

Air strikes kill five pro-Iran fighters in Syria: monitor

Author:

Sun, 2019-12-08 18:07

BEIRUT: Air strikes by unidentified warplanes have killed five pro-Iran fighters in Syria's eastern province of Deir Ezzor near the Iraqi border, a Britain-based war monitor said on Sunday.

The strikes late Saturday targeted "positions of Iranian forces and allied militias" on the edge of the town of Albukamal, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

"Five non-Syrian fighters were killed," Observatory chief Rami Abdel Rahman told AFP, without being able to provide their nationalities.

Regime troops, Iranian forces and allied Iran-backed fighters, including from Iraq, are present in the area on the western banks of the Euphrates River, he said.

According to the Observatory, 10 Iraqi fighters were killed in September in air strikes of unknown origin in the same area.

At the start of that month, air raids killed 18 pro-Iran fighters, the monitor reported.

In June 2018, strikes near the Iraqi border killed 55 pro-regime forces, mostly Syrians and Iraqis, the Observatory said.

An American official said at the time that Israel was responsible, but the Jewish state declined to comment.

Israel has carried out hundreds of strikes in Syria on what it says are positions of Lebanese Shiite movement Hezbollah and Iranian forces, which it has vowed to prevent gaining a foothold in Syrian territory.

But the US-led coalition that has been fighting Daesh has in the past also admitted to carrying out air strikes against pro-regime fighters.

The coalition is backing Kurdish-led fighters on the eastern shores of the Euphrates.



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US military completes pullback from northeast Syria, Esper says

[Protests grip Iraq's capital and south despite rising toll](#)

Author:

AFP

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Sun, 2019-12-08 12:57

BAGHDAD: Thousands of Iraqi protesters streamed into streets and public squares in the capital and restive south on Sunday, saying they were not deterred by deadly violence meant to "scare" them.

In Baghdad, crowds of anti-government demonstrators thronged Tahrir Square,

the epicenter of their movement.

Late Friday, unidentified gunmen attacked a parking complex near Tahrir where demonstrators had been squatting for weeks, leaving 20 protesters and four police officers dead, medics told AFP.

Protesters feared it signalled that their movement would be derailed but by Sunday, the numbers gathered under the sun in Tahrir were staggering.

"They're trying to scare us in whatever ways they can, but we're staying in the streets," said Aisha, a 23-year-old protester.

At least 452 people – the vast majority of them protesters – have died and 20,000 have been wounded since the rallies erupted.

In Nasiriyah, a protest hotspot where dozens were killed in a spree of violence last month, protesters regrouped in downtown along with representatives of powerful tribes.

"We will keep protesting until the regime collapses," pledged Ali Rahim, a student.

In other southern cities, local authorities had declared Sunday – the first day of the work week in Iraq – a holiday for civil servants.

Road blocks and massive strikes also disrupted work in Hilla, Amara, Diwaniya, Kut and the shrine city of Najaf, AFP's correspondents there said. The rallies have persisted despite the resignation of premier Adel Abdel Mahdi earlier this month, with protesters demanding the complete ouster of the ruling class.

Iraq is ranked the 12th most corrupt country in the world by watchdog group Transparency International, with billions of dollars pilfered each year from the state budget of OPEC's second-largest producer.



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Iraqis protest to defy 'slaughter' in Baghdad as drone hits cleric's home

[Egyptian officials say policeman, militant killed in Sinai](#)

Author:

By ASHRAF SWEILLAM | AP

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Sun, 2019-12-08 10:39

EL-ARISH: Egyptian officials say a militant attack has killed a police conscript in the restive northern part of the Sinai Peninsula.

The officials say that the militants attacked a police checkpoint in the town of Rafah early on Sunday, wounding another two conscripts who were taken to a nearby hospital for treatment.

Authorities say that security forces killed a militant, and wounded others, in clashes that followed the assault.

The officials spoke on condition of anonymity as they weren't authorized to talk to reporters.

