

Anti-Daesh envoy quits over pullout from Syria

Sat, 2018-12-22 19:10

JEDDAH: The US envoy to the global coalition fighting Daesh has resigned in protest at President Donald Trump's decision to withdraw US forces from Syria.

Brett McGurk was appointed by Barack Obama in 2015 and retained by Trump. He joins Defense Secretary Jim Mattis in quitting the Trump administration over the pullout of the remaining 2,000 American troops.

McGurk's resignation takes effect on Dec. 31. Less than two weeks ago he said: "It would be reckless if we were just to say, 'Well, the physical caliphate is defeated, so we can just leave now. I think anyone who's looked at a conflict like this would agree with that'."

A week before that, Gen. Joseph Dunford, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said the US had a long way to go in training local Syrian forces to prevent a resurgence of Daesh.

In his letter of resignation to US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, McGurk said the militants were on the run but not yet defeated, and that the premature withdrawal of American forces from Syria would create the conditions that gave rise to Daesh in the first place.

He said there had been gains in accelerating the campaign against Daesh, but the work was not yet done.

After McGurk's resignation, Trump continued to defend his decision to withdraw US troops. "We were originally going to be there for three months, and that was seven years ago – we never left," he said on social media. "When I became President, Daesh was going wild. Now Daesh is largely defeated and other local countries, including Turkey, should be able to easily take care of whatever remains. We're coming home!"

McGurk, 45, is a former deputy assistant secretary of state for Iraq and Iran. During the negotiations by the Obama administration for the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, he led secret side talks with Tehran on the release of Americans imprisoned there.

FASTFACT

Brett McGurk said the premature withdrawal of American forces from Syria would create the conditions that gave rise to Daesh in the first place.

McGurk was a senior official covering Iraq and Afghanistan during President George W. Bush's administration, and was briefly considered for the post of

ambassador to Iraq.

A former US Supreme Court law clerk to the late Chief Justice William Rehnquist, he worked as a lawyer for the Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq after the 2003 US-led invasion and joined Bush's National Security Council staff. In 2007 and 2008, he was the lead US negotiator on security agreements with Iraq.

He will be replaced as coalition envoy by his deputy, retired Lt. Gen. Terry Wolff. Jim Jeffrey, the veteran diplomat appointed special representative for Syria engagement in August, is expected to stay in his position.



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Turkey to delay Syria op; Kurds warn of end to Daesh fight
Constitutional committee will not be formed by year's end: UN Syria envoy

Houthi violations continue despite ceasefire in Hodeidah: Arab coalition

Sat, 2018-12-22 17:07

JEDDAH: The Arab coalition supporting the legitimate Yemeni government said on Saturday that the Iranian-backed Houthi militia continue to violate the Sweden agreement on a ceasefire in the strategic port city of Hodeidah.

“The Houthi militia has breached the ongoing ceasefire agreement in Hodeidah at least 14 times in the past 24 hours,” the coalition said in statement published on Al-Ekhbariya TV for the second consecutive day.

It added that the group were using all types of weapons – including mortars, RPGs, Katyusha rockets and ballistic missiles in violation of the ceasefire agreement reached during UN-sponsored peace talks in Stockholm on Dec. 13.

The coalition also said that the Houthi’s committed the violations in the Ad-Durayhimi, Al-Tuhayta, and Al-Hali districts, as well as other areas in Hodeidah.

The latest Houthi violations coincide with the arrival of the head of a UN mission monitoring a cease-fire in the port city, Retired Dutch Major General Patrick Cammaert, earlier on Saturday.

The UN Security Council on Friday unanimously approved the deployment of an advance team to begin monitoring the ceasefire, under the leadership of Cammaert, for an initial period of 30 days.



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Head of UN mission monitoring Hodeidah ceasefire arrives in Yemen
Security Council votes to send cease-fire observers to Yemen

[Turkey: Nearly 300,000 Syrians return home after military operations](#)

Author:

Reuters

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1545482565411211700

Sat, 2018-12-22 12:34

ISTANBUL: Nearly 300,000 Syrians have returned to their country after Turkey's two cross-border operations in northern Syria, Interior Minister Suleyman Soylu was quoted as saying on Saturday. Turkey has carried out two operations, dubbed "Euphrates Shield" and "Olive Branch," against Kurdish YPG militia and Daesh in northern Syria. Ankara

regards the US-backed YPG as a terrorist organization.

Turkey hosts more than 3.5 million Syrian refugees who have fled the conflict in their homeland. Some Turks view them as an economic burden and a threat to jobs.

"The number of Syrians that returned to their country after the Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch operations is 291,790," Soylu was quoted by state-owned Anadolu news agency as saying.

The Turkish military pushed into Syria northwest in two offensives, carving out a de facto buffer zone.

The first, "Euphrates Shield" in 2016, drove Daesh from territory along the border. The second, "Olive Branch," wrestled the nearby Afrin region from the hands of Syrian Kurdish forces this spring.

