

# Iraq protests swell as UN presses Baghdad to 'step up'

Wed, 2019-11-13 20:24

BAGHDAD: Iraqi officials must "step up" to respond to mass demonstrations, the UN representative in Baghdad told AFP on Wednesday as anti-government rallies swelled in Iraq's capital and the country's south.

Protests demanding an overhaul of the political system have rocked Baghdad and the Shiite-majority south for weeks – the crowds unmoved by government pledges of reform and undeterred by the deaths of more than 300 demonstrators.

Washington and the United Nations have called on the government to respond seriously to the protests, with the world body's representative Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert saying the country's authorities must "step up to the plate and make things happen."

"They are elected by the people, they are accountable to them," the head of the UN's Iraq mission (UNAMI) told AFP in an exclusive interview.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, for his part, has said he told Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdel Mahdi that he "deplored the death toll" and to address the popular movement's "legitimate grievances."

The protests had slowed for a few days following a deadly crackdown by security forces in Baghdad and major southern cities but flared again Wednesday with demonstrations by striking students and teachers.

"We're here to back the protesters and their legitimate demands, which include teachers' rights," said Aqeel Atshan, a professor on strike, in Baghdad's Tahrir (Liberation) Square, the epicenter of the protest movement.

In the southern port city of Basra, around 800 students returned to camp outside the provincial government headquarters, days after they had been pushed out by riot police.

Schools were also shut in the protest hotspots of Diwaniyah and Nasiriyah. Protesters have felt emboldened since the country's top Shiite religious authority Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani said they "cannot go home without sufficient reforms."

"Students, boys and girls alike, are all here for a sit-in," another demonstrator in Tahrir told AFP.

"If Sistani gave the orders for mass civil disobedience, everything would close – the government, the oil companies, everything. That's how we'll have a solution."

The UN has put forward a phased roadmap, backed by Sistani, calling for an immediate end to violence, electoral reform and anti-graft measures within two weeks.

Hennis-Plasschaert, the UN envoy, discussed the plan with lawmakers during a parliamentary session on Wednesday afternoon.

"Now is the time to act, otherwise any momentum will be lost – lost at a time when many, many Iraqis demand concrete results," she told them on the sidelines of the parliamentary meeting.

At the session's opening, speaker of parliament Mohammed Al-Halbussi pledged to work on laws to respond to protesters' demands including electoral reform.

Parliament has received a draft law for electoral reform but has yet to discuss it.

Lawmakers also set dates to interrogate two ministers, which could indicate the first steps of a cabinet reshuffle announced by Abdel Mahdi.

Oil-rich Iraq is ranked the 12th most corrupt country in the world by Transparency International, and youth unemployment stands at 25 percent.

Demonstrations erupted on October 1 in fury over a lack of jobs and corruption, initially fracturing the ruling class.

Populist cleric Moqtada Sadr then called on the government to resign and President Barham Saleh suggested early elections, while other factions stood by Abdel Mahdi.

But after a series of meetings led by Iran's influential Major General Qassem Soleimani, a consensus emerged at the weekend over the government remaining intact and both Saleh and Sadr appear to have changed their tunes.

Sadr, who is reported to be in Iran, took to Twitter on Wednesday to call on parliament to enact reforms and for "a general strike, even for one day," but did not demand the premier step down.

Saleh, too, appears to have dropped the idea of early elections.

The agreement brokered by Soleimani appeared to have paved the way for a crackdown on demonstrations last weekend that sent the death toll amid the unrest to well over 300.

Iraq has faced growing criticism over its response to rallies, with rights defenders accusing authorities of shooting live rounds at protesters and curtailing freedom of expression with an Internet blackout and mass arrests.

Also on Wednesday, the president of autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan, Nechirvan Barzani, was in Baghdad to meet with the premier, president and speaker of parliament.

Barzani and Abdel Mahdi are believed to have good personal ties, and the Iraqi Kurdish authorities have backed the current government.

