

Syria army reaches border area, deploys around Turkish zone

Author:

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QAMISHLI: Syrian troops reached a key area near Turkey's border on Saturday after sending further reinforcements to the region, in what a war monitor said was its largest deployment there in years.

Syrian regime forces entered the provincial borders of the town of Ras Al-Ain, state news agency SANA said.

The regime forces entered the area, which was taken by Turkish forces following a weeks-long offensive against Syria's Kurds.

Troops also deployed along a road stretching some 30 km south of the frontier, SANA added.

Turkey and its Syrian proxies on Oct. 9 launched a cross-border attack against Kurdish-held areas, grabbing a 120-km swathe of Syrian land along the frontier.

The incursion left hundreds dead and caused 300,000 people to flee their homes, in the latest humanitarian crisis in Syria's brutal eight-year war. This week, Turkey and Russia struck a deal in Sochi for more Kurdish forces to withdraw from the frontier on both sides of that Turkish-held area under the supervision of Russian and Syrian forces.

On Saturday, the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said some 2,000 Syrian troops and hundreds of military vehicles were deploying around what Turkey calls its "safe zone."

In the army's "largest deployment" in the area in years, regime forces were being accompanied by Russian military police, the Observatory said.

Moscow has said 300 Russian military police had arrived in Syria to help ensure Kurdish forces withdraw to a line 30 km from the border in keeping with Tuesday's agreement.

Despite Saturday's deployment, the Observatory said that Kurdish fighters and Ankara's Syrian proxies traded artillery fire in the region.

There were no immediate reports of casualties.

Under the Sochi deal, Kurdish forces have until late Tuesday to withdraw from border areas at either end of the Turkish-held area, before joint Turkish-Russian start patrols in a 10-km strip there.

Ankara eventually wants to set up a buffer zone on Syrian soil along the entire length of its 440-km-long border, including to resettle some of the 3.6 million Syrian refugees currently in Turkey.

The Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces has objected to some provisions of the Sochi agreement and it has so far maintained several border posts.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan warned on Saturday that Ankara would "clear terrorists" on its border if the Kurdish forces, which his country view as an offshoot of its own banned insurgency, did not withdraw by the deadline.



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Sun, 2019-10-27 01:10

DUBAI: Experts see untapped tourism potential following a YouGov survey of Arabs' perception of Japan that revealed widespread interest and appreciation of the East Asian country.

The survey interviewed 3,033 people from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, the Levant and North Africa, aged 16 and up.

Although very few respondents had been to Japan, the general understanding, curiosity and appreciation levels were high.

"I have never been to Japan but it's on my bucket list for next year," Sheikha Al-Nuaimi, a 28-year-old Emirati based in Abu Dhabi, told Arab News

“My friends and I have been talking about going for a while because we’ve heard so many incredible things about the country. (Japanese culture) is very popular among us in the GCC.”

Al-Nuaimi said she was planning her trip around the spring cherry blossom season. “I haven’t met anyone, especially from this region, who does not like Japan. From the food to the landscape, there is just so much to see and learn and I’m really looking forward to it.”

Theodore Karasik, a senior advisor at Gulf State Analytics in Washington D.C., said two-way tourism between Japan and the Middle East, including the Gulf, was a growth story.

“Japan is increasingly becoming a travel destination for Arab businessmen and families who are seeking to understand better what Japan is all about,” he told ARAB NEWS.

“In order to satisfy demand and bring more tourists, Japanese companies are increasingly offering halal offerings in terms of hotels and food options.”



Luxury and wonder in Japan, such as the natural beauty of the Katsura river in Arashiyama, are part of Japan’s appeal. (Shutterstock)

He said the survey findings showed that Japan gave the impression as a far-off land from the way it was portrayed to Arab viewers through television, film, documentaries and entertainment.

