

French defense minister in Jordan to visit troops fighting Daesh

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AMMAN: France's defense minister arrived in Jordan on Monday to visit troops battling the Daesh group, showing Paris's determination to continue the fight after a shock US decision to withdraw from Syria.

After a stopover in Amman, where Florence Parly is set to meet with Jordanian Prime Minister Omar Al-Razzaz, she is expected to visit the H5 air base from which French fighter jets take off for sorties against the militants.

The minister's last-minute trip to Jordan comes on the heels of US President Donald Trump's surprise decision in mid-December to pull out all 2,000 American troops stationed in Syria, saying "we've won" against Daesh.

"The impromptu announcement of the US withdrawal from (Syria) caused a lot of questions," Parly told reporters before landing.

France does not "fully share President Trump's analysis," she said, adding the jihadists were "not quite finished."

"Our priority is to continue until the end."

After sweeping across swathes of Syria and Iraq in 2014, the militants' cross-border "caliphate" has been erased by multiple offensives, pushing them back to just a few holdouts in the Syrian desert.

In Syria, Daesh has been rolled back by separate offensives led by the country's army and an Arab-Kurdish alliance backed by the US-led coalition called the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

The SDF are currently battling to expel the militants from their eastern holdout near Syria's border with Iraq.

Without the help of Washington, which carries out 90 percent of the coalition's strikes on Daesh, the French government has said it will be difficult to finish the militants off for good.

"The United States plays a very important role as leader of the international coalition," said Parly, adding that it might not be "realistic or effective" to continue without Washington.

The French military has deployed 1,200 soldiers as part of the anti-Daesh efforts, via air operations, artillery, special forces in Syria and training for the Iraqi army.

A ranking French officer said the timeline for the US withdrawal "might not be incompatible" with the capture of the jihadists' remaining territory, "if it is long enough and the (SDF) advance is fast enough."

France will also have to deal with the issue of foreign militants, especially Europeans, held by the SDF, now under threat of a looming Turkish offensive to clear Kurdish fighters from its border.

"The US-led coalition has relied heavily on the Kurds as ground operators," said Parly.

"Their fate is of major concern, and there are other questions about the

future of a number of prisoners they are holding.”



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[Syrian war claimed 20,000 lives in 2018, says monitor](#)

Author:

Mon, 2018-12-31 22:59

BEIRUT: Syria's nearly eight-year-old conflict saw its lowest annual death toll in 2018 as the regime reasserted its authority over swathes of territory, a war monitor said on Monday.

A total of 19,666 people were killed this year as a result of the conflict, which erupted in 2011, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitoring group reported.

“2018 was the lowest annual toll since the start of the conflict,”

Observatory chief Rami Abdel Rahman told AFP.

The Britain-based monitor relies on a vast network of sources across Syria to document the war that broke out after the brutal repression of nationwide anti-regime protests in 2011.

The death toll for 2017 stood at more than 33,000 and the highest annual figure was reached in 2014 – the year Daesh proclaimed a “caliphate” over large parts of Syria and neighboring Iraq – when 76,000 people were killed.

Among those killed in 2018 were 6,349 civilians, 1,437 of them children, Abdel Rahman said.

“Most of those killed during the first part of the year were killed in regime and Russian bombardment of opposition areas, including Eastern Ghouta,” Abdel Rahman said. “The majority of those killed in the second half of the year were killed in coalition airstrikes,” he added.

The first months of 2018 were marked by major Russian-backed government operations to retake opposition bastions in and around the capital Damascus. The bloodiest of them was an assault on Eastern Ghouta, a densely populated area east of Damascus that remained besieged for years.

Battle against Daesh

The most active front of the past few months has been the battle against the remnants of Daesh in eastern Syria.

The Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), backed by a US-led coalition carrying out airstrikes, launched an offensive on Sept. 10.

Militants defending the last rump of their once sprawling proto-state, near the Iraqi border along the Euphrates River, have put up fierce resistance but seem close to collapsing. While fighting has ended or is winding down in several parts of the country, 2019 could see its share of military flare-ups.

