

Al-Qaeda suffers heavy losses in Yemen conflicts

Author:

Sat, 2020-03-07 01:38

AL-MUKALLA: The Yemen-based Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, also known as AQAP, has been weakened by the deaths of its leaders at the hands of US drones, ground attacks by Yemeni troops and rivalry with other groups, experts said.

"Al-Qaeda is going through hard times with its leaders' priority now to hold the group together," Saleh Al-Baydhani, a Yemeni political analyst, told Arab News.

Al-Qaeda's most dangerous branch was established in 2009 and was responsible for dozens of deadly attacks against army and security targets, that claimed the lives of hundreds of soldiers and civilians.

During its heyday that followed, militants stormed many Yemeni cities, including a large swath of land in the southern province of Abyan in 2011, and in 2015 they stormed the city of Al-Mukalla, Yemen's fifth largest city and neighboring regions on the Arabian Sea.

But over the last three years, its ability to expand on the ground has diminished, which many analysts attributed to the killing of the group's leaders and successful military operations.

Setback

AQAP's latest blow was the killing of their leader Qassem Al-Rimi in a US drone strike last month. Analysts argue that the death of Al-Rimi was the last straw that would leave its mark on the group's ability to regroup for years to come.

"Al-Rimi was the last pillar of Al-Qaeda," Saeed Obeid Al-Jumahi, a Yemeni terrorism expert, told Al-Arabyia TV. "The other two pillars were Nasser Al-Waheshi and Saeed Al-Shehri who were killed by US drones."

Al-Qaeda is going through hard times with its leaders' priority now to hold the group together.

Saleh Al-Baydhani, a Yemeni political analyst

Since capturing Al-Mukalla in 2015, US forces have managed to kill dozens of militants including several senior leaders. Al-Baydhani said the spiraling number of deaths by drone strikes showed the scale of the US's infiltration of the militants.

"The infiltration has prompted Al-Qaeda to stop recruiting new fighters. They also took a low profile to avoid the drones," said Al-Baydhani, adding that the death of AQAP leaders had left a vacuum which crippled the militants' ability to expand on the ground.

"The last three recordings of alleged spies showed that the group was greatly dented," Al-Baydhani said, referring to recent videos by Al-Qaeda media in

which militants execute alleged spies.

New forces

At the beginning of Saudi-led military operations in Yemen, AQAP militants seized control of Al-Mukalla and other areas in Hadramout, exploiting the fall of security and military units.

Many analysts argued at the time that the militants would continue expanding across Yemen during the war. But the predictions did not come true as the coalition helped rebuild Yemen's military and security forces, and backed them during attacks on AQAP.

Backed by air cover from the Saudi-led coalition, Yemeni troops pushed AQAP militants from their strongholds in Abyan, Shabwa, Lahj and Hadramout.

"The coalition-backed forces reached the group's strongholds. The US drones usually hit the leaders from the air without putting troops on the ground," Al-Jumahi said.

In August last year, fighting broke out between army troops and the separatist Southern Transitional Council in the southern provinces of Abyan and Shabwa. Analysts argue that if the fighting had occurred 10 years ago, the militants would have exploited the insecurity to make a comeback.

"At the moment, the organization's priority is maintaining coherence and reducing infiltrations," Al-Baydhani said.

Last week, villagers in the central province of Baydha, where AQAP fighters are thought to be hiding, said that suspected US planes dropped leaflets urging them to help finding three AQAP militants: Khaled Batarfi, the group's new leader; Saad Atef, Al-Qaeda's emir in Shabwa; and Ammar Al-Sanani. Residents would be rewarded with \$6 million for information that would help with finding the three militants.



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Saudi Arabia carries out relief projects in Yemen, Bangladesh Saudi, US officials discuss Yemen's development

[EU countries welcome cease-fire in Syria, urge aid access](#)

Sat, 2020-03-07 01:28

ZAGREB: EU countries gave a cautious welcome on Friday to a Russian-Turkish cease-fire in Syria but urged warring parties to allow in more humanitarian aid.

