

US to set up observation posts along Turkey-Syria border

Thu, 2018-11-22 22:27

ANKARA: Wednesday's announcement by Defense Secretary Jim Mattis that the US is set to install "observation posts" along parts of the Syrian-Turkish border has sparked debate about its possible security repercussions.

The declared aim is to strengthen the focus on defeating Daesh in Syria. The posts will be manned by some of the 2,000 American troops already deployed in the country.

Daesh still has a presence in eastern Syria, east of the Euphrates River near the border with Iraq.

The US is consulting "closely" with the Turkish military, said Mattis.

But experts say his announcement will create further tensions between Washington and Ankara, as the latter will see this as benefitting the Syrian-Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), which Turkey considers a terrorist group.

The announcement comes amid a recent rapprochement between Turkey and the US, whose troops began conducting joint patrols in the northern Syrian city of Manbij from Nov. 1.

As part of a road map agreed in June by Washington and Ankara, the YPG is expected to withdraw from Manbij.

BACKGROUND

The Syrian Democratic Forces announced on Nov. 11 they would resume their offensive against Daesh after having previously called it off due to new tensions with Turkey, which had shelled its positions in northern Syria.

Syria's Kurdish minority has established a semi-autonomous region in the north of the country.

Turkey has carried out two operations against Kurdish forces since 2016, the last against the border enclave of Afrin.

Sinan Hatahet, an expert on Syria at Al-Sharq Forum in Istanbul, told Arab News that the announcement by Mattis "will surely spark a new problem with Turkey, although it will have no impact on the ongoing cooperation in Manbij."

The US is trying to strike a fine balance between maintaining its relationships with state actors in Syria and with its local partners on the ground, Hatahet said.

Sinan Ulgen, a former Turkish diplomat who chairs the Istanbul-based Center for Economics and Foreign Policy, said Ankara will likely react negatively to the announcement by Mattis, as it signals the continuation of US backing for the YPG. Turkish-US cooperation in Manbij could be damaged as a result, Ulgen added.

"Of interest will be whether Washington makes commitments in relation to these observation posts in terms of enhancing Turkey's own border security," he said.

Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar recently criticized a photo of US soldiers having dinner with YPG members in Manbij.

"It is unacceptable for the US to provide arms and ammunition by plane and trucks to the YPG terrorist group even when Daesh has been neutralized to a large extent," Akar said.

Oubai Shahbandar, a fellow at the New America think tank, said defeating Daesh requires a long-term sustainable solution.

"That means the US needs to... enhance its military cooperation with Turkey and with Sunni Arab forces on the ground to prevent the type of chaos that allows extremists like Daesh and the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) terror group to regain lost territory," he told Arab News.

"The joint military patrols between American and Turkish forces in Manbij have so far been successful, and ought to serve as a model for what works for the rest of northeast Syria."



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[Iraq removes blast walls around Green Zone for partial reopening](#)

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Thu, 2018-11-22 13:19

Baghdad: Iraqi authorities began removing cement walls surrounding Baghdad’s Green Zone on Thursday in preparation for a partial reopening of the high-security enclave, an Iraqi official and correspondents said.

The Green Zone became home to Iraq’s parliament and other government offices, United Nations agencies and western embassies after the US-led invasion of 2003.

The area on the west bank of the Tigris River is ringed by blast walls topped with barbed wire and guarded by Iraqi security forces, but inaccessible for

most Iraqi citizens.

On Thursday, reporters saw some walls had been removed.

“Work is ongoing to lift the cement blocks, and a main road will be opened provisionally on Saturday and officially on Sunday,” an Iraqi official said. The official said three entrances into the 10-square kilometer (3.8-square mile) zone would be opened to allow access to a key thoroughfare and therefore relieve traffic clogging other parts of Baghdad.

“The reopening of the road that cuts through the center of the Green Zone came after directions from the prime minister,” the official added.

When Adel Abdel Mahdi was appointed premier last month, he called on parliament to open up the area to all as a way to break down barriers between Iraq’s citizens.

Abdel Mahdi also moved his government’s headquarters outside the Green Zone, in a first since 2003.

Previous prime minister Haidar Al-Abadi had also ordered the zone reopened during his reign, but it was sealed off again after only a few days.

