministry in Gaza said. “It turned out that one of them was a Palestine TV employee whose salary was cut last month.”

Hamas seized control of Gaza from the PA in 2007, a year after winning parliamentary elections that were rejected by much of the international community.

Despite losing power in the enclave, the PA continues to pay tens of thousands of civil servants there.

But it has reduced salaries in recent years due to financial shortfalls, causing much ire among its employees.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Hamas](#)

[media](#)

[palestine TV](#)

Palestine TV offices in Gaza ransacked by gunmen
First Gaza rocket in six weeks draws Israeli response

US warns Syria over chemical weapons ahead of troops withdrawal

Author:

Reuters

ID:

1546701244864497200

Sat, 2019-01-05 13:56

TEL AVIV: US National Security Adviser John Bolton has warned the Syrian government it should not see the impending US military withdrawal from the country as an invitation to use chemical weapons.

US President Donald Trump said in December that US troops had succeeded in their mission to defeat Daesh militants and were no longer needed in the country.

The announcement, which took officials in Washington and allies abroad by surprise, contributed to Jim Mattis' decision to resign as US defense secretary and prompted concern that Daesh could stage a comeback.

"There is absolutely no change in the US position against the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime and absolutely no change in our position that any use of chemical weapons would be met by a very strong response, as we've done twice before," Bolton told reporters on his plane shortly before landing in Tel Aviv, Israel.

"So the regime, the Assad regime, should be under no illusions on that question," said Bolton, who is on a four-day trip to Israel and Turkey. Trump has twice bombed Syria over the government's alleged use of chemical weapons, in April 2017 and April 2018. In September a senior US official said there was evidence showing chemical weapons were being prepared by Syrian government forces in Idlib, the last major rebel stronghold in the country. More than half a million people have died during the Syrian war and 11 million have been forced to flee their homes.

During his trip Bolton is set to meet with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan. He said he was not suggesting Syria appeared ready to use chemical weapons.

"As we elaborate how the (US troop) withdrawal is going to occur and the circumstances, we don't want the Assad regime to see what we do as representing any diminution in our opposition to the use of weapons of mass destruction," he said.

If chemical weapons were to be used, "a lot of options would be on the table ... if they don't heed the lessons of those two strikes the next one will be more telling," Bolton said.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[John Bolton](#)

[Syria](#)
[Bashar Al-Assad](#)
[Israel](#)
[chemical weapons](#)

US gives no timeline for Syria withdrawal as fighting continues
Syrian Kurdish leaders seek Russian-mediated deal

[UN envoy arrives in Yemen to push Hodeidah truce](#)

Sat, 2019-01-05 16:43

SANAA: The UN envoy for Yemen arrived in the capital Sanaa on Saturday for talks to shore up a ceasefire in the country's lifeline port city of Hodeidah, an AFP photographer said.

Martin Griffiths is scheduled to hold talks in Sanaa with Houthi leaders and will later travel to the Saudi capital Riyadh to meet Yemeni government officials.

He will also meet in the Houthi-held capital with retired Dutch general Patrick Cammaert, who has been appointed by the UN to head the truce monitoring team.

Griffiths' visit comes as the ceasefire in Hodeidah was generally holding, although there have been intermittent clashes with both sides blaming each other.

Yemen's government has written to the UN Security Council to accuse the Houthi militia of failing to comply with the ceasefire, while the rebels have accused the Arab coalition of carrying out low-altitude flights over the city.

The United Nations is hoping to bring the warring sides together later this month, possibly in Kuwait, to follow up on the progress made at December's talks in Stockholm, diplomats have said.

The UN Security Council is expected to hear a report from Griffiths next week, but no date has been set for that meeting.