Soylu also said that more than 250,000 illegal migrants had been caught in Turkey in 2018, without specifying their nationalities, adding that this showed a jump of more than 50 percent from the previous year.

He said stepped up efforts by Turkish police and security forces and the coast guard to clamp down on illegal migration had curbed the flow of migrants to countries in Western Europe.

Turkey became one of the main launch points for more than a million migrants from the Middle East and Africa taking the sea route to European Union territory in 2015.

The influx of migrants was drastically curtailed by a 2016 accord between Ankara and the EU to close the route after hundreds died crossing to Greek islands.

President Tayyip Erdogan said on Friday that Turkey would postpone a planned military operation against Syrian Kurdish fighters in northeast Syria as he "cautiously" welcomed Washington's decision to withdraw its troops in the area.



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Turkey to delay Syria op; Kurds warn of end to Daesh fight
Russia, Iran, Turkey agree on convening committee to draw up new Syria constitution

[Security Council votes to send cease-fire observers to Yemen](#)

Fri, 2018-12-21 21:19

JEDDAH: The UN Security Council on Friday unanimously approved a resolution that authorizes the deployment of observers to war-torn Yemen to oversee a fragile truce in the strategic Red Sea port of Hodeidah.

The draft, which was submitted by Britain, had been the subject of tough negotiations among the 15 council members, and was amended several times before the vote.

It also endorses the results of UN-brokered peace negotiations in Sweden last week. Yemen's warring parties agreed to a cease-fire that took effect Tuesday and the withdrawal of fighters in Hodeidah, a key gateway for aid and food imports.

The city is a vital lifeline for millions, and the cease-fire between Saudi-backed government forces and Houthi Shiite militias is seen as the best chance yet of ending four years of devastating conflict.

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The agreement also included a planned prisoner swap involving some 15,000 detainees.

Welcoming the resolution, Saudi Arabia's deputy permanent representative at the UN, Dr. Khaled Manzalawi, said the resolution confirmed "the success of the military pressure by the coalition and the Saudi diplomatic efforts in forcing the Houthis to withdraw from Hodeidah."

The resolution, he said, granted the UN the right to deploy a team to monitor the cease-fire in Hodeidah, which will reduce Houthis' room for maneuver and prevent their obstructive attempts and repetitive violations in the past.

[#SaudiArabia](#) welcomes the [#UK](#) led [#UNSC](#) resolution on [#Yemen](#). The resolution affirms the efforts of Saudi diplomacy led by His Excellency the Saudi Foreign Minister [@AdelAljubeir](#) and the Permanent Representative of the Kingdom to the [@UN](#) Ambassador [@amouallimi pic.twitter.com/06S4bkCzqL](#)

– KSA Mission UN (@ksamissionun) [December 21, 2018](#)

The UN Security Council resolution "insists on the full respect by all parties of the cease-fire agreed" for Hodeidah.

It authorizes the UN to "establish and deploy, for an initial period of 30 days from the adoption of this resolution, an advance team to begin monitoring" the cease-fire, under the leadership of retired Dutch general Patrick Cammaert.

The resolution also authorizes UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres to "submit proposals as soon as possible before Dec. 31, 2018 on how the UN will fully support the Stockholm Agreement as requested by the parties."

DPR [@khaledManzlawiy](#): We extend our deepest thanks to our Kuwaiti [@KuwaitMissionUN](#) & American [@USUN](#) colleagues for their efforts in reaching the appropriate resolution which is in the interest of the brotherly people of Yemen and the maintenance of international peace & security

– KSA Mission UN (@ksamissionun) [December 21, 2018](#)

French Ambassador Francois Delattre said the unanimous vote sent a “strong signal of the council’s unity and engagement” on Yemen, and that it had put its weight behind the UN-brokered talks.

Diplomats said the UN observer mission could consist of 30 to 40 people, tasked with ensuring the withdrawal of the warring parties from Hodeidah and the safe passage of humanitarian aid.

The UN said the first members of the mission were already en route to the region.



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UN council to vote on monitors for truce at key Yemen port
Charity says Yemenis face 'double threat' of cold, hunger

Turkey welcomes US decision, vows to clear Syria of Kurd militia and Daesh

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1545401602395000900

Fri, 2018-12-21 13:55

ISTANBUL, PARIS, BERLIN: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Friday promised to clear Syria of Kurdish militia and Daesh insurgents after the US decision to pull troops out.

Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu earlier welcomed the US decision to withdraw its troops from Syria, and said Washington should coordinate with Ankara on the pull-out.

US President Donald Trump's announcement that the US would withdraw its 2,000 troops has upended a pillar of American policy in the Middle East. Critics say it will make it harder to find a diplomatic solution to Syria's seven-year-old civil war.

Trump made the shock decision during a phone call with his Turkish counterpart who said Turkey could clear the remaining militants from the country, media reported.