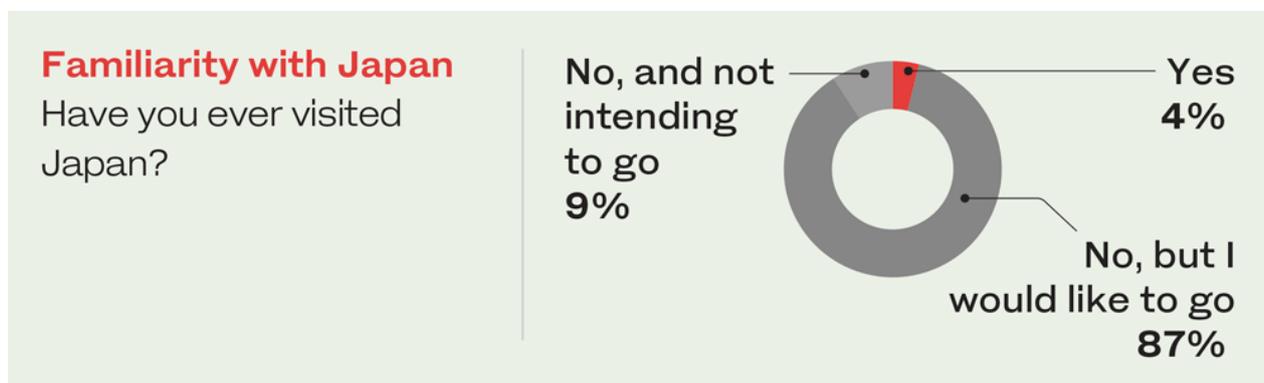
“The history of Middle Eastern tourism is only a recent phenomenon, with the numbers of Arab travelers to Japan increasing. Not too many people in the region previously considered Japan a likely holiday destination. But in recent years the cherry blossom festivals in spring and maple leaves in autumn, plus several World Heritage lists, have been sparking interest. The

mystique of Japan as a society is also attractive.”

The Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO) is looking to build on the 31 million visitors it welcomed in 2018.

While the majority of visitors – nearly 24.34 million – are from neighboring Asian countries, Tsutomu Shimura, JNTO’s executive vice president, said the objective was to attract more affluent visitors, with luxury and authenticity as key promotional messages.

The JNTO says there has been an 8.7 percent rise in tourist arrivals year-on-year, with the Japanese government setting a target of 40 million visitors next year. “Research that we conducted last year shows the Middle East, especially the UAE, is a potentially lucrative market with positive impressions of Japan,” Shimura told ARAB NEWS. “We have identified the Middle East market as an important one for travelers seeking unique luxury experiences.”



JNTO has a strong global presence through its 21 overseas offices, which will soon reach 22 as it plans to open an office in Dubai before Expo 2020.

“JNTO’s office will help to facilitate travel expansion,” Karasik said. “With Emirates and other airlines from the Gulf flying to Japan with increasing frequency, tourists will grow, especially with the 2020 Summer Olympics in Tokyo.”

Japan ranked fourth in the world for travel and tourism competitiveness. It is famous for its cuisine, shopping, hot springs, sightseeing and theme parks. It has been drawing large numbers of visitors through a relaxation of visa requirements, an expansion of its tax-free program and faster immigration procedures.

“The number of visitors and tourists from Gulf countries to Japan is still too small to appear significantly on the statistics, in spite of the huge interest and curiosity about Japan among people in the Gulf countries,” a senior Japanese diplomat based in the Gulf told ARAB NEWS.

“JNTO participated in the Arabian Travel Market 2019 Dubai and actively engaged in promotional activities. It was a learning experience.”

The diplomat cited manga and anime as good ways to introduce the younger generation to Japan. “We have more and more unique destinations, not only

physical destinations but also cultural, social and historical destinations. Some holistic programs and a variety of logistical resources are necessary to achieve our objectives. JNTO's new office in Dubai will help a great deal in this regard."



