

Syrian refugees remain skeptical about return

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ANKARA: While Moscow and Damascus urge the repatriation of Syrian refugees based on improving living conditions in the country, their call seems largely unheard by Syrians who think that the conditions on the ground are not yet encouraging enough for them to return.

Just in November 2018, some 10,232 Syrians have been caught by Turkish border troops crossing illegally into Turkey.

Experts underline that the repatriation process should be carried out voluntarily and with consideration for the socio-economic, political and security risks during the restoration process of the country. Otherwise, it may be premature.

The Syrian regime recently set up a coordination committee for the repatriation of displaced Syrian nationals to their original cities and towns.

Moscow also prepared a plan in July for coordinating the return of Syrian refugees to safe areas in their homelands. The plan was based on the establishment of working groups with Amman and Beirut, with the presence of US and Russian officials.

The reopening of the Nassib border crossing between Syria and Jordan in mid-October has also encouraged Assad government to issue calls for the Syrian nationals to return home.

Following the seven-year-long civil war, about 5.6 million Syrians are believed to have fled abroad to neighboring countries, mostly to Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, while some preferred to set off for a new life in Europe. About 114,000 of them have been repatriated this year, according to data announced by Moscow.

The risk of facing maltreatment when they return to government-held areas also caused concern among Syrian refugee communities.

The UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) has announced that since October more than 700 returnees, mostly from Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, have been arrested and 230 of them were detained in government-controlled parts of Syria.

Omar Kadkoy, a Syrian-origin researcher on refugee integration at Ankara-based think tank TEPAV, thinks that conditions for repatriation aren't ripe yet.

"Many Syrians link the return to political change, but status quo has the upper hand. Plus the risk of being drafted to military, the non-functioning economy, and the lack of safety despite all the recent developments create unappealing conditions for return," he told Arab News.

To encourage the return of Syrians, Assad regime has recently offered an amnesty for army deserters who will allegedly not be punished but will still

have to serve the mandatory two years of military service.

However, those who joined opposition groups against regime forces are exempted from the amnesty, sparking concerns that it aims to attract only Assad supporters home.

According to Kadkoy, who has been living in Ankara for four years, the tempo of life is faster and harder in Turkey, but better compared to where Syrians come from and Syrians are getting used to this complex environment.

"This means they're settling down after seven years and building their future: Kids in schools and universities, parents filling different layers of the labor market, and flourishing businesses," he noted.

Syrian entrepreneurs in Turkey established 151 new companies in October mainly in the wholesale sector. Concentrating their activities in Istanbul, they invested about 34 million Turkish liras (about \$6.3 million) and opened employment opportunities to many.

On the other hand, thousands of Turkish families reportedly began filing requests to adopt orphan Syrian children in Turkey. There are currently about 1 million Syrian refugee children of school age in the country.

According to Kenneth Roth, executive director of Human Rights Watch, there are three major factors preventing many Syrian refugees from feeling that it is safe for them to return home.

"First, the Assad government is continuing to seize and demolish homes in areas that had been held by anti-government forces, meaning that for many Syrian refugees there is no home to return to," Roth told Arab News.

Second, Syrian prisons remain full of people vulnerable to torture and execution.

"Few will want to return home if they face a serious risk of detention," Roth noted, adding that the Assad government has not accounted for the thousands who have "disappeared" in its prisons, many of whom have been killed or died due to horrible treatment.

Roth also said that there has been no accountability whatsoever for the Assad government's deliberate strategy of bombing or besieging and starving civilian areas.

"Few will have any confidence that such atrocities will not resume if there has been no justice for the senior officials who directed them," he added.

Ammar Hamou, a Jordan-based Syrian journalist, thinks that although Syria and Russia are trying to send assurances to Syrian refugees to encourage them to return, in fact the policy of the Syrian regime is contrary to official statements.

"The country is still in the grip of security, arrests are present, and reserve recruitment exists. One of my friends is a refugee in Jordan. He visited Syria two weeks ago, and when he decided to return he was surprised that he was wanted for military service," he told Arab News.



