

Sudan Islamist party urges probe into killing of protesters

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Wed, 2018-12-26 15:20

KHARTOUM: Sudan's top Islamist party, a member of President Omar Al-Bashir's government, called Wednesday for a probe into the killings of protesters in demonstrations that have rocked the economically troubled country.

Angry crowds have taken to the streets in Khartoum and several other cities since December 19 when the government tripled the price of bread

Sudanese authorities say eight protesters have been killed in clashes, but Amnesty International has put the death toll at 37.

At a press conference in Khartoum, Popular Congress Party senior official Idris Suleman said his party's own reports indicated that 17 people "were martyred" and 88 wounded in the demonstrations.

Condemning the killings, the party, founded by late Islamist leader Hassan Turabi, urged the authorities to find those responsible.

"We call on the government to launch an investigation into the killings," Suleman said.

"Those who committed these killings must be held accountable."

Popular Congress Party is part of Bashir's government and has two ministers of state in the cabinet and seven lawmakers in parliament.

Turabi, who died in March 2016, was a leading force behind the 1989 coup that brought Bashir to power, ushering in an Islamist regime that hosted Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden from 1992 to 1996 in Sudan.

Turabi founded Popular Congress Party after he was dismissed from Bashir's National Congress Party amid a power struggle a decade after the coup.

Police and security officers remained deployed in several parts of the Sudanese capital on Wednesday, but no new demonstration had been staged so far.

Bashir has sought to tamp down the discontent by vowing to "take real reforms" to solve Sudan's economic woes.

But his statements appear to have done little to appease protesters angered by financial hardships.

Sudan is mired in economic difficulties including an acute foreign currency shortage and soaring inflation.

The crisis has worsened despite the lifting of an economic embargo by the United States in October 2017.

Inflation is running at close to 70 percent and the Sudanese pound has plunged in value, while shortages in bread and fuel have been reported across several cities including Khartoum.

Since the start of the protest movement, Sudanese authorities had arrested several anti-government figures with liberal and communist backgrounds.

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[Morocco announces new arrests in Nordic tourists' killings](#)

Author:

Associated Press

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1545840587436038800

Wed, 2018-12-26 (All day)

RABAT: Moroccan authorities say a total of 19 people have been arrested in connection with the murders of two Nordic tourists in the Atlas Mountains. Boubker Sabik, a spokesman for Morocco's national security agency, says 10 new suspects were arrested over the last two days for their links with the alleged killers of 24-year-old Louisa Vesterager Jespersen from Denmark, and 28-year-old Maren Ueland from Norway.

Their bodies were found last week in their camping tent in a remote area in the Atlas Mountains. Authorities believe the hikers were killed by men affiliated with Daesh.

Sabik told national television 2M on Sunday that the suspects targeted the two girls randomly and that Daesh didn't coordinate the killings.



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Nine more arrested in Morocco over murder of Scandinavian tourists
Morocco arrests suspect after two Scandinavian tourists murdered

[Assad deploys forces to north of Manbij](#)

Author:

Tue, 2018-12-25 23:50

The deployment of Syrian President Bashar Assad's forces to the north of Syria's Manbij province on Tuesday, according to Turkish media reports, sparked a new debate about how regional powers, especially Turkey, would react to this abrupt attempt to fill the vacuum being left by the withdrawal

of US forces.

The move by Assad forces in the Kurdish-held region is seen as complementing their deal with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a former US ally led by the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG).

The SDF and representatives of the Assad regime recently held a meeting to coordinate the move.

Before the US withdrawal, American and Turkish forces were jointly conducting patrols in Manbij region and the June deal between Ankara and Washington presumed the withdrawal of the YPG militia from the region, but the deal was not fully implemented.

Since Dec. 23, Turkey, along with Ankara-backed Syrian opposition forces, has amassed troops and sent reinforcements, including a commando unit, to the Manbij frontline in an attempt to encircle the area and avert Syrian regime troops from altering the status quo on the ground.

According to experts interviewed by Arab News, the YPG has been searching for a buffer since the US withdrawal and is expected to lean toward the Assad regime as a protective shield.

"However, reaching consensus with the regime bears with it some political and military costs to the YPG," said Oytun Orhan, coordinator of Syria studies at ORSAM, an Ankara-based think-tank.

"It will have to give up its maximalist federalism claims entirely, while its security shield should be integrated within the Syrian army at some point."

Orhan said that any potential conflict between YPG and Turkey in Manbij would incur huge losses for the Syrian Kurdish militia, which currently controls about 25 percent of Syrian territory and approximately 65 percent of the border with Turkey.

"The YPG is, therefore, focused on reaching a settlement with the regime," he said. "However, the presence of regime forces in Manbij would not prevent Turkey from launching a currently pending military offensive within the region because it will not eliminate Turkey's domestic security concerns."

Ankara considers the YPG a Syrian extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party.

The threat posed by the Iran-backed militia in Syria is another parameter to take into consideration while evaluating checks and balances in Manbij.