The war between the Houthis and troops loyal to the internationally-recognised government escalated in March 2015, when President Abedrabbo Mansour Hadi fled into Saudi exile and the Arab coalition intervened. The conflict has unleashed the world's worst humanitarian crisis according to the UN, which says 14 million Yemenis are on the brink of famine.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Yemen](#)

[UN](#)

[Hodeidah](#)

Yemen government following up reports of aid looting
Restaurant promises refugees in South Korea a taste of Yemen

[Syrian Kurdish leaders seek Russian-mediated deal](#)

Author:

Fri, 2019-01-04 22:13

QAMISHLI, SYRIA: Syrian Kurdish leaders aim to secure a Russian-mediated political deal with the Bashar Assad regime regardless of US plans to withdraw from their region, a senior Kurdish official told Reuters.

The Kurdish-led administration that runs much of northern Syria presented a road map for an agreement with Assad during recent meetings in Russia and are awaiting Moscow's response, Badran Jia Kurd said.

If such a deal could be agreed, it would piece back together the two biggest

chunks of a country splintered by eight years of war and leave one corner of the northwest in the hands of anti-Assad opposition backed by Turkey.

The talks with Russia and new overtures toward Damascus underline a recalibration of Kurdish strategy since President Donald Trump announced his decision to withdraw US forces whose presence has stabilized the Kurdish-led region.

Their immediate priority is to find a way to shield the region from Turkey, which views the Kurdish YPG militia as a national security threat.

FASTFACT

Kurds' immediate priority is to find a way to shield the region from Turkey, which views the Kurdish YPG militia as a national security threat.

Turkey has already sent its army into Syria twice to roll back the YPG. But it has held off attacking the large Kurdish-controlled area of the northeast where US forces operate. Trump, who has not set out a withdrawal timetable, said on Wednesday the US would leave slowly "over a period of time." He also said the US wanted to protect Kurds, who have been vital to the US campaign against Daesh.

Jia Kurd welcomed the idea of a slow withdrawal but said the United States had not discussed the pullout with its Syrian allies who were caught off guard by Trump's announcement.

To fill the expected vacuum, they want Russia to help secure a Syrian army deployment at the northern border. This is part of a wider effort to strike a deal with Damascus they hope will also safeguard their regional autonomy. Jia Kurd said Russia had agreed to mediate.

"The final decision is (to reach an) agreement with Damascus; we will work in this direction regardless of the cost, even if the Americans object," Jia Kurd said in the northern Syrian city of Qamishli.

"Our view is that (Russia) is trying to open new horizons with Damascus; this is what we sensed from them."

Damascus and the YPG have mostly avoided confrontation during the war. At times, they have even fought common foes.

They convened political talks last year in Damascus, but these broke down without progress. Jia Kurd said the need for Damascus to enter serious dialogue was now more pressing.

The main aims of the road map are to protect the border from Turkey, to find a way to integrate the governing structures of northern Syria into the constitution, and to ensure a fair distribution of resources in northern and eastern Syria.

"The ball is in the court of Russia and Damascus," Jia Kurd said. "On this basis we can negotiate and start a dialogue."

One of the biggest challenges will be reconciling the regional autonomy demands with Assad's goal of exercising authority over the whole country again.

The Syrian foreign minister recently said a federal Syria was unacceptable.

Jia Kurd said "conservative" elements in Damascus wanted to ignore political changes and to "impose their control and influence" through the kind of agreements forced on areas where anti-Assad rebels had been defeated.

"This is rejected by us," he said.

The Kurds' bargaining chips include control of dams on the Euphrates River, oil fields and other resources. Jia Kurd said these would be one main element of the dialogue.

Analysts however say their bargaining position has been weakened by Trump's announcement, which heightened Kurdish fears of a Turkish offensive.

Turkey views the YPG militia as an extension of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which has waged a 34-year insurgency in Turkey.

Analysts believe Assad and the YPG could eventually work together against Turkey-backed rebels in northwestern Syria.

Jia Kurd said ending the Turkish occupation and defeating the remaining insurgents there required an agreement between Damascus and the Kurdish-led administration:

"This will give a big push towards ending the occupation and terrorism in Syria."



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Syria](#)

US seeking to ensure 'Turks don't slaughter the Kurds' in Syria