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[UN Yemen envoy pushes Security Council for robust truce monitoring](#)

Fri, 2018-12-14 16:04

JEDDAH: A robust monitoring regime is urgently needed in Yemen's port city of Hodeidah to oversee compliance by the warring parties with an agreed ceasefire in the region, United Nations Yemen envoy Martin Griffiths told the Security Council on Friday.

The Iranian-aligned Houthis and the Arab Coalition-backed Yemen government of President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi agreed on Thursday to stop fighting for Houthi-held Hodeidah and withdraw their troops, the first significant breakthrough for UN-led peace efforts in five years of conflict.

"A robust and competent monitoring regime is not just essential, it is also urgently needed and both parties have told us they would very much welcome it and indeed depend on it," Griffiths told the 15-member council, adding that UN officials were already planning for such a deployment.

Such a monitoring mission needs the backing of the Security Council in a resolution, diplomats said.

Griffiths said in a video briefing that retired Dutch Major General Patrick Cammaert had agreed to lead the monitoring component of the agreement, which took effect on Thursday when the deal was published. He said Cammaert could arrive in the region within days.

“Being present in the field soon is an essential part of the confidence that needs to go with the implementation of this agreement,” Griffiths said. The council was already discussing a British-drafted resolution to enshrine five requests made by UN aid chief Mark Lowcock – one of which was for a truce around facilities needed for aid and commercial imports – and diplomats said that would now be reworked to endorse the agreement reached in Sweden. “We hope to be able to work expeditiously with colleagues to bring about a Security Council resolution which will give the firmest possible support to what has been achieved so far,” British UN Ambassador Karen Pierce told the council.

“As requested we will of course want – with colleagues – to address the monitoring requirements,” she said.

“The UN will take on a leading role in supporting Yemen Red Sea Ports Corporation in management and inspections at Hodeidah, Salif and Ras Issa,” Griffiths said. “The UN ... has developed a plan seeking specific support from member states in the port.”

Meanwhile, in a statement by Saudi Arabia’s King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the Kingdom backed “the agreements reached in Sweden in UN-sponsored talks between a delegation of Yemen’s legitimate government and the Houthi rebels,” the official SPA news agency reported.

“The Kingdom remains engaged in the search for a political solution in Yemen which guarantees the security and stability of the country,” the statement said.

The statement also called on the Iran-aligned Houthis to “embark on this path” toward a political solution.

Saudi Arabia’s Foreign Ministry also said on Friday that it welcomed the agreement between Yemen’s internationally recognized government and the Houthi militia.

The ministry said that the Kingdom was committed to reaching a political solution that guarantees the security and stability of Yemen.

The handing over of the port of Hodeidah to the control of the United Nations will help to alleviate the suffering of the Yemeni people, the ministry stressed.



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Guterres: Saudi Arabia’s crown prince contributed to reaching Yemen agreement

Turkey targets military over alleged Gulen links

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Fri, 2018-12-14 09:21

ISTANBUL: Turkish authorities on Friday ordered the arrest of over 200 military personnel in new raids against suspects linked to the attempted coup in 2016, state media reported.

The Istanbul public prosecutor ordered arrest warrants for 219 soldiers on active duty including four colonels and five lieutenant colonels, state news agency Anadolu said.

Istanbul police launched an operation to capture the suspects on Friday morning.

They are believed to have ties to the group led by US-based Muslim preacher Fethullah Gulen, a former ally turned foe of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Ankara accuses Gulen of being behind the failed coup but he strongly denies any links.

In Ankara, the capital's public prosecutor issued arrest warrants on Friday for 48 people, mainly working in the arms industry, also over alleged links to Gulen.

Turkey refers to the group as the "Fethullah Terrorist Organization" but followers insist they have peaceful goals of promoting Islam and secular education.

Over 50,000 people have been arrested since the failed putsch in a purge lambasted by human rights activists and Ankara's Western allies.

Nearly 130,000 public sector workers have been sacked.

Last week, dozens of people including airforce personnel were detained for suspected links to coup-plotters in nationwide operations.