No group claimed responsibility for the attack, which bares the hallmarks of a Daesh affiliate based in northern Sinai.

Egypt is battling a Daesh-led insurgency in the Sinai that intensified after the military overthrew an Islamist president in 2013.



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Egypt army kills 83 militants in North SinaiEgypt officials: Attack kills 3 soldiers, 3 militants in Sinai

[Airstrikes kill 19 civilians in northwest Syria](#)

Author:

Sat, 2019-12-07 23:57

AL-BARA, Syria: Syrian regime and Russian airstrikes on Saturday killed 19 civilians, eight of them children, in the country's last major opposition bastion, a war monitor said.

The air raids in the rebel-run northwestern region of Idlib also wounded several others, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

Airstrikes by regime ally Russia killed four civilians including a child in the village of Al-Bara in the south of the region, the Observatory said.

An AFP correspondent at the scene saw rescue workers pick through the rubble

of a two-story home whose concrete roof had collapsed.

Rescuers carried away the body of a victim wrapped in a blanket on a stretcher.

Russian raids also killed nine civilians including three children in the nearby village of Balyun, the Observatory said.

Crude barrel bombs dropped by government helicopters killed five civilians including three children in the village of Abadeeta, also in the same area.

In the southeast of the embattled region, a raid by a regime aircraft killed another child in the village of Bajghas, the Observatory said.

The Britain-based monitor, which relies on a network of sources inside Syria, says it determines the provenance of an airstrike by looking at flight patterns and the aircraft and munitions involved.

The airstrikes on Idlib province have intensified over the past few weeks as the government appears to be preparing for an offensive on rebel-held areas east of the province to secure the main highway that links the capital Damascus with the northern city of Aleppo, Syria's largest and once commercial center.

The Idlib region, which is home to some 3 million people including many displaced by Syria's civil war, is controlled by the country's former Al-Qaeda affiliate.

The Damascus regime has repeatedly vowed to take back control of Idlib.

Bashar Assad's forces launched a blistering military campaign against the region in April, killing around 1,000 civilians and displacing more than 400,000 people from their homes. A cease-fire announced by Moscow has largely held since late August.

But the Observatory says deadly bombardment and skirmishes have persisted, with more than 200 civilians killed in the region since the deal.

Syria's war has killed over 370,000 people and displaced millions from their homes since beginning in 2011 with the brutal repression of anti-Assad protests.

Earlier, the Observatory and the opposition's Syrian Civil Defense said four people, including a child and two women, were killed in airstrikes on the opposition-held village of Bara.

The Observatory said five others were killed in the village of Ibdeita and a child in another village nearby.

Different casualty figures are common in the immediate aftermath of violence in Syria, where an eight-year conflict has killed about 400,000 people, wounded more than a million and displaced half the country's prewar population.

Syrian troops launched a four-month offensive earlier this year on Idlib, which is dominated by al-Qaida-linked militants. The government offensive forced hundreds of thousands of civilians to flee their homes.

A fragile cease-fire halted the government advance in late August but has been repeatedly violated in recent weeks.



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Syrian airstrikes intensify in northwestCar bomb claims lives of 17 people in northern Syrian village of Tal Halaf

[Are US sanctions on the way for Turkey?](#)

Sat, 2019-12-07 23:47

ANKARA: The crisis over Turkey's acquisition of the S-400 air defense system from Russia may come to a head with the threat of US sanctions, according to sources in Ankara.

Despite the close relationship between Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his US counterpart Donald Trump, the CAATSA (Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act) sanctions package promoted by the US Senate is expected to bring political and financial repercussions for Turkey.

The increasing congressional anger is mainly related to the country's insistence on purchasing Russian-made weapons and its growing military incursions into Syria targeting Syrian Kurdish YPG militia, longtime partners of the US against Daesh.

Images provided to the media showing Turkey allegedly testing the radar of the missile defense system it bought from Russia accompanied with US-made F-16 fighter jets has been the final straw for the US Senate, which is pressing for immediate sanctions, five months after delivery of the Russian system.