Besides the continued threat posed by Daesh sleeper cells even after it loses its last pocket in eastern Syria, two other areas remain of concern.

Turkey has threatened a major offensive against the Kurdish militia that controls regions along its border in northeastern Syria.

The announcement made by US President Donald Trump two weeks ago that he had ordered a full troop pullout from Syria left the US-led coalition’s Kurdish allies more exposed.

Thousands of opposition fighters also remain in Idlib, a northern province where many of them were transferred as a result of deals to end government assaults on other areas across the country.

Under an agreement reached in Russia, Turkey was tasked with disarming some of the groups active in Idlib but little progress has been achieved.

President Bashar Assad has consistently said that his forces would seek to reconquer the entire Syrian territory.

According to the Observatory, the government and its allies now controls 60.2 percent of Syrian territory, while the SDF hold 28.8 percent.

The Kurds last week asked for the regime's help against the threat of a Turkish offensive, a move that will put pay to their ambitions of increased autonomy.

By comparison, the US-based Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project puts the number of conflict-related deaths in Afghanistan at more than 40,000 this year.



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As Syria war winds down, refugees stay put despite hardships
Iraqi jets strike Daesh sites in Syria as Trump slows pullout schedule

Hariri hopes Lebanon will 'turn a new page' in 2019

Author:

Mon, 2018-12-31 22:35

BEIRUT: Thousands of troops were on Lebanon's streets Monday as the country prepared to ring in 2019.

A huge party was held in central Beirut for the second consecutive year, attracting people from the city's neighborhoods and surrounding districts, and there were tough security measures in place from the military.

The Defense Ministry suspended issuing permits for carrying firearms on all Lebanese territory, and 13,000 military personnel were deployed to protect tourists, places of worship and commercial facilities, as well as manage traffic congestion.

Security forces reiterated their call for people to refrain from the deadly tradition of celebratory gunfire, saying that those carrying out this act would face prosecution.

Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri, speaking at an event in the capital, said he hoped a new government would be formed in 2019.

The elections were in May 2018.

"I want the Lebanese to rejoice so that we turn a new page and think of the country and the people," he said. "I hope the celebration meets the aspirations of the Lebanese people, and especially the people of Beirut."

Economic bodies stressed the need to form a government at the beginning of 2019 and expressed their regret for the current turmoil, amid calls from social media users for a general strike.

The country's finance minister had earlier warned that Lebanon was entering a financial crisis.

"The repercussions and consequences of the economic crisis today are at their highest. "The crisis today has started to transform into a financial crisis from an economic crisis," said Ali Hassan Khalil late on Saturday, according to Lebanon's state-run National News Agency.

"We hope it will not become a monetary crisis," he said.

Grocery shops in Beirut were packed, a sign that some families were preparing to spend New Year's Eve at home, with prices for festivities skyrocketing to as much as \$1,500 per person.



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After year of political deadlock, financial woes, what next for Lebanon? Lebanon's Hariri hopes government will be finalised on Friday

[Sudanese police clash with anti-government protesters](#)

Mon, 2018-12-31 21:14

KHARTOUM: Sudanese police on Monday used tear gas to disperse thousands of protesters shortly after they began to march toward the Nile-side presidential palace in Khartoum to press their demands for President Omar Bashir to step down, according to activists and video postings.

There were unconfirmed reports of protesters being shot by live ammunition.

Video clips posted online by activists show pools of blood outside a small eatery in the city center. Another one shows protesters carrying a man whose head and shirt are bloodied. Scores of demonstrators run away as the sound of

gunfire is heard.

A female protester's voice is heard urging others, "don't run," as those around her violently cough from the tear gas.

"I am going to die," another female voice says.

Before the clashes erupted, the demonstrators sang the national anthem, chanted "peaceful!" – as if to emphasize their non-violent protest.

Earlier Monday, Human Rights Watch urged Bashir's government to instruct security forces not to use lethal force against protesters, citing independent groups as saying 40 people have been killed since the protests erupted nearly two weeks ago.

