

How viable is the Kurds' autonomous territory in northeast Syria?

Sat, 2021-10-16 21:18

MISSOURI, USA: Ilham Ahmed, head of the political wing of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), has been lobbying Moscow and Washington to support Kurdish representation in the long-stalled, UN-backed Syrian peace process.

Ahmed, who has visited both capitals in recent weeks, also wants the country's Kurdish-run region to be exempted from sanctions imposed under the 2019 Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act, the US legislation that sanctioned the regime of President Bashar Assad for war crimes against the Syrian people.

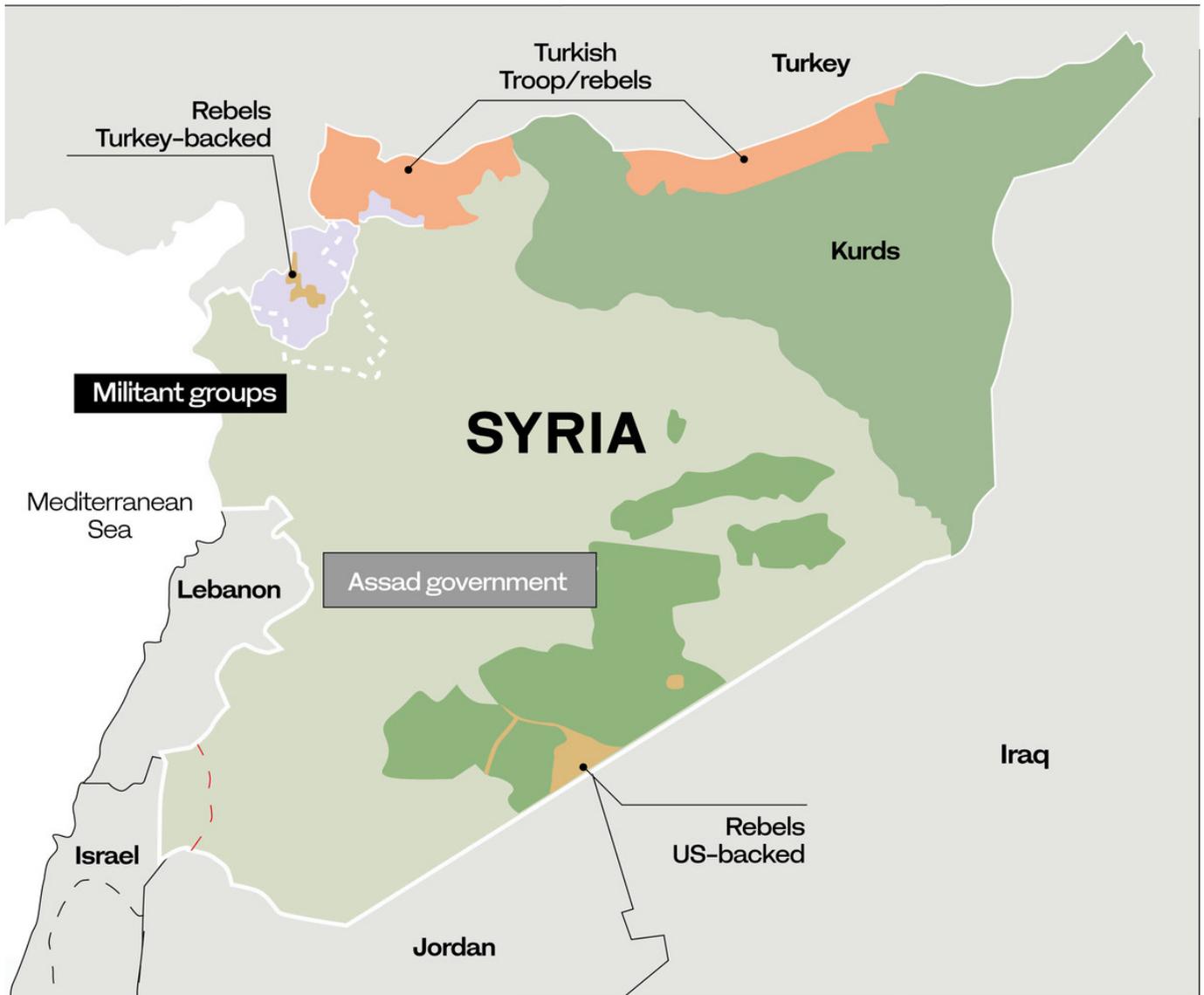
But what are the Syrian Kurds hoping for, precisely, and how viable are their proposals?