But they have worried that any amendments to Iraq's 2005 constitution as part of a reform process could infringe on Kurdish rights.



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UN: Top Iraqi Shiite cleric backs reforms to resolve unrest

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## [Tunisia's parliament picks Ennahda leader as speaker](#)

Wed, 2019-11-13 19:57

TUNIS: Tunisia's new parliament on Wednesday elected Rached Ghannouchi, leader of the moderate Islamist Ennahda party, as its speaker after the rival Heart of Tunisia party backed him, opening the way for a possible coalition government between them.

Ennahda came first in last month's election, but took only 52 of 217 seats in a deeply fragmented parliament, forcing it to compromise to win majority



support for its preferred candidates for speaker and for prime minister. However, its efforts to build a coalition with several rival parties have so far come to nothing and Tunisia continues with a caretaker government under the existing prime minister, Youssef Chahed.

Wednesday's election for speaker represented a big test for Ennahda, which was banned before Tunisia's 2011 revolution but has since played a big role in several coalition governments.

Its veteran leader Ghannouchi, 78, had faced competition from two rival politicians for the post of speaker. It is his first official post since he returned to Tunisia from exile in London after the 2011 revolution.

It was not immediately clear what price, if any, Heart of Tunisia asked for supporting Ghannouchi as speaker but the party led by media magnate Nabil Karoui now appears likely to join a coalition government with Ennahda.

"The party decided to vote for Ennahda after an agreement," said Ridha Charfeddine, a Heart of Tunisia lawmaker.

It and Ennahda have presented themselves as ideological rivals and have both previously ruled out entering into coalition.

The Attayar and Achaab parties, which had previously been in negotiations with Ennahda over Ghannouchi's candidacy, did not back in Wednesday's vote.

Ennahda, as the biggest party in parliament, has until Friday to name its nominee for prime minister, starting the clock on a two-month process for that person to form a government. It is not yet known whom it will nominate.

Tunisia's post-revolution constitution splits power between the newly elected President Kais Saied and a government that passes legislation through the parliament.



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## [Turkish policy sees Erdogan playing a dangerous diplomatic double game](#)

Wed, 2019-11-13 18:38

MISSOURI: The vast majority of US policymakers, legislators, officials and even American citizens do not look favorably upon Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's official state visit on Wednesday. The honor of the White House invitation strikes many in the US as inappropriate and badly timed.

This, along with US President Donald Trump's Oct. 6 capitulation to Erdogan and his surprise announcement of an immediate withdrawal of US troops from the Syrian border, stands out as perhaps the only major issue to cause bipartisan opposition to Trump.

Even as Erdogan meets with Trump on Wednesday, the US Congress is pushing forward with more sanctions against Turkey for its invasion of Syria disguised as a military operation – "Operation Peace Spring" – against "Kurdish terrorists."

In recent years, Turkey has helped solidify Russian influence over large expanses of the war-torn Middle East at the expense of its traditional NATO allies, from whom it has steadily drifted away.

Assuming that Trump's America (if not Europe) does not care so much about democracy or human rights norms, other recent Turkish policies make the collision with Washington and the Europeans abundantly clear.



Turkey helped Iran evade US sanctions for many years, leading to indictments against some of its officials and top bank executives.

Last summer, Turkey purchased the S-400 air defense system from Russia, which is not inter-operable with NATO systems and could allow Russian technicians to gain valuable intelligence about American-made fighter aircraft.

Throughout most of the civil war in Syria, Turkey backed various extremist groups fighting Bashar Al-Assad's regime. It allowed tens of thousands of militants to transit through its territory en route to Syria, without lifting a finger as they established their "caliphate" right over the border.

After also denying the Americans the use of the NATO airbase at Incirlik for anti-Daesh operations, Washington found its Syrian Kurdish allies to help them against Daesh. As soon as the Kurds had liberated the last of Daesh-held territories in Syria, Turkey insisted that it had to move against main Kurdish fighting force.