But for Turkey, Trump's abrupt move marks a removal of a major source of friction with the US. The two NATO allies have long been at odds over Syria, where Washington has backed Syrian Kurdish YPG fighters. Turkey considers the YPG a terrorist organization.

"With regards to the withdrawal, the decision of the United States to withdraw from Syria, we welcome that decision and Turkey fully supports the territory integrity of (Syria)," Cavusoglu told reporters in Malta, during an official visit.

"We need to coordinate this withdrawal with the United States and we are already in touch at different levels."

Erdogan said this week Turkey might start a new military operation in Syria at any moment. Its forces have intervened to sweep YPG and Daesh militants from territory west of the Euphrates over the past two years. It has not gone east of the river, partly to avoid direct confrontation with US forces.

Turkey has repeatedly voiced frustration over what it says is the slow implementation of a deal with Washington to pull YPG fighters out of Manbij, a town in mainly Arab territory west of the Euphrates.

"We have the Manbij road map, we discussed whether we can implement this by the time that they (US forces) withdraw," Cavusoglu said, referring to the Manbij deal.

"So many issues that Turkey and the United States should coordinate (on) and there shouldn't be any vacuum in the country that terrorist groups might also fill."

Syrian Kurdish forces leading the battle against Daesh remnants in Syria could withdraw from the frontlines and redeploy to the Turkish border if the region they control is attacked by Turkey, one of their leaders said on Friday in Paris.

Two leaders of the political wing of the Kurdish-led force, who held talks with French officials about the planned US military withdrawal from Syria, also said they feared the escape of some 1,000 militants being held in Syrian Kurdish jails should guards be drafted to fight elsewhere.

Ilham Ahmad, one of two co-chairs of the Syrian Democratic Council, the political arm of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), warned that a Turkish attack could bring the battle against Daesh in Syria to a halt.

"We will continue our mission but confronting this terrorism will be difficult because our forces will be forced to withdraw from the frontlines in Deir Ezzor to take up positions on the border with Turkey to counter any attack we may face," she said.

Syrian Kurdish forces could "lose control" over detained foreign militants if Daesh used the US pullout to regroup, or if Turkey pushed ahead with its threatened offensive against the Kurds' region of Rojava, she warned.

Hundreds of foreign Daesh militants are being held in Syrian Kurdish prisons. Asked if the Kurds would go as far as releasing them, Riad Darar, the council's other co-chair, said: "Of course not. But we fear that the chaos will not allow us to protect the premises where they are located."

The international coalition fighting Daesh in Syria "has a job to finish" despite Trump's "very serious" decision to withdraw American troops from Syria, the French defense minister said on Friday.

"The decision taken by the US president changes things pretty radically," Florence Parly told RTL radio.

"We consider that the job must be finished," she said, adding that failing to do so could mean Daesh might regroup.

Parly also suggested that implementing the withdrawal of 2,000 US soldiers from Syria should be discussed among the allied coalition, adding that "you can't withdraw troops from one day to another."

France has aircraft in the region, along with long-range artillery in position along the Iraqi-Syrian border.

Washington says France has also deployed special forces inside Syria, though France has never acknowledged this.

The German government says it wasn't consulted by Washington before the US announced the withdrawal of US troops from Syria. Government spokeswoman Ulrike Demmer told reporters in Berlin on Friday that Berlin would have appreciated prior consultations.

Demmer said the US decision could affect the dynamics of the conflict, adding that "much remains to be done" for a final victory over Daesh. She said the US is an "important ally" but declined to say whether Germany considers it a "reliable" one, too.

German Defense Ministry spokesman Jens Flosdorff said the decision has no immediate impact on Germany's aerial surveillance missions over Syria.

The Netherlands, joining other US allies, voiced disquiet on Friday at the US decision and said Washington's plan to reduce its military presence in Afghanistan was premature given continuing conflict there.

Thursday's announcement by Trump surprised the Dutch, who contribute to military missions in Syria and Afghanistan, Defense Minister Ank Bijleveld told journalists in The Hague.

The Netherlands supports the fight against Daesh militants with F-16 jets. The Dutch are set to end their participation in that operation, which falls under US military command, on Dec. 31.

Bijleveld said an end to the US military presence in Syria would have "far-reaching consequences for the region and security." Daesh has "not yet been completely defeated and the threat is not gone," she said, a position at odds with Trump's assessment.

The Dutch were also surprised by the announcement of Washington's plans to significantly draw down its forces in Afghanistan, she said.

Bijleveld said it would be premature to scale back forces in Afghanistan, where the Netherlands has 100 troops in a NATO-led mission – known as Resolute Support – supporting Afghan Army and police forces.

"We are intensifying efforts in Afghanistan because the security situation is not improving quickly enough," she said.



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'It is right for me to step down': Mattis quits Turkey welcomes US decision, vows to clear Syria of Kurd militia and Daesh