Foreign ministers from the 27 EU states held talks in Zagreb on the crisis in the northwestern Syrian province of Idlib, where Ankara is battling Moscow-backed government forces.

"For sure I am pleased for the cease-fire, the cease-fire is good news. At least it's goodwill – let's see how it works," Josep Borrell said.

Nearly a million civilians have fled their homes due to the Idlib fighting, dubbed by the UN the worst humanitarian emergency since the start of the Syrian civil war in 2011.

The ministers called "in the strongest possible terms" for the cease-fire to be implemented to protect civilians and "to enable the unhindered delivery of humanitarian assistance by the international community."

The EU has announced €60 million (\$68 million) in humanitarian assistance for northwest Syria, as part of a €170 million package for those in need across the war-torn country. But Borrell warned that logistics were a bigger challenge than financing – the difficulties of trucking in supplies to feed and shelter a million people in the middle of winter.

"It is important now to concentrate on humanitarian aid and I would welcome if Russia would respect the concept of humanitarian aid corridors to be widened," Estonian Foreign Minister Urmas Reinsalu said.

Ireland's Simon Coveney said there was "relief" among EU countries at news of the cease-fire.

HIGHLIGHT

Foreign ministers from the 27 EU states held talks in Zagreb on the crisis in the northwestern Syrian province of Idlib, where Ankara is battling Moscow-backed government forces.

"But there's still an extraordinary humanitarian challenge that I think we all face in terms of the sheer numbers of refugees that had been displaced

because of the conflict there,” Coveney added.

Some EU countries, notably the Netherlands, had called for a no-fly zone over Idlib to stop the regime bombing civilians.

But the EU has no power to implement or enforce such a measure and officials are privately skeptical.

“We all know this would need UN mandate, would you get that?” a senior EU official said, alluding to Russia’s right of veto at the UN Security Council.

“A no-fly zone always sounds nice but needs to be militarily enforced. Who would do that?”

The ministers’ statement did not mention a no-fly zone but stressed the importance of protecting civilians from air attacks.

Intense fighting has killed dozens of Turkish soldiers in Idlib in recent weeks, as Ankara launched a direct offensive against Bashar Assad’s forces for the first time.

The escalating crisis prompted Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to open Turkey’s border with Greece to refugees and migrants.

Turkey has demanded the EU’s support for its actions in Syria and some in the bloc have accused Erdogan of using migrants as “blackmail.”

In their statement, the ministers repeated their rejection of “Turkey’s use of migratory pressure for political purposes,” after a week of dramatic scenes on the Turkish-Greek border.

“Illegal crossings will not be tolerated. In this regard, the EU and its member states will take all necessary measures, in accordance with EU and international law,” the statement said.



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Turkey accused of forcefully moving migrants to Greek border Turkey-Russia deal: An ideal outcome for all?

Turkey accused of forcefully moving migrants to Greek border

Sat, 2020-03-07 01:21

ANKARA: Around 400 refugees from a repatriation center in the Turkish capital Ankara have been forcibly transported to the Greek border since last Saturday, a lawyers' group has claimed.

The move came soon after Turkey said it could no longer stop those who wanted to reach European soil.

Upheaval

Since then thousands of migrants – not only from Syria, but also from other Middle Eastern countries and Afghanistan – have flocked to Turkey's land and sea borders with Greece and Bulgaria.

The EU's Foreign Affairs Council on Friday criticized the ongoing humanitarian crisis along the Turkish-Greek border.

"While acknowledging the increased migratory burden and risks Turkey is facing on its territory and the substantial efforts it has made in hosting 3.7 million migrants and refugees, the EU reiterates its serious concern over the situation at the Greek-Turkish border and strongly rejects Turkey's use of migratory pressure for political purposes," the EU said in a statement.

SPEEDREAD

The Turkish Interior Ministry, responsible for administering the repatriation centers, has not denied the allegations about the removal of the refugees from the Ankara site.

