

Frankly Speaking: 'More Western military support needed to head off terror groups' in Iraq, says Peshmerga Gen. Sirwan Barzani

Sun, 2021-07-25 22:38

DUBAI: The US and other Western coalition members should increase their ground forces in Iraqi Kurdistan in order to head off the threat of a resurgent terror campaign in the region, one of the main fighters against Daesh and Iran-backed militias told Arab News.

General Sirwan Barzani, who commands a key unit of the Kurdish Peshmerga armed forces in northern Iraq, said: "The troops on the ground have been fighting against Daesh, but it was not easy and not so possible to defeat this terrorist group without the support of the coalition, especially the leader of the coalition, the US, and also the rest of the countries, the European countries.

"I think the administration of President Biden has to send more forces to Iraq."

Barzani, who commanded Kurdish troops in the bitter battles of 2015 and 2016 to regain territory lost to Daesh, made his plea for more Western military assistance on "Frankly Speaking," the series of video interviews with leading policymakers in the region.

In the course of a wide-ranging conversation, Barzani – a member of one of the leading families of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) and a prominent businessman through his ownership of Korek Telecom – also spoke of Kurdish independence aspirations, the incursions of Turkey's Kurdish militant group PKK in Iraqi Kurdistan, the humanitarian assistance his people receive from Saudi Arabia and the challenges of diversifying Kurdistan's oil-dependent economy.

But Barzani's appeal for more US and other Western troops – in the face of President Biden's apparent determination to end America's "forever wars" in the region – was a key feature, underlining Kurdish concerns that the threat from Daesh was still the "biggest threat" to the whole of Iraq.

"Daesh is starting to reorganize themselves again; the militants are very active and almost every day they launch terror attacks against civilian targets, military or security services. There is an attack from Daesh there almost every day.



General Sirwan Barzani

"I'm responsible for Sector Six south and southwest of (Iraqi Kurdistan's capital) Irbil. We have a permanent Daesh presence in those mountains. We are facing this problem every day and we have a permanent Daesh presence there.

"Even with all these operations, cooperating with the coalition, also with the Iraqi army, the fighters are still there. Daesh is not defeated like Al-Qaeda. Daesh is there still and without the support of the coalition, the group will become stronger and stronger," he said.

Barzani called for renewed Western military support for the Peshmerga, which he said was not receiving any budgetary assistance from Baghdad to counter Daesh or Iranian-backed militias in Iraq.

Recent drone attacks on Irbil International Airport were claimed by Iran-backed militias against forces deemed to be pro-US in the region, he said, underlining the need for more defense assistance.

"The most important thing they have to do is to just give us as Peshmerga some new technology. For example, we don't have any drones. Even technologies like night-vision or thermal cameras and defensive weapons – we still don't have them. All the end users (for such equipment) are meant to be from Baghdad and, unfortunately, not from here (Irbil)," Barzani said.

He believes the Biden administration's decision to end military operations in Afghanistan would have only limited repercussions for Iraq.