Russian jets, Iran-backed fighters, Turkish-supported insurgents, Islamist radicals, US troops and Syrian government forces, as well as the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), operate across the patchwork of territories that constitute northern Syria.

The US views the YPG as a key ally in the fight against Daesh in northeastern Syria while Russia has forces in the area to support President Assad.

THE SITUATION IN SYRIA

Map showing who controls what region



Source: Jane's Conflict Monitor, The Economist

ARAB NEWS

While some media outlets reported that Ahmed, as the president of the executive committee of the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), was lobbying for American or Russian support for the creation of a breakaway state, the Syrian Kurds are not actually pushing for such a maximalist goal.

The Syrian Kurdish parties are sympathetic to the ideology of jailed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) leader Abdullah Ocalan. They say they reject nationalism, secession and statism in general, in line with Ocalan's post-2001 writings.

At the same time, however, Syrian Kurdish organizations appear to be establishing all the trappings of their own separate state in the territory they control.

Their military forces – including the SDF, the YPG and the YPJ, the YPG's all-female militia – are working assiduously to establish and maintain their monopoly on the use of force in the northeast.

They have clashed not only with Turkish forces and various Islamist extremist groups in the area, but also on occasion with Kurdish armed groups, the military forces of the Assad regime, Free Syrian Army rebels and others.



A member of the Kurdish internal security services known as Asayish stands guard during a demonstration by Syrian Kurds against the Turkish assault on northeastern Syria and in support of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), in Syria's northeastern city of Qamishli. (AFP/File Photo)

Competing political parties in the territories under their control have likewise faced pressure, or outright bans, as the SDC and its ally, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), seek to bring everyone under the same institutional and governing structures that they created and dominate.

In some ways the Kurds of the SDC and PYD have proven to be very liberal, happily welcoming Arab tribes, Christians, Yezidis, Armenians, Turkmen and other groups and ethnicities into their ranks and governing structures.

However, they appear much less accepting and tolerant of those who seek to operate outside of the "democratic autonomy" political umbrella they have established.

With their own security forces, political institutions, schools and a variety of party-established civil-society organizations, it does at times look as though the Syrian Kurds are intent on creating their own separate state. But what choice did they have after the outbreak of civil war in Syria in 2011?

The Assad regime had brutally repressed Kurds for decades prior to the war.

After Assad withdrew his forces and much of the Syrian government's personnel from northeast Syria early in the conflict, to focus on the western and southern parts of the country where the rebel threat appeared the greatest, someone had to fill the resultant vacuum.



Syrian Kurdish women carry party flags, as they take part in a rally in support of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the People's Protection Forces. (AFP/File Photo)

PKK-aligned Syrian Kurdish groups moved in to defend the area against Daesh and other extremist groups that were trying to take over. They fought extremely hard against the radical Islamists, handing Daesh its first defeat, in Kobani in 2014.

Freed from the regime's iron grip for the first time in their lives, the Kurds seized the opportunity to establish Kurdish and other minority-language programs, cultural centers, schools and institutions.

Fearing the malign "divide and conquer" tactics of neighboring powers, the new Syrian Kurdish authorities rejected attempts by other Kurdish parties, particularly those under the influence of Iraqi Kurdistan's regional government, and Arab rebel groups to establish competing parties and militias in their hard-won territory.

Authorities in Turkey, meanwhile, were concerned by what they saw as an emerging PKK-controlled proto-state on their southern border. Through three military incursions in the last five years that displaced hundreds of thousands of ethnic Kurds, Ankara seized hundreds of kilometers of the border

strip and pushed around 30 km into northern Syria.

In 2018, Moscow appeared to greenlight the Turkish invasion of Afrin, which at the time was under SDF/YPG/PYD control, withdrawing its troops and allowing Turkish jets to operate in air space previously controlled by Russia.



Woman watch from a rooftop as US troops patrol in 2020 along the streets of the Syrian town of Al-Jawadiyah and meet the inhabitants, in the northeastern Hasakeh province, near the border with Turkey. (AFP/File Photo)

The following year, Washington appeared to do the same, withdrawing US troops from the Tal Abyad area on the border with Turkey just before the Turkish invasion.

These incursions have left the Syrian Kurdish administration in a serious bind. Without American support and the presence of a token US tripwire force, Turkey could well expand its area of control in northern Syria.