It was rumored at the time that objections by the US embassy – which has the tightest security regulations of all bodies present in the Green Zone – were the reason.



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Iraq to unify customs procedures with Kurdistan, PM says Crown Prince Mohammed

Lebanon celebrates independence without a government

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Thu, 2018-11-22 16:09

BEIRUT: The Lebanese people celebrated the 75th anniversary of their country's independence on Wednesday. On the eve of the traditional military parade in the heart of Beirut, President Michel Aoun told the Lebanese people in a national address that "to be an independent nation, the homeland needs to be the master of its decisions and its land, and to be able to say 'Yes' or 'No' in all issues relating to its national affairs."

President Aoun's speech came as hopes of forming a new government in Lebanon faded in light of Hezbollah's insistence on the need to represent its six Sunni MPs in the government and the refusal of Saad Hariri, the prime minister-designate, to accept this demand.

The president reminded the Lebanese that "the interference of external elements costs us the ability to decide, wastes the essence of independence, and places sovereignty in danger."

He stressed that "differences should not be over the homeland, but over politics, and my call today to all officials, political factions and sects is to discard our differences and highlight the sense of responsibility toward the people, who are fed up by the indifference of the decision-makers to their fears and broken dreams. It is our duty to reassure them about their future and to work hard to save our country economically, socially and morally."

He said that "the crisis of forming a government is not unique and Lebanon has lived through it before. It may happen in other deep-rooted countries too, but it is costing us precious time and preventing the possibilities of production."

Aoun stressed that "the independence and sovereignty of the homeland must remain outside the equation of opposition and loyalty, and outside the scope of a power struggle."

He promised "not to be lenient in the face of corruption and corrupt people. We will not back down on promises of reform, sustainable development and job creation for our youth."

President Aoun also talked about the issue of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, saying that "there are those who are hindering their return to their country for hidden reasons, whether by talking about voluntary return and using all means of encouragement and intimidation to push the displaced to choose to stay where they are, or try to link the issue to a political solution."



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Lebanon's economy faces stark choice: Reform or collapse
Lebanon can't waste more time on government formation – Aoun

[Atomic watchdog: Iran sticking to nuclear deal amid new US sanctions](#)

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Thu, 2018-11-22 12:10

VIENNA: Iran is implementing its side of its nuclear deal with major powers, the UN atomic watchdog policing the pact reaffirmed on Thursday, two weeks after the latest wave of reimposed US sanctions against Tehran took effect. President Donald Trump said in May he was pulling the United States out of

the 2015 nuclear deal for reasons including Iran's influence on the wars in Syria and Yemen and its ballistic missile program, none of which are covered by the pact.

Germany, France and Britain have been scrambling to prevent a collapse of the deal, under which international sanctions against Tehran were lifted in exchange for strict limits being placed on Iran's nuclear activities.

Many Western companies have canceled plans to do business with Iran for fear of breaching the sanctions Washington has put back in place. That has raised fears that Iran will breach the deal's nuclear limits, which are designed to keep it a year away from being able to build a nuclear weapon if it chose to. "Iran is implementing its nuclear-related commitments under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action," International Atomic Energy Agency Director-General Yukiya Amano told a quarterly meeting of his agency's 35-nation Board of Governors.