The chair of the Ankara Bar Association's Migrant Rights Center, Onur Gelbal, said a number of migrants who resisted the deportation had managed to stay on at the Ankara center.

There are 28 repatriation centers throughout Turkey, most established with EU funds, which together can hold a maximum of 20,000 people.

The Turkish Interior Ministry, which is responsible for administering the repatriation centers, has not denied the allegations about the removal of the refugees from the Ankara site, and the Ankara Bar Association is expected next week to formally accuse the ministry of neglect of duty and file a

complaint to the prosecutor's office.

"We were informed by our attorney colleagues who received phone calls on Saturday night from their clients who were forced onto buses to be transported to the border," Gelbal told Arab News.

Border tense

The association assigned staff to the Turkish-Greek border to track migrants who had been transported from the Ankara center.

Many of the refugees massed on the border have been pushed back by Greek authorities and now find themselves stranded without any basic facilities. With only 200 migrants staying back, the repatriation center in Ankara is almost empty. Those repatriated by force were mainly Iraqis and Afghans and included women and children.

Amid the ongoing stand-off between Ankara and Brussels over migration management, one town in northern Turkey has offered free transport to ferry migrants to the Greek border.

Dubbed as a "walk toward hope," several foundations working with migrants in Turkey have also allegedly arranged buses to the border from various Turkish cities including Istanbul where many migrants are located.

However, the Foreign Affairs Council reiterated its commitment to "effectively protect the EU's external borders" and to not tolerate illegal crossings by land or sea.

"Migrants should not be encouraged to attempt illegal crossings by land or sea. The council calls on the Turkish government and all actors and organizations on the ground to relay this message and counter the dissemination of false information," its statement added.





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Turkey-Russia deal: An ideal outcome for all?EU criticizes Turkey on migration as border clashes resume

[Seven cases of deadly virus found in Palestine](#)

Author:

Fri, 2020-03-06 02:48

GAZA CITY: Palestine has announced seven cases of coronavirus in the city of Bethlehem, in the south of the West Bank, and has declared a state of emergency in the cities of Bethlehem and Jericho.

Local websites reported that four people were infected with the virus in a hotel in the Beit Jala area of Bethlehem. Ministry of Health spokesman, Tareef Ashour, said: "We took samples from Polish and American foreigners, and samples from 21 workers in a hotel.

"Most of the tests are negative, but there are suspicious cases and we have transferred some samples for examination to Israeli labs in order to make

sure of the infection," he added.

Palestinian Minister of Health May Kila told a news conference in Bethlehem on Thursday that the results would be released in the coming hours, and that the ministry was in continuous communication with Tel HaShomer Hospital in Israel.

Following that announcement, the Ministry of Health declared a series of measures calling for the closure of educational institutions, mosques and churches in Bethlehem for two weeks.

The Football Federation announced the suspension of sports matches in a number of Palestinian cities in the West Bank, in a move to prevent mass gatherings.

The Federation of Churches also announced the closure of the Church of the Nativity in the city until further notice on the advice of the Ministry of Health, and the Palestinian Waqfs Ministry announced the cancelation of Friday prayers in Bethlehem's 27 mosques.

Among the measures announced Wednesday by the Palestinian Health Ministry were increasing examinations at the crossing between the West Bank and Jordan, where one case has been announced so far.

Hamas, which rules the Gaza Strip, has adopted a similar approach for those crossing from Egypt into the Palestinian enclave. All those return from high risk countries will be required to enter self-isolation for 14 days.

The Palestinian Authority also announced the prohibition of gatherings of more than 1,000 people in open areas, more than 50 people in one closed place and the postponing of international conferences scheduled to take place in the Palestinian Territories

In addition, the ministry said Palestinian officials would be prohibited from flying overseas and all military courses abroad were suspended until further notice.