Just this week, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said Turkey was determined to eliminate alleged threats originating in northern Syria and that a suspected YPG attack that killed two Turkish police officers in Azaz was “the final straw.”

Meanwhile, the Assad regime appears uninterested in any proposals for a “more decentralized Syrian state” in which parts of the northeast would remain nominally a part of the state but actually fall under Syrian Kurdish control.

Ahmed’s recent diplomatic forays have therefore focused on Moscow and

Washington. In the former, the Syrian Kurds hope to convince the Russians to cajole the Assad regime into some sort of a compromise that would safeguard as much autonomy in northeastern Syria as possible. In the latter they aim to secure a US commitment not to abandon them again.



Cars drive past election campaign billboards depicting Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad, a candidate for the upcoming presidential vote, in the capital Damascus, on May 24, 2021. (AFP/File Photo)

Ahmed outlined her hopes during a conference hosted by the Washington Institute on Sept. 29.

“The Syrian Democratic Council seeks a lasting political solution to the conflict, advocating internal dialogue and, ultimately, political and cultural decentralization that respects the country’s diversity and bolsters economic development,” she said.

“Continued support from our partner, the US, is crucial to this mission. The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria faces numerous obstacles, including insecurity, poverty, foreign intervention, and terrorism.

“In addition, the Geneva peace process and constitutional process have stalled. The US could help alleviate these issues in the pursuit of a more stable Syria free of despotism, proxy conflicts and terror.”

America’s chaotic exit from Afghanistan in August undoubtedly will have unnerved Syrian Kurds already apprehensive about their own future. Assad, Turkey and Daesh would all welcome a similar US withdrawal from northeastern Syria.

It is unlikely the “Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria,” the governing body of which is the SDC, would be able to hold up against such combined pressures.



US troops patrol along the streets of the Syrian town of Al-Jawadiyah.
(AFP/File Photo)

However, the botched American withdrawal from Afghanistan might actually work in Syrian Kurds' favor, as the Biden administration will probably try to avoid a similar embarrassment in Syria any time soon.

Following meetings in Washington last month with representatives of the White House, State Department and Pentagon, Ahmed seems to have received a reassuring response.

“They (the Americans) promised to do whatever it takes to destroy Islamic State (Daesh) and work to build infrastructure in northeastern Syria,” she told the Reuters news agency. “They said they are going to stay in Syria and will not withdraw – they will keep fighting Islamic State.”

She added: “Before, they were unclear under Trump and during the Afghan withdrawal, but this time they made everything clear.”

