

US launches strike against Iranian forces in Syria

Author:

Sat, 2021-02-27 01:30

CHICAGO: A US airstrike in Syria targeted facilities belonging to an Iranian-backed armed group, killing one fighter and wounding several others, according to the Associated Press. However, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a Britain-based group that monitors the war in Syria, said as many as 22 fighters were killed.

Thursday's strike signaled the first military action undertaken by US President Joe Biden, who took office on Jan. 20.

Pentagon officials said the strikes were retaliation for a rocket attack at the International Airport in Erbil on Feb. 15 that killed one civilian contractor and wounded a US service member and other coalition troops.

Biden's decision to attack in Syria did not appear to signal an intention to widen US military involvement in the region but rather to demonstrate a will to defend US troops in Iraq and send a message to Iran.

"I think the very limited nature of the strike means both that it is unlikely to cause an escalation, and it is unlikely to change Iranian behavior," said Justin Logan, a Fellow at the Conservative Cato Institute.

"Just as limited strikes from Iran-linked militias are unlikely to change US policy in Iraq. What is the point? There is a schoolyard logic to the strike – he hit me first – but the question ought to be about what effect it is expected to produce."

US Senator Tim Kaine, a Democrat from Virginia, said the attacks were clearly intended to target Iranian regime proxy militia groups operating in Syria.

"The American people deserve to hear the administration's rationale for these strikes and its legal justification for acting without coming to Congress," Kaine said in a statement.

"Offensive military action without congressional approval is not constitutional, absent extraordinary circumstances. Congress must be fully briefed on this matter expeditiously."

Kaine, who has challenged presidential actions to expand military force without congressional authorization, introduced legislation to prohibit a war with Iran without bipartisan support from the Senate and the House, but the bill was vetoed by former President Donald Trump.

Former US ambassador to Morocco, Edward Gabriel, defended the strikes saying they were a necessary response given Iran's violence against American targets.

“This attack, coming on the advent of US-Iranian talks, sends the important message that we, the United States, will not allow Iranian-sponsored attacks on US personnel and will respond to any such threat accordingly,” said Gabriel, who is a member of the Arab Americans for Biden coalition.

“It was measured and indicates that the Biden administration seems prepared for a negotiation with Iran that not only deals with curbing Iranian nuclear ambitions, but will also not tolerate Iranian proxy aggression in the region anymore.”

Ali Safavi, an official with the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Paris-based National Council of Resistance of Iran, said the Iran regime only understands a policy of firmness.

“So long as the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps and its proxy groups and militias continue to operate in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen, wreaking havoc in the Middle East, incidents such as the ones in Erbil, Ballad, and Baghdad will persist,” Safavi said.

“Tehran only understands the language of firmness; weakness only emboldens it.”



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US airstrike in Syria sent ‘unambiguous message’: White HouseUS bombs facilities in Syria used by Iran-backed militia; monitor counts 17 killed

Pro-government rallies cause outrage in Turkey

Author:

Sat, 2021-02-27 00:47

ANKARA: Large rallies for Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and other "superspreader" events have sparked public outcry, with the government accused of double standards in the country's fight against the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

In recent weeks, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has attended these crowded events – some resembling pop concerts – along with other provincial congress meetings across the country.

The indoor events, with thousands in attendance, have been criticized over a lack of social distancing. Meanwhile, peaceful protests of university students and ordinary meetings of some dissident NGOs are still forbidden because they do not respect pandemic measures.

Restaurants, coffee houses and art excursions remain shut under pandemic restrictions, which has left thousands of laid-off workers on the verge of chronic poverty and merchants grappling with bankruptcy.

"Shopkeepers have closed shutters and they are utterly devastated. The AKP's rallies are wide open and everybody is smiling," Kemal Kilicdaroglu, the head of Turkey's main opposition Republican People's Party, said during his parliamentary speech on Tuesday.

The pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party was fined for violating social distancing rules after one of its events, but no punishments have been imposed for the pro-government rallies.

Turkish Health Minister Fahrettin Koca, who advises against large rallies, publicly apologized after Erdogan and a group of AKP officials gathered at a mosque in Istanbul on Feb. 21 for the funeral of a clergyman.

"I should have foreseen such a situation," Koca said Wednesday. "It is my mistake. As 83 million people, we should equally self-sacrifice ourselves by staying away from closed spaces and crowded areas during the pandemic."

Thousands of people forbidden from attending funerals, along with millions of children still unable to attend school, have taken to social media to express their anger and criticize the fairness of pandemic restrictions.

A video featuring AKP youth members from the southern Hatay branch dancing, singing and carrying each other on their shoulders all without masks has gone viral and was dubbed the "political corona party."

A recent survey by the government revealed that only 40 percent of the Turkish people trust the administration's management of the COVID-19. Turkey is ranked 74th out of 98 countries in the Lowy Institute's COVID Performance Index, which assesses each nation's performance in managing the virus.

"I have not seen or heard anything like this," Ozlem Kayim Yildiz, a neurologist from Sivas University, tweeted. "In the midst of the pandemic, while restrictions continue, 'some' are exempt from these restrictions. Has the caste system arrived? They do not even bother to obey their own rules. They don't even care about looking consistent or thoughtful."