With its "Operation Peace Spring," Turkey and its Syrian proxies successfully pushed the Americans out of most of Syria and forced the Kurds to turn to Russia and the Assad regime for protection.

As European leaders criticized the offensive, which many describe as a program of ethnic cleansing, Turkey threatened to unleash millions of Syrian refugees into Europe.

The ongoing fighting, chaos and displacement in northern Syria is also allowing Daesh captives held by the Kurds to escape, reinvigorating a



movement that was on its deathbed just a few weeks ago.

Small wonder then, talk of expelling Turkey from NATO is now a mainstay in American and European media. Despite fierce Turkish opposition and lobbying, Congress on Oct. 29 finally passed a resolution recognizing the Armenian genocide.



American attitudes towards Turkey were not always like this.

In the halls of US government and particularly in the State Department, there was a time when one could not overemphasize Turkey's importance or praise Ankara enough.

In the early days of the previous Democratic administration, President Obama often spoke of Turkey as "a model" for the rest of the Muslim world.

What happened?

President Erdogan and his Sunni nationalist Justice and Development Party (AKP) happened.

At the beginning of the AKP's takeover of Turkey, the changes seemed too slow or subtle to draw much attention. Following the AKP's first electoral victory in 2002, Turkey's military and secular old guard (known as "Kemalists") continued to wield a great deal of political power behind the scenes.



This Western-leaning old guard placed a great deal of value on Turkey's NATO membership, its relations with Washington and a general policy of not becoming too entangled in the myriad problems of the Middle East.

The first sign of change came just before America's 2003 invasion of Iraq. While few expected Turkey to participate in that war, top Turkish leaders and the military had promised the Americans they could pass through their territory to attack Saddam Hussein's Iraq from the north as well as the south.

AKP parliamentarians surprised the old guard by voting not to allow American troops to transit through Turkey, effectively denying America its northern front against Saddam's regime.

The move proved extremely popular with the Turkish public, which despite a long relationship with NATO and the US, was never known for much pro-American sentiment.

In the following years, Erdogan managed to completely purge the Kemalist old guard and military from politics. He did so through his own charisma and a series of mostly fabricated conspiracy charges against his political opponents, aided by a growing economy and an increasingly strident anti-American, Islamist-sounding rhetoric.



The change in Turkey became most apparent by 2011, when the Turkish chief of



army staff, the head of the air force, the head of the navy and the head of the land forces all resigned on the same day.

Once the Kemalist old guard was purged and the military forced back into its barracks, Erdogan and his inner circle could freely pursue their own foreign policy instincts.

These instincts seemed to call for Turkey to become more involved in the Middle East, to aspire towards regaining some of the stature and importance of its Ottoman forebears, to distance itself from American and European policies, and even to lean more towards the East and Russia.

These new foreign-policy goals put Turkey on a collision course with America's interests and those of other American allies.

When the Arab Spring began in 2011, Erdogan's new Turkey supported Islamists in every Arab country rocked by protests. Erdogan himself reveled in the prospect of a new Muslim Brotherhood-dominated Middle East, envisioning himself as the neo-Ottoman leader of the new trend.

He bought currency for his ambition to lead the Arab and Sunni Islamist world by projecting himself as the Palestinians' indispensable defender, wrecking Turkey's delicate relationship with Israel in the process.

The mainstays of Islamist discourse include not only exploiting the Palestinian issue but anti-Western (especially anti-American) and anti-Semitic rhetoric, a promise to return to a "golden age" of Muslim ascendance, and a penchant for authoritarianism at home.

Erdogan and his inner circle proved no exception to this rule. Erdogan and his party members continually accused the American ambassador in Ankara of innumerable plots against Turkey. They used dog whistle anti-Semitic language wherein the "interest-rate lobby" and a "higher mind" sought to undermine Erdogan and his quest for a strong Turkey.

They spoke of "liberating Jerusalem" and insisted that any "friend of Zionism" is an enemy of Turkey (which might include Washington, many wondered).