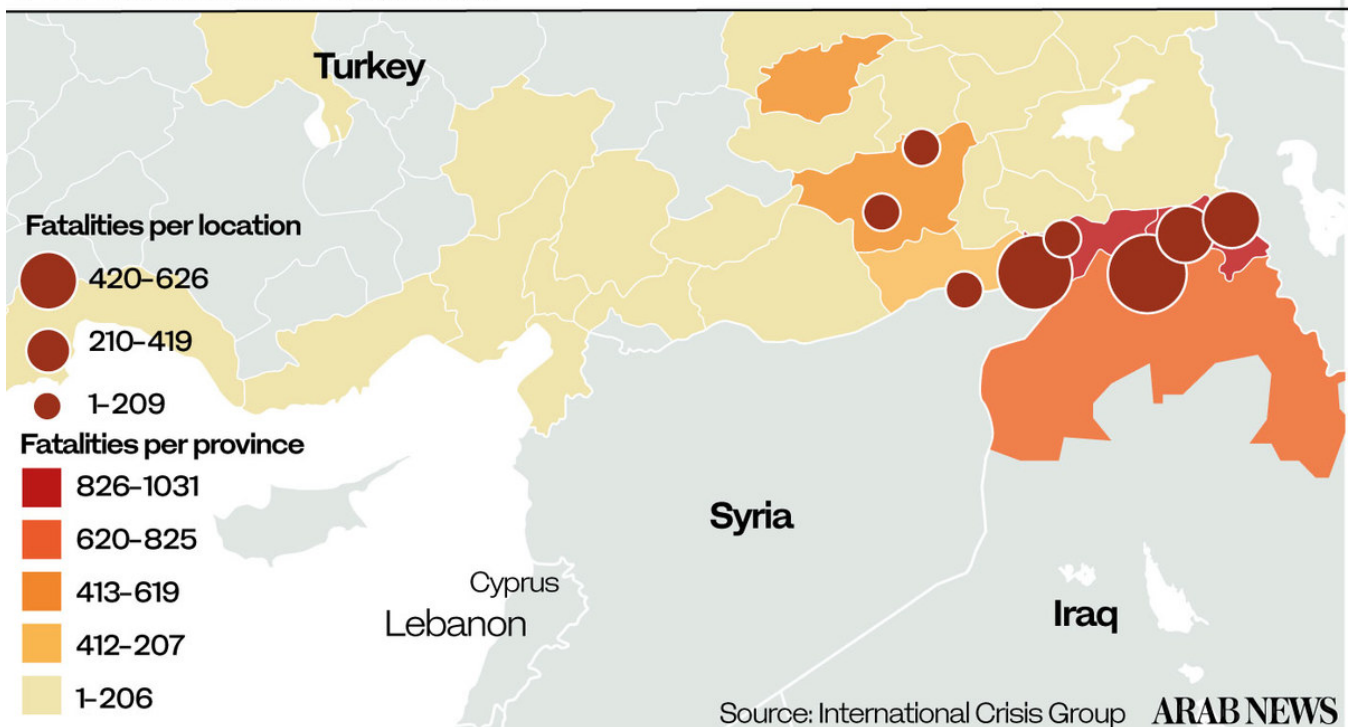
“I think it is different. You cannot compare Afghanistan and Iraq. The stability of Iraq is the stability of the Middle East and, of course, everybody knows that all of the world is looking for stability in the Middle East for many reasons, especially economic reasons,” he said.

Instability is also being fostered by the presence of large numbers of members of the PKK, the militant political organization that has been fighting for equal rights and autonomy for Turkey’s Kurdish population since 1984.

“The problem here is they are inside our region in Kurdistan. They’re making it an unstable area. They didn’t go back to the border because of this fight between the PKK and the Turkish military. Unfortunately, they provide an excuse for the Turkish army to come in. Almost every month they have a new position inside our region. It’s not acceptable and what the PKK is doing now is not good for the region,” Bargain said.

THE TURKISH-KURDISH CONFLICT

Districts and towns where Turkish security personnel and PKK members have died



The KRG organized a referendum in 2017 that showed an overwhelming majority of Iraqi Kurdistan’s population was in favor of independence from Baghdad, but the result was not recognized by the Iraqi government and moves towards full independence had to be shelved.

“Unfortunately, what happened in Iraq was that nobody heeded the constitution and everybody started with sanctions. Even when we were fighting against

Daesh, we were under sanctions from the federal government.

“Those reasons pushed us to go in for the referendum and to have our own state and independence. It was our right, of course, and it was legal, but because of the situation we postponed it,” he said, but added: “It (independence) is the dream of any Kurd.”

The Kurdish economy is heavily dependent on oil from the northern regions of Iraq, but this too has faced challenges because of squabbles over revenue with Baghdad. Barzani said that it was important for any economy to reduce reliance on oil products, and the KRG has put in place a strategy to do so.