Turkish officials insist the raids are necessary to cleanse state institutions of the "virus" of infiltration by the Gulen movement.



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Turkey detains dozens nationwide over alleged Gulen links
Turkey will enter Syria's Manbij if US doesn't remove YPG fighters: Erdogan

[Turkey will enter Syria's Manbij if US doesn't remove YPG fighters: Erdogan](#)

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Fri, 2018-12-14 08:39

ISTANBUL: Turkish forces will enter the Syrian town of Manbij if the United States does not remove YPG Kurdish fighters, and it will also target Kurdish-controlled areas further east, President Tayyip Erdogan said on Friday. Erdogan said this week that Turkey would launch a new operation within days against the US-backed Syrian Kurdish YPG militia which controls swathes of Syria's northern border region, in what will be Turkey's third military campaign in Syria in two years.

Ankara and Washington have long been at odds in Syria, where the United States has backed the YPG in the fight against the Daesh group. Turkey says the YPG is a terrorist organization and an extension of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK).

Turkey has complained over the slow implementation of a deal with Washington to pull YPG Kurdish fighters out of Manbij, which lies in mainly Arab territory west of the Euphrates, back to the eastern bank of the river.

"Manbij is a place where Arabs live, but they have surrendered the area to the terror organization," Erdogan told members of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation in a speech in Istanbul. "Now we are saying that you should cleanse, remove them, or else we will enter Manbij. I am speaking very clearly."

Erdogan said Turkey was also determined to bring "peace and security" to areas east of the Euphrates, where the YPG controls an area stretching more than 400 km (250 miles) along the border toward Iraq.

He compared the promised military campaign to an incursion into northern Syria in 2016 and one earlier this year by Turkish forces and their Syrian rebel allies, who still hold territory there seized from YPG and Islamic State fighters.

A spokesman for the Syrian rebels said on Thursday that up to 15,000 fighters are prepared to support Turkey's latest operation.

The United States, which has set up observation posts on the Syrian side of the border, has warned Turkey against a new incursion and said the newly constructed positions would help deter any security threat against Turkey coming from Syria.

Erdogan, however, said Turkey had waited long enough to act against the YPG militia, which it says is indistinguishable from PKK militants who have waged an insurgency against the state in southeastern Turkey for 34 years.

"We are not only providing security for our country when taking steps in Syria but we are also protecting the honor of people," he said.

Kurdish commander Mazloum Kobani said on Thursday the Syrian Democratic Forces, which are spearheaded by the YPG, will respond strongly to any attack.



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Syrian Arab tribes call for Turkish intervention against Kurdish YPG forces
Pentagon cautions Turkey over new operation against Syria Kurds

[Lebanese wary as Israel destroys Hezbollah border tunnels](#)

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By SARAH EL DEEB | AP

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Fri, 2018-12-14 (All day)

MAYS AL-JABAL, Lebanon: As Israeli excavators dug into the rocky hills along the frontier with a Lebanese village, a crowd of young Lebanese men gathered to watch.

The mood was light as the crowd observed what Israel says is a military operation – dubbed “Northern Shield” – aimed at destroying attack tunnels

built by the Lebanese Hezbollah militia. The young men posed for selfies, with the Israeli crew in the background, as they burned fires and brewed tea to keep warm.

But Lebanese soldiers were visibly on high alert, deploying to new camouflaged posts behind sandbags and inside abandoned homes. About two dozen UN peacekeepers stood in a long line, just ahead of the blue line demarcating the frontier between the two countries technically still at war.

The scene highlights the palpable anxiety that any misstep could lead to a conflagration between Israel and Lebanon that no one seems to want.

Underscoring such jitters, shadowy figures appearing across the misty hills of the border village of Mays Al-Jabal last weekend sparked panic, and Israeli soldiers fired in the air to warn a Lebanese military intelligence patrol, according to Lebanese reports. Israel said it fired at Hezbollah members who came to the site to dismantle sensors installed to detect tunnels.