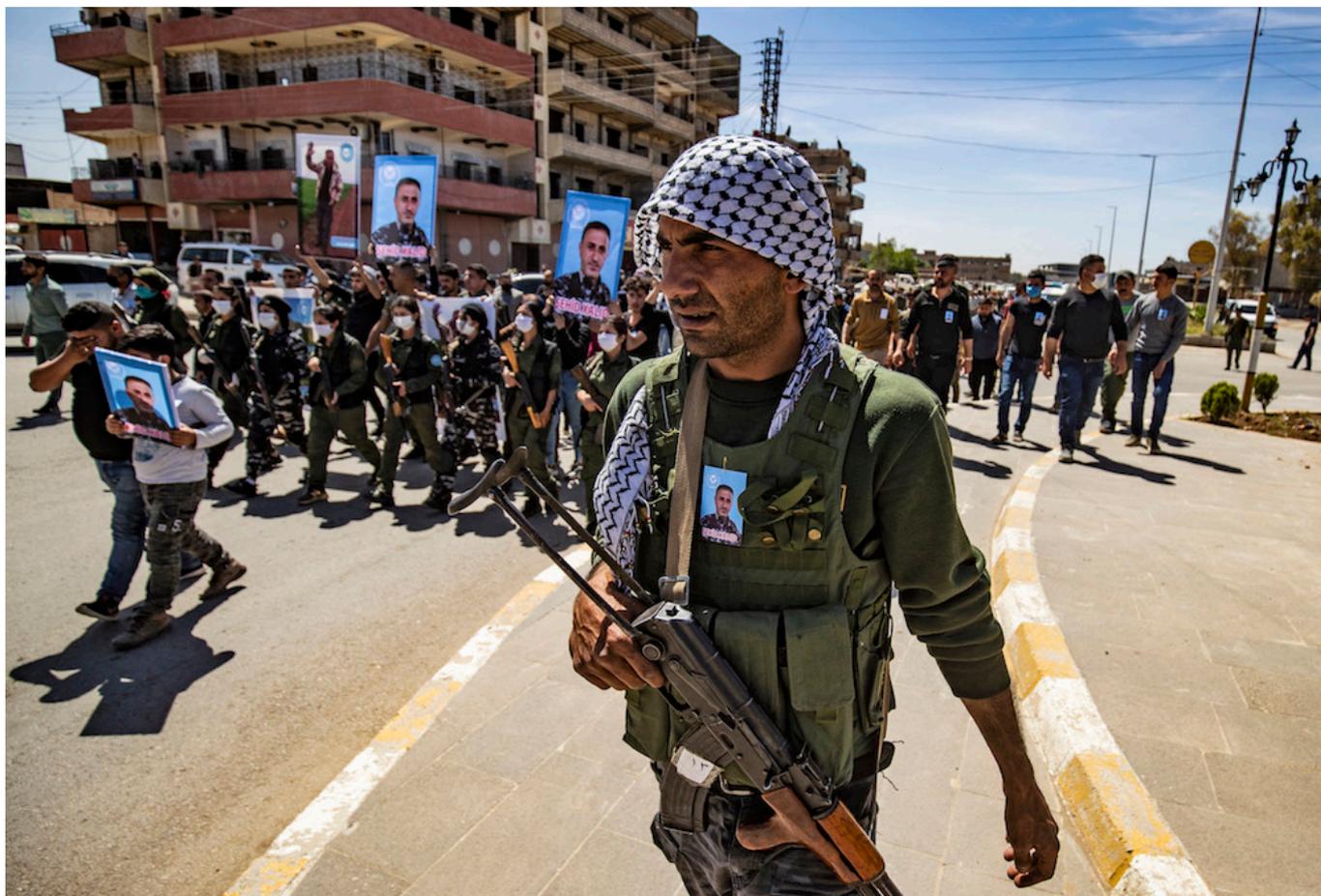
With no change of attitudes in Damascus or Ankara, the Syrian Kurds are left with little choice but to continue to rely on the American presence, cooperation and support. At best, they can extend the status quo and the longevity of their precarious autonomy.

If they can convince Washington and Russia to help them reopen the crossings

on the border with Iraq, exempt them from the sanctions designed to target the Assad regime, and allow the delivery of international aid directly to their enclave, rather than being routed through Damascus with the result that it rarely reaches the northeast, then the political and economic situation will improve.

Without a more durable political solution on the horizon, this is probably the best the Syrian Kurds can hope for.

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How will Ankara react to oil deal with Syrian Kurds? Eight murders in a month in Syria camp: Kurds

Thousands of pro-military protesters rally against Sudan government

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AFP

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1634399373840686700

Sat, 2021-10-16 15:35

KHARTOUM: Thousands of pro-military Sudanese protesters took to the streets Saturday demanding the dissolution of the transitional government, saying it had “failed” them politically and economically.

The protests came as Sudanese politics reels from divisions among the factions steering the rocky transition from two decades of iron-fisted rule by Omar Al-Bashir, who was ousted by the army in April 2019 in the face of mass protests.

Saturday’s demonstrations were organized by a splinter faction of the Forces for Freedom and Change (FFC), a civilian alliance which spearheaded the anti-Bashir protests and became a key plank of the transition.

“We need a military government, the current government has failed to bring us justice and equality,” said Abboud Ahmed, a 50-year-old protester near the presidential palace in central Khartoum.

The official SUNA news agency reported that protesters had traveled in by truck from Khartoum’s outskirts and from neighboring states.

Critics alleged that the protests involved sympathizers of the Bashir regime, which was dominated by Islamists and the military.

Banners called for the “dissolution of the government.” Protesters chanted “one army, one people” and “the army will bring us bread.”

“We are marching in a peaceful protest and we want a military government,” said housewife Enaam Mohamed.

On Friday, Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok warned that the transition is facing its “worst and most dangerous” crisis.

The mainstream faction of the FFC said: “The current crisis is not related to dissolution of the government of not.

“It is engineered by some parties to overthrow the revolutionary forces... paving the way for the return of remnants of the previous regime.”

Support for the transitional government has waned in recent months in the face of a tough package of IMF-backed economic reforms, including the slashing of fuel subsidies and a managed float of the Sudanese pound.

Protests have rocked eastern Sudan where demonstrators have blocked trade through the key hub of Port Sudan since September.