“It’s a risky thing to depend on oil only because nobody, no country can depend only on one resource or one revenue stream. So, especially in Kurdistan, even the KRG is launching reforms so as to not depend on oil, to diversify the economy. It is most important,” he said.

Barzani cited some alternative revenue streams for the region, notably agriculture, solar power and other technologies, but he singled out the potential of tourism.

“For Kurdistan we have many things, but the tourism side is very important. We have a very nice region geographically and weather-wise. What’s more, there is security for the economy and businesses. Thanks to the Peshmerga and our people, we have very good security in this region,” he said.

Barzani founded Korek Telecom in 2000, which has grown to become one of the leading corporate groups in Iraq despite the destruction inflicted by the Daesh occupation on large parts of the region.

Kurdistan also faces other challenges in terms of investment required in power supplies and telecoms infrastructure, he said.

Barzani added that he had been watching developments in Saudi Arabia and its Vision 2030 strategy to reduce reliance on oil revenues, which he said was a “great move.”

He also highlighted the strength of relations between the Kurdish region and Saudi Arabia. “There is a good relation with Saudi Arabia for sure. They are supporting many of our internally displaced persons and refugees here,” he said.

“There is a historical relationship with Saudi Arabia, and we continue to have very good relations with them.”

Barzani maintained that for Kurdistan, economic development and the opportunity to create a “peaceful oasis” would continue to depend on maintaining regional security in the face of multiple threats.

“Security is more important than anything else,” he said.

• **Twitter:** @frankkanedubai



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Frankly Speaking: Saudi Arabia, US 'working closely on multiple fronts' to resolve Middle East conflicts, says Fahad Nazer

Egyptian president directs the restoration of Al-Bayt shrines

Mon, 2021-07-26 00:18

CAIRO: Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi has directed the restoration of the shrines of the Al-Bayt family, especially the tombs of Sayyida Nafisa, Sayyida Zainab and Imam Hussein bin Ali.

The Egyptian presidency said that El-Sisi met with the head of the Armed Forces Engineering Authority, Ihab El-Far, and discussed the restoration of the interior halls of mosques and their sophisticated architectural decorations.

The restorations will be in keeping with the historical pedigree of the sites. The development of the surrounding roads, squares and other facilities will also match the heritage of the shrines.

The Al-Ashraf Syndicate – descendants of the Prophet Muhammad and his immediate family – thanked El-Sisi for his directives to develop the shrines of the Al-Bayt mosques.

HIGHLIGHTS

- **The restorations will be in keeping with the historical pedigree of the sites.**
- **The development of the surrounding roads, squares and other facilities will also match the heritage of the shrines.**

“President El-Sisi’s interest in developing the shrines and mosques of Al-Bayt confirms his constant keenness to develop Egypt’s civilized Islamic front ... and we will see valuable architectural masterpieces after completing their restoration and development,” the statement said.

El-Sisi also directed the establishment of a new central headquarters of international organizations in the diplomatic district. In a meeting to discuss the new location, participants covered the development of the diplomatic quarter in accordance with the UN, and how it would adhere to international architectural standards.

Elsewhere, Jehan Abd El-Moneim, deputy governor of Cairo for the southern region, confirmed that the development of the Sayyida Ruqayya shrine has been completed.



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Food commodities in Egypt 'will not be affected by increase in fuel prices'

[Bandits kill 4 Iranian troops](#)

Author:

Sun, 2021-07-25 00:47

TEHRAN: Armed bandits killed four members of Iran's elite Revolutionary Guard in fighting in a southern province.

An official report said the clash between Guard members and the bandits happened Friday night in the Gounic district of Sistan and Baluchistan province.

The site of the fighting is some 1,250 km southeast of the capital Tehran. It did not elaborate.

The province has been the scene of occasional clashes between Baluch militants and Iranian forces. Security forces have also fought with drug traffickers in the province, which is on a major smuggling route for Afghan opium and heroin.