So far, the coronavirus has killed 370 health professionals in Turkey.

Urartu Seker, a medical specialist from Bilkent University, echoed the widespread criticisms from those in the scientific community: "I'm very sorry, for those who follow the rules, those who lost their jobs, and for children who are out of school," he said.

Turkey's population continues to struggle financially as it deals with pandemic restrictions. About 100,000 shopkeepers closed their businesses last year, while about 40,735 companies ceased operations.

Millions are expected to lose their jobs after the Turkish government lifts the ban on layoffs in May, which will be a huge blow for a country that is already dealing with more than 11 million people unemployed.



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Protestants in Turkey asked to spy on communityTurkey's pro-Kurdish party MPs targeted in legal barrage

[UN slams Iran over minority-rights record as unrest in country continues](#)

Author:

Sat, 2021-02-27 00:33

LONDON: The UN has slammed Iran for its record on minority rights and denounced an "apparently coordinated campaign" against minorities in the country. It comes after days of violence and unrest in the Sistan and Baluchestan province.

"In Iran, an apparently coordinated campaign has been targeting minority groups since December, including in Sistan and Baluchestan, Khuzestan, and in the Kurdish provinces," said UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet. "Mass arrests and enforced disappearances have been reported, as well as increasing numbers of executions following deeply flawed processes.

"Across the country, the exercise of civic freedoms and political or critical expression continue to be targeted through national security laws, criminal prosecution and intimidation.

"I am concerned at persistent impunity for human-rights violations, including violations that occurred in the contexts of protests in 2018 and 2019."

Ethnic Arabs in Khuzestan and Kurds in Kurdistan province have long suffered at the hands of the regime, as have ethnic Baluchis in Sistan and Baluchestan, where in the past week unrest and violence has flared between them and security forces.

On Monday, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps fired on fuel smugglers on the Iran-Pakistan border, killing 10 people according to Human Rights Watch. Since then protests and violence against the local government in Iran have escalated.

On Tuesday, protesters attacked the county governor's office in Saravan, a city in Sistan and Baluchestan. In a separate incident unknown assailants attacked a police station, also in Saravan, with light weapons and grenade launchers, resulting in a firefight that left one police officer dead.

Iranian officials said the unrest has been brought "under control." However,

sources in contact with people inside Iran said that despite a crackdown by Tehran across the province and an internet blackout, protesters blocked highways and occupied government buildings on Thursday.

Ali Safavi, a member of Paris-based Iranian opposition group the National Council of Resistance in Iran, told Arab News that his sources there estimate the death toll related to the unrest could now be as high as 40.

“Iran’s ethnic minorities, including the Baluchis, Kurds and Arabs, have suffered tremendously from the mullahs’ discriminatory policies and practices,” he said.

“The savage crackdown, including the deployment of tanks, on the defenseless people of Saravan and other cities in the Sistan and Baluchestan Province is, by any measure, a crime against humanity.

“The international community should waste no time condemning the slaughter in the strongest language possible and launch an independent international inquiry.”

Safavi condemned the lack of response from EU nations to the violence, and slammed plans to proceed with an EU-funded online Europe-Iran Business Forum next week, despite egregious human-rights abuses in the country and terrorist activity on the European continent that has been linked to Iran.

“To the EU, making a buck by European business is more valuable than the lives of the Iranian people,” he said.



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[Russia unmoved as Security Council again warned of Syrian children's plight](#)

Author:

Fri, 2021-02-26 04:11

NEW YORK: In what might be his final briefing on Syria to the Security Council, the UN's humanitarian chief on Thursday once again warned of the dire situation in the country, and the terrible toll it is taking on children in particular.

Mark Lowcock, who this month said that after four years in the role he is stepping down to spend more time with his family in the UK, sounded the alarm about a humanitarian crisis which, 10 years into the civil war, is only getting worse. A fragile economy is suffering shock after shock, the currency is in free fall, food prices have spiked by 200 percent, unemployment is rising, and 60 percent of the population lacks access to safe and nutritious food, he said.

Millions are forced to resort to "desperate measures" to survive, he added. Parents are going without food so that they can feed their children, who are having to find work instead of going to school. More than half a million under-fives are affected by stunting, which is impaired growth and development as a result of chronic malnutrition.

Although this crisis is affecting people throughout Syria, it is particularly bad in the northwest and northeast, where Lowcock said one in three children is suffering from the irreversible effects of stunting. He said malnutrition is so common that parents no longer even notice the signs in their children.

"The effects this will have on their development and learning will be lifelong and irreversible," he added.

Sonia Khush, Save the Children's Syria response director, told the council that about half of Syrian children are growing up "having known nothing but conflict, which has permeated all aspects of their lives and robbed them of their childhoods."

She added: "Children today are facing a graver reality than at any other point in the 10-year conflict. They are more likely to be in need of humanitarian assistance, to go hungry, to die from preventable diseases, to miss out on school and face protection risks."