The Turkish minister of defense in October even posted a map online which showed northern Syria, northern Iraq, Greek islands in the Aegean Sea, parts of the Balkans and Greece, and all of Cyprus as part of Turkey – with the message: "We have no eyes on anyone's soil. We will only take what's ours."

The discourse fit very well with Erdogan's constant glorification of the Ottoman Empire.

Erdogan even built himself a \$615 million, 1,100-room Ottoman-style palace in 2014, dubbed the "White Palace" (AK Saray). The palace includes a costumed honor guard of 16 warriors dressed in period garb from various Turkic empires of the last 2,000 years.

At the same time, Turkey under Erdogan became increasingly authoritarian

after 2011, to the point that many wonder if the country can remain in a NATO alliance whose preamble states that members "... are determined to safeguard the freedom, common heritage and civilization of their peoples, founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law."

All of which makes many wonder what Erdogan and Trump will discuss at the White House on Wednesday.

Will the conversation include any talk of how Turkey damaged American interests in the Middle East; assisted Russia, Iran and Assad's designs on northeastern Syria; and provided Daesh and other militant groups there a new lease on life?

Do Turkey and America even share any strategic interests?



















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Turkey's Erdogan called out for endangering 'US national security' Turkey plays the Daesh card over potential EU sanctions

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## [Turkey's Erdogan called out for endangering 'US national security'](#)

Wed, 2019-11-13 00:25

ERBIL, DUBAI: In a humiliating rebuke to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in the lead-up to his visit to Washington, members of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the US House of Representatives have written a strong



letter urging US President Donald Trump to withdraw the White House invitation.

The letter says Erdogan's "decision to invade northern Syria on Oct. 9 has had disastrous consequences for US national security, has led to deep divisions in the NATO alliance, and caused a humanitarian crisis on the ground."

The Congress members said: "Turkish forces have killed civilians and members of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a critical US partner in the fight against (Daesh), and displaced over one hundred thousand people from their homes in northern Syria."

The committee's concerns are well founded. After weeks of instability and violence following the Turkish incursion, the situation in northeastern Syria remains tense despite the implementation of a ceasefire and an agreement between Russia and Turkey that compelled Kurdish-led SDF troops to withdraw from the border.

According to multiple sources, residents of this part of Syria are fearful for their future and the humanitarian situation is a cause for concern.

Since Turkey launched its assault, shortly after the US troop withdrawal from the border, approximately 180,000 Syrian civilians, primarily Kurds, have been displaced from their homes.