"The Trump administration said it would ensure that Iranian-backed militias don't fill the power vacuum," Orhan said.

"In the same vein, Moscow would prefer the presence of regime forces rather than the dominance of the Iranian militia."

According to Orhan, regime forces are now focusing all their military clout in the eastern bank of Euphrates river, while pledging to ease the situation

in Syrian city of Idlib.

Yesterday, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov announced that the Assad regime consented to Turkey's presence in Idlib as a military entity rather than an occupying force.

"Coordination between the YPG and the regime has existed since before the US announced the withdrawal of its forces from Syria," Navvar Saban, a military analyst at the Omran Center for Strategic Studies in Istanbul, told Arab News.

"They tried several times to re-open the negotiation channels. The clashes that broke out between them on different fronts were random acts and were not part of an organized campaign."

Saban underlines that the regime forces were part of the Manbij military operation under the SDF.

"They decided to integrate some of their forces and dispatched them in the eastern and western sides of Al-Arimah village," he said. "It is obvious that they do not feel the need to cover their cooperation with the YPG any longer."

According to Saban, it is likely to see even a bigger advance in Manbij area, but the regime said it would "exercise restraint" on the southern part of Manbij and intervene in the cities as an institution and not as a security force.

The regime is testing the reactions of regional players, Saban said.

"The Kurds are not capable of handling such an area alone without the Americans and that is why they needed the regime, but the Russians will not allow the regime to do anything that would provoke the Turks," he added.

From this point of view, Saban doesn't think that the regime would think twice about advancing in areas that Ankara deems important, such as Tal Abyad.

The consensus between Moscow and Ankara will be crucial for the region, according to experts.

Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan told reporters on Tuesday that he may meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin to discuss the US withdrawal from Syria and to increase coordination. A date for the meeting has yet to be set. Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu will also visit Russia over the same agenda.



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Syrian state media report missile attack near Damascus
Manbij roadmap to be completed by end of US withdrawal from Syria

[Syrian state media report missile attack near Damascus](#)

Tue, 2018-12-25 23:21

DAMASCUS: Syrian state media are reporting that air defenses are repelling a missile attack near the capital of Damascus.

State TV gave no further details Tuesday and did not say who was behind the barrage. The attack is the first since a missile assault on the southern outskirts of Damascus on Nov. 29.

In the past, Israel is widely believed to have been behind a series of airstrikes that mainly targeted Iranian and Hezbollah forces fighting alongside the government in Syria.

Russia announced it had delivered the S-300 air defense system to Syria in October. That came after the Sept. 17 downing of a Russian reconnaissance plane by Syrian forces responding to an Israeli airstrike, a friendly fire incident that stoked regional tensions.



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[Iraqi Christians celebrate Christmas one year after Daesh defeat](#)

Author:

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Tue, 2018-12-25 11:40

BAGHDAD: Iraqi Christians quietly celebrated Christmas on Tuesday amid improved security, more than a year after the country declared victory over Daesh militants who threatened to end their 2,000-year history in Iraq. Christianity in Iraq dates back to the first century of the Christian era, when the apostles Thomas and Thaddeus are believed to have preached the Gospel on the fertile flood plains of the rivers Tigris and Euphrates. Iraq is home to many different eastern rite churches, both Catholic and Orthodox, traditionally a sign of the country's ethnic and religious diversity.

But war and sectarian conflict shrank Iraq's Christian population from 1.5 million to about 400,000 after the US-led invasion in 2003. Following the onslaught of Daesh in 2014 and the brutal three-year war that followed their numbers have fallen further, though it is not known exactly by how much. In Baghdad, Christians celebrated mass on Tuesday morning – declared a national holiday by government – in churches decorated for Christmas. Once fearful, they said they were now hopeful, since conditions had improved. "Of course we can say the security situation is better than in previous years," said Father Basilius, leader of the St. George Chaldean Church in Baghdad where more than a hundred congregants attended Christmas mass. "We enjoy security and stability mainly in Baghdad. In addition, Daesh was beaten."

Iraq declared victory over the militants more than a year ago, but the damage done to Christian enclaves on the Nineveh Plains has been extensive.

In Qaraqosh, a town also known as Hamdaniya which lies 15 km (10 miles) west of Mosul, the damage is still visible.

At the city's Immaculate Church, which belongs to the Syrian Catholic denomination and has not yet been rebuilt since the militants set it on fire in 2014, Christians gathered for midnight mass on Monday, surrounded by blackened walls still tagged with Daesh graffiti.

Dozens of worshippers prayed and received communion, and then gathered around the traditional bonfire in the church's courtyard.

Before the militant onslaught, Qaraqosh was the largest Christian settlement in Iraq, with a population of more than 50,000. But today only a few hundred families have returned.

Faced with a choice to convert, pay a tax or die, many Christians in the Nineveh Plains fled to nearby towns and cities and some eventually moved abroad.

Some have since returned, Father Butros said, adding: "We hope that all displaced families will return."







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Damascus lights up its biggest Christmas tree
Palestinians mark Christmas amid Israeli restrictions