The Ministry of Health called on Palestinians not to panic, adding the measures taken followed international measures to prevent the spread of the virus

The owner of a hotel in Bethlehem told Arab News that the reservations of 50 rooms were canceled for delegations that were expected to arrive in the city on Thursday, due to an order by Ministry of Tourism.

The Jerusalem Waqfs Department called on worshippers coming to pray at Al-Aqsa Mosque to follow safety procedures and maintain hygiene, while it did not announce the cancelation of Friday prayers.

In Israel, the Ministry of Health has announced 15 cases of coronavirus infection, most of them Israelis returning from abroad, and has imposed strict measures to prevent the spread of the virus, including quarantining tens of thousands and stopping flights to and from 13 affected countries.



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Saudi Arabia says Iran's actions have helped spread coronavirus around the world

[Greece blocks 35,000 migrants, plans to deport arrivals after March 1](#)

Author:

Fri, 2020-03-06 02:33

KASTANIES, Greece: Greece has repulsed nearly 35,000 migrants trying to cross onto its territory illegally since Turkey opened its border nearly a week ago, government sources said on Thursday, as it prepares to deport hundreds of others who made it through.

Thousands of migrants have made for Greece since Ankara said on Feb. 28 that it would let migrants cross its borders into Europe, reneging on a commitment to hold them on its territory under a 2016 deal with the EU.

Hundreds have made it into Greece, many by sea to Lesbos and other Greek islands. Ankara and Athens are accusing each other of using excessive force

in the border area, where migrants have clashed with security forces in recent days.

The situation at the Kastanies border crossing, where Greek and Turkish riot police both used tear gas on Wednesday, was calm on Thursday morning.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Greece says will deport recently arrived migrants.
- Migrants huddled in tents and makeshift camps on the Turkish side of the border.
- Turkey accuses Greece of rights abuses, prepares lawsuit.

Migrants huddled in tents and makeshift camps on the Turkish side of the border.

Greek border guards rebuffed nearly 7,000 attempts in the last 24 hours alone, taking the total since Feb. 29 to 34,778 and the number of arrests of those who got through to 244, the Greek government sources said.

Migrants who arrived in Greece illegally after March 1 will be transferred to the northern city of Serres and deported back to their own countries, Greek Migration Minister Notis Mitarachi said late on Wednesday.

“Our aim is to return them to their countries,” he told the Athens News Agency.

Criticism

Mitarachi also said migrants who entered the country prior to Jan. 1, 2019 and living on the islands would be transferred to the mainland in the coming days.

Greece announced on March 1 that it would not accept any new asylum applications for a month following the buildup of migrants at the border. This has triggered criticism from human rights agencies.

Turkey accused Greek forces of shooting dead one migrant and wounding five others, a charge strongly denied by Greece, which said Turkish police were using tear gas to help the migrants illegally cross onto its territory.

Turkish Interior Minister Suleyman Soylu, who visited the land border with Greece on Thursday, said late on Wednesday that Ankara was preparing a case in the European Court of Human Rights over Greece’s treatment of migrants.

Turkey’s change in policy toward the migrants on its soil came after at least 33 Turkish soldiers were killed by Russian-backed Syrian government forces in an airstrike in Syria.

The Aegean Sea separating Greece and Turkey remained choppy on Thursday and there were no further sightings of dinghies carrying migrants to Lesbos and other Greek islands from the nearby Turkish coast.

Lesbos already hosts more than 20,000 asylum seekers, many of them living in filthy conditions in overcrowded camps.

Greece and the EU accuse Turkey of deliberately goading the migrants to cross the border as a way of pressuring Brussels into offering more money or supporting Ankara's geopolitical aims in the Syrian conflict.

Turkey, which already hosts 3.6 million Syrian refugees and faces another influx from an upsurge in fighting in northwest Syria, says it cannot take in any more and complains that EU aid falls well short of what is needed for the refugees.



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Erdogan denies blackmail over Syria migrants EU rejects Turkey's 'blackmail', borders to stay closed to migrants: France