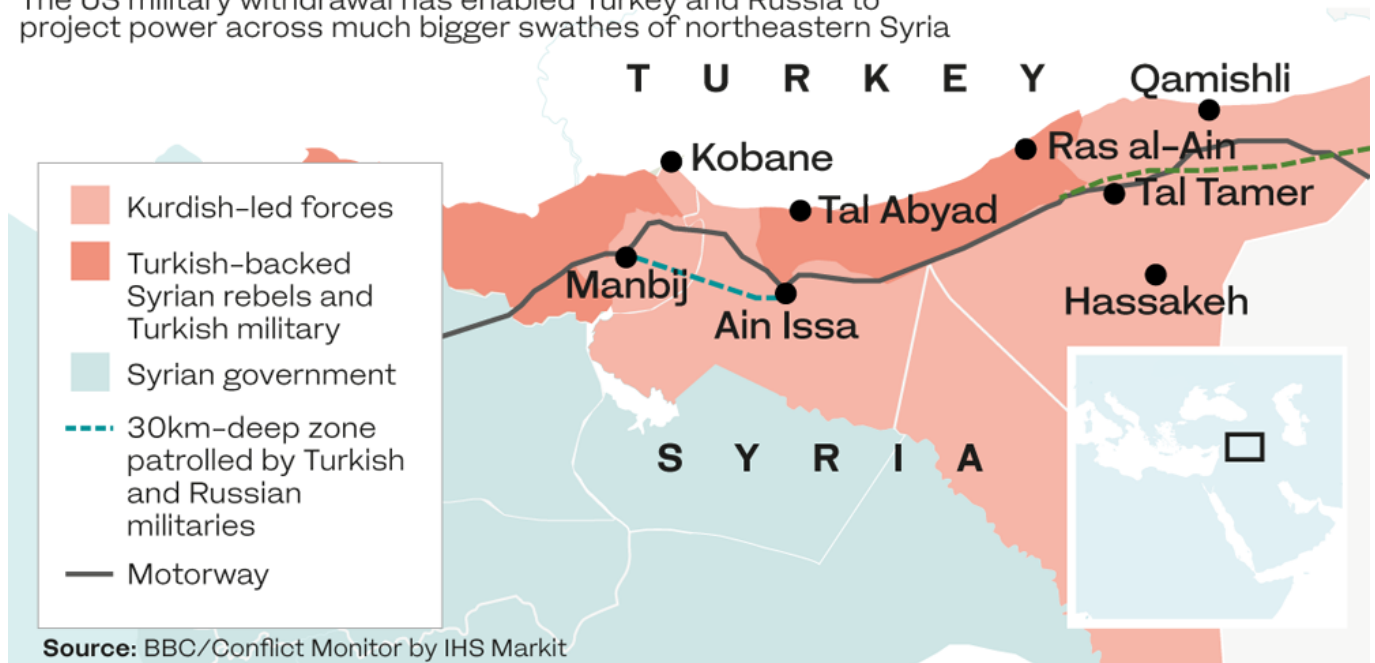
Turkey, with the help of its Syrian militia proxies, has carved out a large swath of territory – about 120 kilometers wide – that extends from Tal Abyad to Ras Al-Ayn (known by Kurds as Serekaniye).

On Oct. 31 at a gathering in Istanbul, Erdogan boasted that the "safe zones" were the most peaceful and livable places in Syria today. "We did not provide all these services with any expectation, but as our human and moral responsibilities," he said, adding "when we look around, we see only humans, souls and life."

Most Kurds of northeastern Syria see the situation very differently. In their view, what Erdogan has undertaken in the name of resettling millions of Syrian refugees in the so-called safe zone is a giant demographic-engineering exercise.

# ZONES OF CONTROL

The US military withdrawal has enabled Turkey and Russia to project power across much bigger swathes of northeastern Syria



What has reinforced their suspicions have been incidents of Turkish-backed Syrian militias looting civilian homes and businesses, clips of which have flooded social media since the first days of the Turkish invasion.

Sounding a direct warning via Twitter, Mazloun Abdi, the SDF's general commander, said: "There are efforts by Turkey to achieve its demographic-change goals in Northeast Syria through international organizations. The UN head's willingness to form a team to study the proposal and engage in discussions with Turkish authorities on the issue is deeply worrying and dangerous."

Dr. Neman Ghafouri heads the charity Joint Help for Kurdistan, which is distributing humanitarian aid in the region, and said the humanitarian situation could not be worse.

She said that because northeastern Syria has been practically under an embargo for years: "It's very hard to find even the most basic items in significant quantities. Even finding and buying simple clothing for the displaced is very difficult and expensive."

Ghafouri has talked to many people displaced from different areas. Some spoke of how they tried to return to their homes but the presence of the militias, whose roadside executions of Kurds have been filmed and posted on the web, acted as a deterrent.

Among the displaced Syrians Ghafouri spoke to were a pharmacist and a doctor from Ras Al-Ayn who tried to return to their homes.

"They told me about another pharmacist they knew who was arrested along with his son by these militias, who demanded a large ransom for their release," she said. After being detained for eight hours, both were released without the ransom being paid. Instead, the militiamen "stole everything they could find in their home and their pharmacy."

The general atmosphere, as inferred by Ghafouri, is one of “suffering and hopelessness.”