Israel's tunnel search comes at a time when the civil war in neighboring Syria seems to be winding down. Hezbollah had sent hundreds of troops to Syria in 2013 to fight alongside the forces of Syrian President Bashar Assad. With Assad's forces emerging victorious, attention now seems to be returning to the tense Israel-Lebanon border.

Israel said its troops have discovered at least three tunnels along the frontier – a tactic used by Hezbollah in previous wars – and called on the international community to impose new sanctions on Hezbollah.

The militant group, which fought a bruising but inconclusive war with Israel in 2006, has not commented on the Israeli operation or statements.

Lebanese Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri said Thursday that neither Israel nor Lebanon wanted to go to war, but noted that Israel violates Lebanese airspace and international waters on a regular basis.

He said the Lebanese army “will deal with this issue” after receiving a full report from the UN peacekeeping force, but did not elaborate.

The peacekeeping force, known as UNIFIL, has confirmed the presence of tunnels and said it is working with both sides to address the situation in line with UN Security Council resolutions.

In southern Lebanon on Thursday, Lebanese army soldiers observed the frontier in Mays Al-Jabal, taking photos of their Israeli counterparts operating only a few meters (yards) away. At times, the Lebanese soldiers asked the young men to move back, away from the frontier.

Lebanese homes and farms are nestled at the bottom of the hill where the operations run from daybreak until sundown. No civilian Israeli homes visible from that tense border.

Ali Jaber, a 21-year-old resident of Mays Al-Jabal, said he believes that Hezbollah is more popular after the Syria war, and that this is the reason Israel is now turning to it. “But whoever puts up a shield and is hiding and making fortifications must be scared,” he said.

Hussein Melhem, a 19-year old electrician from the village, came to watch. His cheeks ruddy on a cold but clear day, he covered his head with a tight hood. He alleged that Israel is trying to change the border.

“If they could occupy all of this, they would,” he said, in an apparent reference to Israel's 18-year military occupation of southern Lebanon which ended in 2000. “But the resistance will prevent them.”

As a seven-year-old in 2006, Melhem and his family left Mays Al-Jabal when

Israel invaded. His village was badly damaged but has since largely recovered and he said he found their home intact.

It is hard to forget about war in the villages and towns along the frontier. Pictures of Hezbollah fighters who died in the 2006 war, as well as the one raging in neighboring Syria, known locally as the "Sacred Defense," are everywhere. Posts on town squares boast of defeating Israel or urge the locals to "know their enemy."

During the Syrian civil war, Israel has frequently carried out airstrikes in Syria against Iranian-allied forces, particularly Hezbollah. Israel says it aims to prevent sophisticated weaponry from reaching Hezbollah, which it considers its most pressing security concern.

In Lebanon, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's warnings have raised suspicions that he is also using the tunnel operation as a diplomatic pressure card.

Netanyahu has called for more sanctions against Hezbollah. In a visit to the frontier earlier this week, he warned that if Hezbollah tries to disrupt the search for tunnels, "it will be hit in a way it cannot even imagine."

In Israel, some newspaper commentators have been critical of the UN peacekeeping force, whose mandate Israel and the United States have unsuccessfully attempted to expand to include "intervention and deterrence." About 20 kilometers (12 miles) to the north from Mays Al-Jabal, Israeli soldiers are also operating along another frontier to uncover what they suspect is a tunnel location.

There, a high concrete wall separates them from the Lebanese village of Kfar Kela. Red-roofed Israeli homes on a hill overlook the diggers, who had cleared peach trees to make room for their work. Lebanese residences, some of them luxury summer homes, sat atop hills hundreds of meters from the wall. UN peacekeepers and Lebanese army separately patrol the area. Israel began building the wall in 2012, and this section was completed weeks ago. While graffiti covers the older slabs of concrete, water has collected under the newer segment of the wall.

A UN peacekeeping force was working to clear the water after Lebanese residents complained it comes from irrigation drainage from the other side.



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Lebanon's Aoun says Israeli anti-tunnel action no risk to peace Israel says located second 'Hezbollah' tunnel from Lebanon