On September 21, the government said it thwarted a coup attempt which it blamed on both military officers and civilians linked to Bashir’s regime.





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Sudan security service slaps travel ban on top civilian politicians Sudan to return to economic growth, forecasts finance minister

[Turkey plans military action against Syrian Kurdish YPG if diplomacy fails](#)

Author:

Reuters

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1634332267176357900

Sat, 2021-10-16 00:10

ANKARA: Turkey is preparing for possible further military action against a US-backed Kurdish militia in northern Syria if talks on the issue with the US

and Russia fail, two Turkish officials said.

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said this week Ankara was determined to eliminate threats originating in northern Syria and that a Kurdish YPG militia attack that killed two Turkish police officers was "the final straw." Turkey said the police in Syria's Azaz region were hit in a guided missile attack on Sunday launched from Tel Rifaat by the YPG, which Ankara considers a terrorist group closely linked to militants fighting a decades-old insurgency in southeast Turkey.

"It is essential that the areas, notably the Tel Rifaat region from which attacks are constantly carried out against us, are cleansed," one senior official told Reuters.

Turkish forces have launched three incursions in the last five years, seizing hundreds of kilometers of border strip and pushing around 30 km into northern Syria.

Russian jets, Iran-backed fighters, Turkish-supported insurgents, jihadists, US troops and Syrian government forces also operate across the patchwork of territories in northern Syria, as well as the Kurdish YPG.

The US views the YPG as a key ally in the fight against Daesh in northeast Syria. Russia has forces in the area to support Syrian President Bashar Assad.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Turkey has carried out three incursions in Syria in recent years.
- Official says YPG militia must be pushed back at least 30 km.

The time and nature of any further Turkish military action was unclear. The official said the military and national intelligence agency were making preparations.

"The decision for this has been taken and the necessary coordination will be done with particular countries. This subject will be discussed with Russia and the United States," he added.

The officials said Erdogan would discuss the issue with US President Joe Biden at a G20 summit of the world's major economies in Rome at the end of October.

Another official said the YPG must be pushed back at least 30 km, noting Russia was completely in control of the areas from which recent attacks had come, along with some Iranian elements.

Erdogan will speak with Russian President Vladimir Putin after the talks with Biden, he said.

"If there is no outcome from diplomacy and the PYD does not leave these areas, an operation appears unavoidable," he said, using the abbreviation for the YPG's political wing and referring to Tel Rifaat and "several other locations."

On Monday, shells believed to have been fired from a YPG-controlled area east of Tel Rifaat exploded in the Turkish town of Karkamis, across the border from Syria's Jarablus, causing slight damage, Turkey said.

Azaz and Jarablus have been under the control of rebels backed by Turkey

since Ankara's first incursion into Syria in 2016 – an operation that aimed to drive Daesh militants and the YPG away from the border. Since then Ankara has launched two other operations in Syria against the YPG, one targeting the northwest Afrin region and one further east.



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Turkey says it will do 'what is necessary' after Syria attacks
After attacks in Syria, what is Turkey's military plan?

[EU: Iran not ready to resume Vienna talks](#)

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1634332233126355600

Sat, 2021-10-16 00:09

BRUSSELS: Iran is not ready to return to talks with world powers over its nuclear program yet and its new negotiating team wants to discuss the texts

that will be put forward when it meets with the EU in Brussels in the next few weeks, a senior EU official said on Friday.

EU political director Enrique Mora, the chief coordinator for the talks, was in Tehran on Thursday to meet members of Iran's nuclear negotiating team, four months after discussions broke off between Iran and world powers.

Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi has so far refused to resume indirect talks with the US in Vienna on both sides returning to compliance with the deal, under which Iran curbed its nuclear program in return for economic sanctions relief.

Diplomats from France, Britain and Germany, who are party to the accord along with China and Russia, said ahead of Mora's visit that it came at a critical time and things could not be deemed "business as usual" given escalating Iranian nuclear activities and the stalling of negotiations.

The US said time was running short. "They are not yet ready for engaging in Vienna," the official told reporters on condition of anonymity, adding that he believed Tehran was "absolutely decided to go back to Vienna and to end the negotiations."

The Islamic Republic has repeatedly said it will return to the negotiations "soon," but it has not given a clearer timeline.

Western diplomats had hoped the Vienna talks might resume before the end of October.

However, after Mora's visit, Iran's Foreign Ministry said it would hold talks in the coming days with the EU in Brussels.