Alluding to the resettlement of Arabs on confiscated Kurdish land by Syrian President Hafez Al-Assad back in the mid-1970s, she said: “This is not the first time efforts have been made to change demographics.”

Ghafouri said that even today, on the road from Hasakah to Derik, “you can see where Arab villages have been built on the best agricultural lands in the region.”

On Oct. 24, in an interview to Turkey’s state broadcaster TRT, Erdogan came close to making the case for ethnic cleansing. “What is important is to prepare a controlled life in this enormous area, and the most suitable people for it are Arabs,” he said. “These areas are not suitable for the lifestyle of Kurds ... because these areas are virtually desert.”

In actual fact, northeastern Syria, where the country’s largest Kurdish-majority areas are located, is also where Syria’s best agricultural lands happen to be. The region is often referred to as the country’s “breadbasket.”

Ghafouri believes the events of the past several weeks are “all about destroying the landscape and demography of the Kurdish regions for good,” adding: “It has been partially accomplished already.”

Besides Turkey, Russia and the Syrian regime have also sent troops to the Turkey-Syria border, but locals Ghafouri spoke to “don’t see the Russian deployment as a cause for hope.”

She said: “Despite feeling betrayed by America, people I’ve talked to there trust Russia even less. It seems that with Russian support, the Syrian regime has achieved what it wants – namely the ‘Arabization’ of predominantly Kurdish areas with the help of Turkey.”

In recent weeks, more than 14,000 Syrians have fled the conflict in the country’s northeast to neighboring Iraqi Kurdistan, which already hosts a huge refugee population.

Jotiar Adil, a spokesperson for the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), said the KRG “does not have the capacity to handle and care for a new wave of refugees coming across the border on its own.





“Therefore, we ask the international community to take a serious stance on this and assist us in sheltering and providing for these refugees.”

While the Russian-Syrian deployment along the border in northeastern Syria is expected to lessen the likelihood of a total Turkish takeover, the agreement with Russia permits Turkey to retain forces in Syrian territories under its control and states: “Joint efforts will be launched to facilitate the return of refugees in a safe and voluntary manner.”

Nevertheless, Joshua Landis, a Syria expert and head of the Middle East department at the University of Oklahoma, believes: “Erdogan’s resettlement plan is dead. The Russians will fight it and so will the Syrians. There may be some resettlement around Tal Abyad and Ras Al-Ayn, but beyond that, it is hard to imagine that right now. Even in this area, it is doubtful there will be any large-scale refugee resettlement.

“The situation will not be like in Afrin, where the Kurdish population could be chased out to make way for Arab refugees.”

However, the US lawmakers who have called on the White House to disinvite Erdogan believe “his calamitous actions in Syria follow a long list of disconcerting steps”.

Reminding Trump about the resolutions passed last month by the House warning of sanctions against Turkey, the statement said: “Given this situation, we believe that now is a particularly inappropriate time for President Erdogan to visit the US, and we urge you to rescind this invitation.”



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Erdogan to tell Trump: US has not met Syria cease-fire obligations  
Erdogan to meet Trump in Washington on Nov. 13

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## [Turkey plays the Daesh card over potential EU sanctions](#)

Wed, 2019-11-13 00:24

ANKARA: With Turkey beginning the deportation process of Daesh captives held in its prisons back to Europe on Monday, the issue is brought back to the bilateral agenda between Ankara and EU, whose relations have been strained since the recent military incursion in northern Syria. The policy of deportation is likely to result in a new diplomatic fault line with Ankara's allies in Europe.

On Tuesday, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan weaponized Daesh and the refugee issue again over the draft plans in Brussels to sanction Turkey over its drilling activities in the Mediterranean.

Erdogan implicitly threatened to release all Daesh prisoners it holds and send them back to Europe.