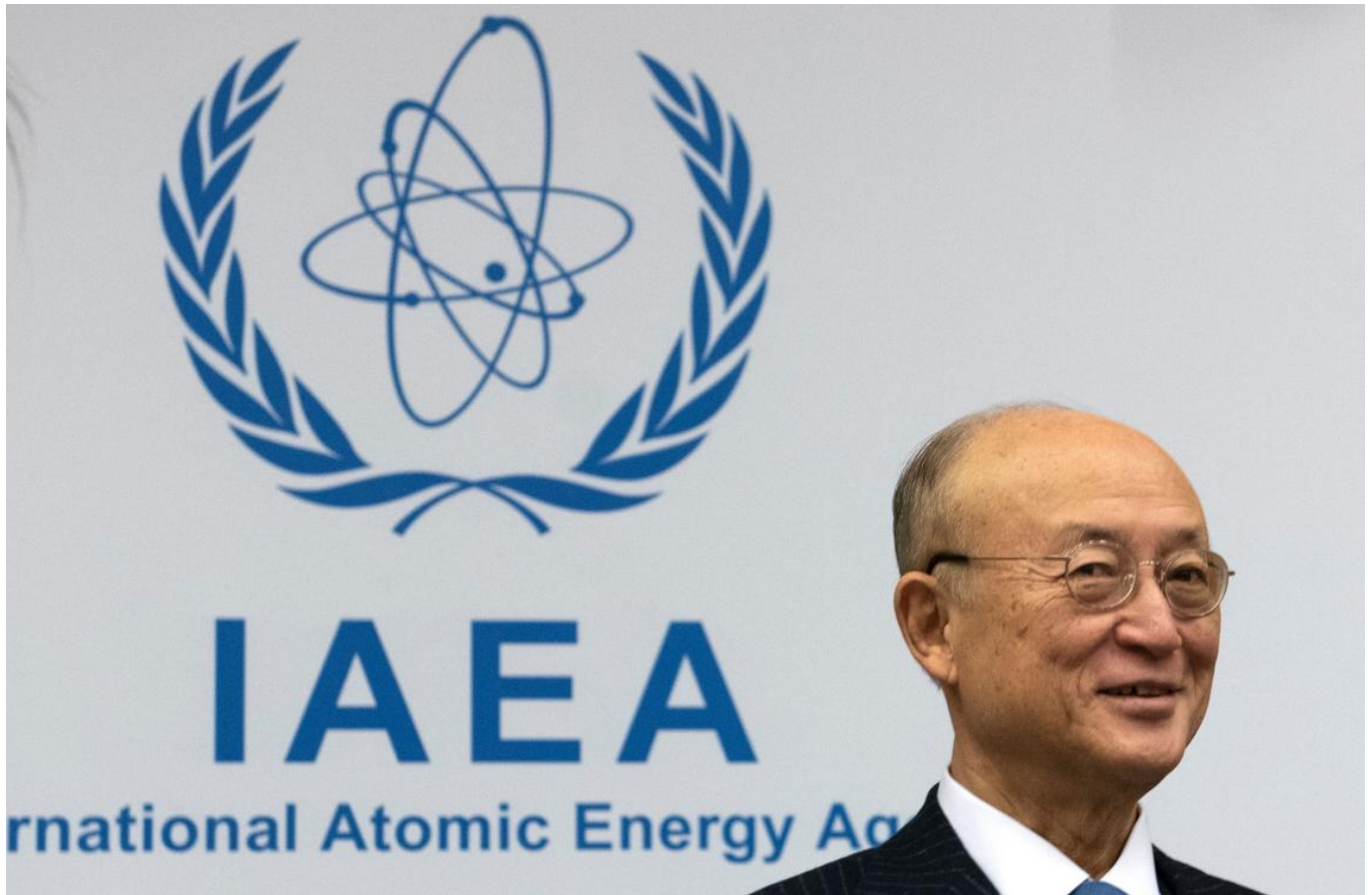
The JCPOA is the official name of the nuclear accord.

"It is essential that Iran continues to fully implement those commitments," he added, confirming the findings of a confidential report to IAEA member states last week.

Amano did not comment on the broader impact of US sanctions, the latest round of which took effect on Nov. 5. Iran has warned it could scrap the deal if signatories France, Britain and Germany and their allies fail to preserve the economic benefits promised by its terms.

The European powers have been working on setting up a so-called special-purpose vehicle that would act as a kind of clearing house matching Iranian exports with EU exports in what amounts to a barter arrangement to circumvent US sanctions.

But the countries they have approached to host it have declined, diplomats say, delaying the project and deepening doubt as to whether Europeans can counteract the bulk of US sanctions targeting oil and other vital sources of income.



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Iran nuclear accord failure would be 'great loss', IAEA chief says
Saudi Arabia welcomes US withdrawal from Iran nuclear deal

[Nine years jail for people smuggler](#)

The Australian Government welcomes the news that a 34-year-old Afghan man was today sentenced to nine years jail by the District Court of Western Australia for his involvement in the smuggling of 13 people.