Khush said the combined effects of the conflict, during which thousands of children have been killed, displacement, poverty and the COVID-19 pandemic have created conditions in which millions of Syrian young people are missing out on an education, girls are being married off to support their families, boys are being sent to war, and child labor is becoming more prevalent.

Schools are supposed to be safe places for children to learn and thrive, she added, but instead they have been attacked, used by armed groups and are littered with unexploded ordinance.

Of the five million people across northern Syria in need of cross-border assistance, two million are children and half of them have been displaced, in some cases more than 10 times, Khush said.

Lack of access to adequate supplies of food and water has resulted in an alarming nutritional crisis.

"This means they have gone for months without eating nutritious food that is vital to their survival and development, and the number of children who go to bed hungry every day is in the millions," Khush said.

In the past year, the UN has lost access to three of four border crossings through which it delivered humanitarian aid to Syria from neighboring countries. Under pressure from Russia and China, on behalf of the Assad regime, closed crossings have not been reopened. In the northwest, the entire humanitarian aid effort to help 2.4 million people has to pass through a single checkpoint on the border with Turkey.

"Without the cross-border operation, doctors in northwest Syria, like some of those I spoke to, would not be able to provide those children with the care that they need to survive," Lowcock said. "They would not have the resources and supplies to carry on, within quite a short period of time, they said. The situation would go from terrible to catastrophic."

Lowcock, who is also the emergency relief coordinator, reiterated the stance of UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres that "when it comes to delivering life-saving aid to people in need, all channels should be made, and should be kept, available."

Should the Security Council again fail to extend its authorization for cross-border assistance, Lowcock warned that it would "trigger suffering and loss of life potentially on a very large scale."

Despite the dire warnings, the Russian stance on the issue of cross-border assistance remained the same.

"There is no doubt that keeping the cross-border mechanism will also mean keeping supporting terrorists, who are living on what they have extorted and also on how they are controlling smuggling," said Vassily Nebenzya, Russia's permanent representative to the UN.

"If we all had to make a decision on the extension of the cross-border mechanism tomorrow, I fear that we would not have any convincing grounds to

do so.”



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Six months after Beirut blast, Syrian refugees battle for survival
Most Turks want Syrian refugees to go home

[US bombs facilities in Syria used by Iran-backed militia](#)

Fri, 2021-02-26 02:41

WASHINGTON: The United States launched airstrikes in Syria on Thursday, targeting facilities near the Iraqi border used by Iranian-backed militia groups. The Pentagon said the strikes were retaliation for a rocket attack in Iraq earlier this month that killed one civilian contractor and wounded a US service member and other coalition troops.

The airstrike was the first military action undertaken by the Biden administration, which in its first weeks has emphasized its intent to put

more focus on the challenges posed by China, even as Mideast threats persist. "This proportionate military response was conducted together with diplomatic measures, including consultation with coalition partners," the Pentagon's chief spokesperson, John Kirby, said in announcing the strikes.

"The operation sends an unambiguous message: President Biden will act to protect American and coalition personnel. At the same time, we have acted in a deliberate manner that aims to deescalate the overall situation in eastern Syria and Iraq."

Kirby said the US airstrikes "destroyed multiple facilities at a border control point used by a number of Iranian-backed militant groups."

Further details were not immediately available.

Biden administration officials condemned the Feb. 15 rocket attack near the city of Irbil in Iraq's semi-autonomous Kurdish-run region, but as recently as this week officials indicated they had not determined for certain who carried it out. Officials have noted that in the past, Iranian-backed Shiite militia groups have been responsible for numerous rocket attacks that targeted US personnel or facilities in Iraq.

Kirby had said Tuesday that Iraq is in charge of investigating the Feb. 15 attack.

"Right now, we're not able to give you a certain attribution as to who was behind these attacks, what groups, and I'm not going to get into the tactical details of every bit of weaponry used here," Kirby said. "Let's let the investigations complete and conclude, and then when we have more to say, we will."

A little-known Shiite militant group calling itself Saraya Awliya Al-Dam, Arabic for Guardians of Blood Brigade, claimed responsibility for the Feb. 15 attack. A week later, a rocket attack in Baghdad's Green Zone appeared to target the US Embassy compound, but no one was hurt.

Iran this week said it has no links to the Guardians of Blood Brigade.

The frequency of attacks by Shiite militia groups against US targets in Iraq diminished late last year ahead of President Joe Biden's inauguration, though now Iran is pressing America to return to Tehran's 2015 nuclear deal. The US under the previous Trump administration blamed Iran-backed groups for carrying out the attacks. Tensions soared after a Washington-directed drone strike that killed top Iranian Gen. Qassem Soleimani and powerful Iraqi militia leader Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis last year.

Trump had said the death of a US contractor would be a red line and provoke US escalation in Iraq. The December 2019 killing of a US civilian contractor in a rocket attack in Kirkuk sparked a tit-for-tat fight on Iraqi soil that brought the country to the brink of a proxy war.

US forces have been significantly reduced in Iraq to 2,500 personnel and no longer partake in combat missions with Iraqi forces in ongoing operations against the Daesh group.



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