The New York-based group said Sudanese forces have been using tear gas and live ammunition against protesters, as well as beating and arresting many. Scores have been injured and hundreds arrested, it said. Last week, the US, Britain, Norway and Canada said in a joint statement that they have "reliable reports" that Sudan's security forces were using live fire.

Monday's demonstrations were called for by an umbrella of independent professional unions, which also urged Sudanese to take to the streets across the country.

Bashir, who has been in power since he led a 1989 military coup, vowed in a meeting with police commanders Sunday that his government would not tolerate any attempt to undermine the stability and security of Sudan, according to the state news agency.

"The objective is not to kill the protesters, but ... to safeguard the security and stability of citizens," he said.

"President Bashir appears to be making public speeches that justify excessive use of force instead of condemning this brutality," said HRW's Jehanne Henry. "With more protests planned, Sudanese authorities should send an unambiguous message to all security forces to respect the rights of protesters and not to use lethal force."

Amnesty International has said it has "reliable reports" that 37 protesters were killed in the first five days of protests, which began on Dec. 19. The government has acknowledged 19 deaths.

Monday's attempted march on Bashir's palace is the second such attempt – thousands tried to reach the white neo-colonial building in central Khartoum last Tuesday, clashing with policemen who used tear gas and batons to disperse them.

Although the protesters never reached the palace, their action showed the depth of popular discontent with Bashir's rule.

Protesters numbering in the hundreds or very low thousands gathered in a dozen or so venues across the city Tuesday and fought pitched battles with

police for hours before they dispersed after nightfall.

This time, the unions are urging protesters to stay on the streets until they usher in 2019 so that they can mark the anniversary of Sudan's independence on Jan. 1, 1956.

Sudan's economy has struggled for most of Bashir's rule. He has also failed to unite or keep the peace in the religiously and ethnically diverse nation, losing three quarters of Sudan's oil wealth when the mainly animist and Christian south seceded in 2011 following a referendum in which southerners voted overwhelmingly in favor of independence.

A year earlier, Bashir, now in his mid-70s, was indicted by the International Criminal Court for genocide in Sudan's western region of Darfur.



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Sudan's Bashir tells police not to use excessive force against demonstrators
Sudan security forces fire tear gas, stun grenades at protesters near Khartoum

Iraqi jets strike Daesh sites in Syria as Trump slows pullout schedule

Author:

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Mon, 2018-12-31 (All day)

JEDDAH: Iraqi warplanes hit a meeting of Daesh leaders near Deir Ezzor in Syria on Monday, destroying the building they were gathered in, the military said in a statement.

The statement said F-16 fighter jets carried out the raid around Al-Sousa village in eastern Syria, as “30 leaders from Daesh gangs” met in the building.

The strike came a day after Iraq’s government hinted at greater involvement for its armed forces in Syria as the US begins withdrawing troops from the country.

But President Donald Trump appeared to backtrack on Monday on shock plans for an immediate pullout of US troops from Syria, but said his drive to end American involvement in wars made him a “hero.”

The shift came as senior Republican Senator Lindsey Graham said Trump had promised to stay in Syria to finish the job of defeating Daesh.

Trump had earlier stunned allies – and prompted the resignation of his respected defense secretary, Jim Mattis – by abruptly announcing that Daesh was defeated and that US troops in Syria were ready to leave.

However, in a tweet early Monday, President Trump seemed to signal a more cautious schedule for pulling out the troops which support local forces.

“We’re slowly sending our troops back home to be with their families, while at the same time fighting” Daesh remnants, Trump wrote.

In contrast to previously emphatic victory declarations, Trump said that Daesh “is mostly gone.”

On Sunday, Graham, who is one of Trump’s principal allies in Congress, lunched at the White House to urge a rethink on Syria.

Graham emerged after two hours, saying Trump “understands the need to finish the job.”

“I think the president is committed to making sure when we leave Syria that Daesh is completely defeated,” Graham said.

Another prominent critic of the pullout plan was retired US Army General

Stanley McChrystal, the former commander of US and international forces in Afghanistan.

On Sunday, he warned that a US pullout would likely cause “greater instability” in the region.



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Syria's Assad authorizes Iraqi forces to strike Daesh in Syria