"They insisted that they don't want talks for talks, they want talking with practical results and with a final agreement on how to bring JCPOA (the nuclear deal) back to life," the official said.

Describing a meeting in Brussels as a "good idea," the official said it would allow both sides to go through the texts on the table from June and clarify questions that Iran's new negotiating team may have. "I think we are just clarifying even more the situation for a final destination, which is going to be resuming in Vienna. I expect that soon," he said.

France's Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Anne-Claire Legendre said negotiations should resume immediately based on where they left off in June to reach a deal quickly.

"Iran must show a willingness through acts that it shares the same desire to come back to the negotiating table and conclude an agreement," she told reporters.

Western diplomats have said they are concerned Tehran's new negotiating team – under a president known as an anti-Western hard-liner, unlike his pragmatist predecessor – may make new demands beyond the scope of what had already been agreed.

BACKGROUND

Iran has repeatedly said it will return to the negotiations 'soon,' but it has not given a clearer timeline. Western diplomats had hoped the Vienna talks might resume before October-end.

Separately, Iran sharply criticized the UN's International Atomic Energy

Agency for keeping its eyes trained on the Islamic republic while ignoring its arch-enemy Israel's suspected nuclear program. Israel is widely believed to be the Middle East's sole nuclear arms possessor with up to 300 warheads, but it has long refused to confirm or deny it has such weapons and unlike Iran is not a signatory to the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

"Silence and negligence about Israel's nuclear program sends a negative message to the NPT members," Kazem Gharibabadi, Iran's ambassador to the UN agency, tweeted.

Being an NPT signatory meant "accepting the robust verifications," while being outside it meant being "free from any obligation and criticism, and even (getting) rewarded", he wrote.

"What is the advantage of being both a NPT member and fully implementing the agency's safeguards?"

Gharibabadi was reacting to an interview given by IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi to Energy Intelligence earlier this month.

Asked why the IAEA is so focused on Iran's nuclear program but not Israel's, he responded: "Our relation with Israel is based on the one that you have with a country which is not a party to the NPT."

Iran has been a signatory to the NPT since 1970, the year it came into force, and has always denied it has any ambitions to acquire or manufacture an atomic bomb.

Israel, which has never signed up to the treaty, has repeatedly warned that it will do whatever it takes to prevent Iran obtaining nuclear weapons.

The NPT calls on nations "to achieve the cessation of the nuclear arms race and to undertake measures in the direction of nuclear disarmament."



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Saudi FM: There should be 'quick suspension' by Iran of activities that

violate nuclear deal US envoy says possible Iran won't return to nuclear deal

[UN urges ceasefire in Marib for 'safe passage'](#)

Author:

Arab News

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1634331990406342500

Sat, 2021-10-16 00:06

SANAA: The UN has called for a halt to fighting in a district of Yemen's oil-rich Marib province that pits government forces supported by the Arab coalition against Iran-backed Houthi rebels.

Marib, Shabwa and Al-Bayda provinces have all seen an escalation in fighting in recent weeks, resulting in "a devastating impact on civilians," according to David Gressly, the UN's humanitarian coordinator for Yemen.

The security situation has been particularly difficult in Marib's Abedia district, where the UN says the movement of aid and some 35,000 people has been "extremely restricted," including for 17,000 "extremely vulnerable" people who found refuge there from conflict in other areas of Yemen.

"I call on all parties involved in the fighting to agree now to a cessation of hostilities for Abedia district to allow for the safe passage of civilians and aid workers, and for the evacuation of all of those wounded in the fighting," Gressly said in a statement.

The fighting in Marib – where the Houthis are battling to seize the provincial capital Marib city, the government's last stronghold in northern Yemen – displaced some 10,000 people in September alone, the highest monthly figure so far this year.

Abedia is about 100 km from Marib city, which had between 20,000 and 30,000 inhabitants before the war, but has seen its population swell to hundreds of thousands by Yemenis displaced from earlier front lines.

With about 139 refugee camps in Marib province, according to the government, hosting around 2.2 million people, many displaced civilians have become caught in the line of fire once again.

The Houthis began a big push to seize Marib in February and, after a lull, they renewed their campaign in September, prompting intense air bombardment from the coalition.

The coalition entered the war in 2015, after the Houthis captured the capital Sanaa the previous year.



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Yemeni troops recapture areas from Houthis in Marib's Juba district
Arab coalition: Over 180 Houthis killed, 10 military vehicles destroyed in Abedia operations