Ali Cinar, a US-based foreign policy expert, expects US sanctions within the coming weeks and said that these will further damage the bilateral relationship.

"The US Senate Foreign Relations Committee has scheduled for next week deliberations on legislation that would penalize Turkey's S-400 purchase," he told Arab News.

Last week, US Senators Republican Lindsey Graham and Democratic Chris Van Hollen wrote a letter to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo urging the Trump administration to impose sanctions on Turkey.

"It is time you applied the law. Failure to do so is sending a terrible signal to other countries that they can flout US laws without consequence," they wrote in the letter.

The committee will elaborate on the bill just a week after the meeting between Trump and Erdogan under the auspices of the NATO leaders' summit in London. The general feeling in the US is that after several meetings between the US and Turkish leaders, with seemingly no breakthrough on the S-400, Ankara appears not to be changing course.

According to Cinar, if Turkey continues on its path to activate the S-400 system, the US is right to impose sanctions and expel Turkey from the F35 program under CAATSA.

"I think the sanctions would be lighter at the beginning but sending a strong message to Turkey is key for the Senate so sanctions on some officials would be one of the options," he said.

FASTFACT

Despite the close relationship between Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan

and his US counterpart Donald Trump, the sanctions package promoted by the US Senate is expected to bring political and financial repercussions for Turkey.

But Cinar also underlined that the US president has the power to waive the sanctions for 180 days, after which he must submit another waiver for another 180 days, and that the president can do this consecutively.

“The president also has the right to waive one or more sanctions, for instance impose one package of sanctions and waive the rest,” he said.

The law provides the president, who signed it in August 2017, with the opportunity to select from a list of 12 possible sanctions to punish countries taking possession of Russian military hardware. Among these options, preventing access to loans from financial institutions and denying US visas to government officials are considered as hard ones.

CAATSA became US law in July 2017, and sanctions have so far been imposed on Iran, Russia and North Korea. Being a manufacturing and financial partner of the program, Turkey is already disengaged from Lockheed Martin’s colossal F-35 fighter jets program for buying the Russian system, and the last Turkish manufacturer is expected to be removed from the multinational program by March. Ankara has expressed its intention to buy the Kremlin’s Su-35 fighter jets in retaliation.

Beyond harming its ties with Washington, possible sanctions are likely to oblige Turkey to search for alternative markets and supplies for defense equipment.

For Ozgur Unluhisarcikli, Ankara office director of the German Marshall Fund of the US, it was clear that CAATSA sanctions would be imposed on Turkey as a consequence of it making a major weapons acquisition from Russia.

“President Trump tried to defer this decision for as long as possible and it appears that the US Congress is getting impatient and may take matters into its own hands in case Trump does not impose the sanctions soon,” he told Arab News.

Unluhisarcikli added: “While Trump is expected to impose the sanctions before 2020, he will likely formulate a package that will have a minimum impact on the Turkish economy. As the risk-averse foreign investors have already left the Turkish market, citizens are already dollarized, there is shortage of liquidity and the current accounts deficit has decreased as a consequence of stagnation, the impact of the sanctions on the financial markets can be lower than generally anticipated.”

For Unluhisarcikli, the impact on the Turkish economy will be felt in the medium and long term as it will become even less attractive for real investment.

“The sanctions will unavoidably point to a new low in US-Turkey relations and lead to a new wave of anti-Americanism. It will be surprising if President Erdogan does not choose to surf this wave and create a rally around the flag-

or-president sentiment,” he said.

This process will have an indirect affect on the fate of millions of refugees currently living in Turkey.

As the Turkish economy deteriorates, Unluhisarcikli predicted, the job market will contract, including for refugees, and some of these refugees may start looking elsewhere to rebuild their lives.



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NATO leaders ramp up pressure on Turkey over S-400 missile system
Erdogan: Turkey's efforts to solve S-400 missile row with US to continue until April