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Iran's meddling in affairs of other countries threatens regional security: GCC chief

[Endangered bears leave Lebanon for better life in US animal sanctuary](#)

Sun, 2021-07-25 00:59

BEIRUT: Two endangered bears who were living in poor conditions in a Lebanon zoo have been flown to an animal sanctuary in the US after they started to lose weight and suffered from other health issues.

Rights association Animals Lebanon said it managed to persuade their owner that "the bears deserved better" given the creatures' deteriorating condition.

Lebanon's economic crisis, considered the worst in its modern history, has affected animals as much as humans.

Families have given up their pets, unable to feed them in light of sharp rises in the dollar exchange rate. Zoos have also been affected, with animals facing malnourishment and owners no longer able to secure their basic needs. Animals Lebanon said the two Syrian brown bears, called Homer and Ulysses, had been trapped for more than 10 years in a zoo in the southern city of

Tyre.

“There are six bears still waiting to be rescued in the north of Lebanon, Bekaa and Beirut,” the association’s director, Jason Mier, told Arab News. Previous attempts to get the bears to the Colorado Wild Animal Sanctuary had failed due to the pandemic, roadblocks, banks freezing assets, and the wait to obtain the sanctuary’s confirmation to receive the creatures.

FASTFACT

Families have given up their pets, unable to feed them in light of sharp rises in the dollar exchange rate. Zoos have also been affected, with animals facing malnourishment and owners no longer able to secure their basic needs.

The sanctuary cares for more than 650 lions, tigers, bears, wolves and other animals – including a fox and a wallaby rescued by Animals Lebanon. Animal rescue organization Four Paws offered to help bear the cost of the animals’ trip to Colorado.

Mier said: “There are six zoos we are aware of in Lebanon. In 2017, we passed the Animal Protection and Welfare Law, which regulates zoos. These zoos hold endangered wildlife, local wildlife, and farmed or domesticated animals. There are about 30 lions, 10 bears, and 10 tigers. We believe conditions need to be drastically improved at all zoos.”

Dr. Assad Serhal, director of the Society for the Protection of Nature in Lebanon, told Arab News that the Syrian brown bear was an endangered species seen in the mountainous area of eastern Lebanon, near the Syrian borders. In 2019, an environmental activist filmed a brown cub playing on the road in the outskirts of Ersal, in the Bekaa valley. That same cub was previously seen with his mother in 2017 in the same area. This species had not been seen in Lebanon for over 50 years.

The Syrian brown bear lived in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria and Turkey but, due to illegal and non-organized hunting in Lebanon, the species became extinct. Serhal said Lebanon was home to several species of wild animal, but that most had been captured by zoo owners across the country.



Y NEWS SCREEN GRAB

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[Iran's meddling in affairs of other countries threatens regional security: GCC chief](#)

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Sat, 2021-07-24 19:39

LONDON: Iran's intervention in the internal affairs of other countries is a threat to the region and a matter of concern, the chief of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) said on Saturday.

Iran's nuclear program, ballistic missiles, and its support for militias, must also be included in ongoing talks in Vienna and they should not be

limited to reviving the nuclear deal, GCC Secretary-general Nayef bin Falah Al-Hajraf said at a virtual Gulf Research Meeting.

Representatives of Iran and the five world powers still party to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action have been meeting in the Austrian capital since April, with US envoys participating indirectly. An agreement has yet to be reached.

Al-Hajraf added that the current situation in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen represents a clear and direct threat to the security and stability of the Middle East.

The GCC chief said that economic integration is on the list of priorities for the council, as is strengthening the leading position of GCC countries in the region and the world.

He said Saudi Arabia holding the G20 presidency in 2020, the UAE hosting Expo 2020 from October, and Qatar's hosting of the 2022 FIFA World Cup are examples of this effort.

Al-Hajraf added that the national visions and development plans in GCC countries are creating the appropriate momentum to focus on the future and exploit opportunities.



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coordination between member states