"Beware EU, we have 4 million refugees, we have Daesh terrorists in custody



in Turkey and Syria. We can even stop the accession negotiations suddenly. EU should be careful," he warned, adding: "Some countries have started panicking after we began the repatriation process of foreign Daesh terrorists. Turkey has been worrying about this issue for years, let others worry now." The EU's sanction package intends "to sanction individuals or entities responsible for, or involved in, unauthorized drilling activities of hydrocarbons."

The deportation wave from Turkey began with three Daesh prisoners, a German, a Dane and an American. The 28-year-old Dane citizen had been arrested on his arrival in Copenhagen, while the German ex-fighter had been also expelled. The American member has been stuck in no-man's land between Turkish and Greek borders since Monday as Greek authorities refused him entry.

Dozens of others who fought in the militant group are also expected to be deported in the coming days. Among them are French, German and Irish ex-fighters.

The fate of foreign fighters from Daesh has been a controversial issue since the defeat of the group in Syria and Iraq. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on Tuesday called for further international cooperation to resolve the issues related to foreign fighters.

Turkey has some 2,500 militants in its prisons. According to international standards, Ankara should repatriate Daesh members who were seized in Turkish territories, while those who were captured in Syria in territories beyond Assad control pose judicial problems.

However, Ankara put the blame on European countries of being too slow to reclaim their citizens who had joined Daesh.

## **FASTFACTS**

- According to international standards, Ankara should repatriate Daesh members who were seized in Turkish territories, while those who were captured in Syria in territories beyond Assad control pose judicial problems.
- The deportation process marks another rupture in Brussels-Ankara relations.

Although some European countries like Germany, Denmark and the UK have stripped citizenship from their nationals who joined Daesh to prevent their return, Ankara is determined to send even those Daesh suspects who have had their citizenships revoked.

Turkish Interior Minister Suleyman Soylu recently said that "Turkey was not a hotel for foreign jihadis" even if they are legally stateless.

Ankara and Paris have strict bilateral protocols for deportation procedures, which allows the French authorities to repatriate terrorists.

However, Nihat Ali Ozcan, a retired major now serving as a security analyst at Ankara-based think tank TEPAV, said: "It is usually challenging to prove in a trial that Daesh members committed any crimes because convictions do not usually have supporting evidence."

The average sentence for fighters returning to European countries has been about five years of imprisonment, which generates serious domestic security threats if the returned European nationals cannot go through an efficient

rehabilitation process.

The irony of Turkey's partial invasion of northeastern Syria is that Ankara now finds itself in the same situation as the very Syrian Kurdish YPG militia that it has been fighting.

**Paul T. Levin, Director of the Stockholm University Institute for Turkish Studies**

In recent weeks, Turkey arrested many people close to the former Daesh leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, who recently died during a US raid.

Erdogan is expected to discuss the fate of Daesh fighters during his meeting with his US counterpart Donald Trump in Washington on Wednesday.

The deportation process marks another rupture in Brussels-Ankara relations as last month some European countries launched an arms sales embargo to Turkey over its military incursion into northern Syria.

"The irony of Turkey's partial invasion of northeastern Syria is that Turkey now finds itself in the same situation as the very Syrian Kurdish YPG militia that it has been fighting. Now both are stuck with a number of Daesh fighters and their families in custody, calling for Europe and countries elsewhere to take their citizens back," Paul T. Levin, director of the Stockholm University Institute for Turkish Studies, told Arab News.

Levin said Turkey has an understandable concern over the refusal of European states to take responsibility for "their" Daesh fighters.

"Since these countries have not been willing to do much to help either Turkey or, more acutely, the YPG, there is a legitimate need to press the issue. And Turkey has some support in international law to demand that sender states take their citizens back," he said.

Levin added that it is also especially problematic that the threat to send Daesh fighters to Europe comes as a response to EU sanctions against Turkey on an entirely separate issue.

"It suggests that he may be less interested in a joint solution to the problem of captured Daesh fighters than in being able to use them as leverage in foreign policy disputes," he said.





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Israeli public opinion warms toward Turkey, shows survey Turkey and Qatar on course to clash over Levant basin drilling