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[Rights group calls on Turkey to stop deporting Syrians to war-torn country](#)

Sun, 2019-10-27 01:14

ANKARA: With the Syrian conflict recently taking another turn, after the

cease-fire process in the north following the Turkish invasion of the region, efforts to establish a safe zone along the Turkish-Syrian border have sparked debate about the fate of Syrian refugees: Will they be forcibly deported to their homeland? According to a report from Human Rights Watch (HRW), Turkish authorities in Istanbul and the southern province of Antakya randomly arrested and expelled many refugees into northern Syria, specially into Idlib governorate, between January and September 2019.

The report, based on the statements of deported Syrians, claims that the refugees were forced to sign forms without reading them in advance or seeing a lawyer, and in some cases were beaten or threatened before being transported.

The watchdog released its reports days after Turkey concluded its two week-long cross-border operation into northern Syria aimed at creating a so-called "safe-zone" to settle up to 1 million refugees currently living in Turkey.

FASTFACT

HRW shared its findings with Turkey's Interior Ministry but has not received a response.

Sheltering 3.67 million Syrians, Turkey currently seeks to use territories formerly held by the Kurdish-led YPG militia. Once settled, the security of the safe zone will be ensured by joint patrols of Turkish and Russian troops. However, HRW says, "safe zones" established during other conflicts have rarely been safe, and establishing one cannot justify forcibly returning refugees.

"HRW would argue forcefully against any deportation of Syrian refugees from Turkey to what Turkey might call a 'safe zone' in the northeast of the country, where too many warring parties with too many interests in that area would make such a zone unsafe," Gerry Simpson, associate crisis and conflict director at HRW, told Arab News.

On Oct. 15, HRW shared its findings with Turkey's Interior Ministry but has not received a response.

"We imagine that any attempt to round up Syrian refugees in Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir, Hatay or any other provinces that host refugees would result in attempts to leave the country. Whether or not Turkey would allow them to get on boats to head to Greece or Bulgaria is another question," Simpson said.

According to HRW, "The recent deportations from Istanbul show that any Syrian forcibly returned from Greece would face a risk of onward transfer to Syria," while the refugee deal inked between Turkey and the EU in March 2016 maintains that Turkey is a safe country for the return of Syrian asylum seekers from European countries.

The EU provided about €55 million to Turkey to support immigration reception and detention centers between 2011 and 2015.

NUMBER

1m – Syrian refugees whom Turkey currently seeks to resettle to a planned

safe zone in territories formerly held by the Kurdish-led YPG militia in northern Syria.

Turkey's General Directorate of Immigration Management denied the claims in the HRW report in a statement published on Friday, and insisted that the claims are untrue.

"The claim that Syrians are deported in an unlawful manner doesn't reflect the reality on the ground," it said.

The international principle of nonrefoulement forbids the return of anyone to a place where there is a real risk of persecution, torture or ill-treatment, including threat to life.

So far, 364,663 Syrian refugees have returned voluntarily from Turkey to their homeland. Turkey claims that those refugees went back to places with decent living standards with health, security and other necessary infrastructure.

In its report, HRW also called on Turkey's Interior Ministry to "ensure that police officers and immigration officials do not use violence against Syrians or other detained foreign nationals and should hold any officials using violence to account."

The group also insisted that Turkey allow the UN high commissioner for refugees "to freely access removal centers, monitor the process of obtaining Syrians' permission to return them to Syria to make certain it is voluntary, and observe interviews and removal procedures to ensure that police or immigration officials do not use violence against Syrians or other foreign nationals."

Turkey's new policy states Syrian refugees should return to their province of first registration by Oct. 30. Since the summer, Turkish forces have been carrying operations in big cities to enforce this rule.



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[Defense chief Esper: US troops, armored vehicles going to Syria oil fields](#)

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By LOLITA C. BALDOR | AP

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Fri, 2019-10-25 14:52

BRUSSELS: Pentagon chief Mark Esper said Friday that the United States will leave more American troops and armored vehicles in eastern Syria to help prevent Daesh militants from gaining access to oil fields controlled by US-allied Syrian Kurds. That deployment will likely include tanks, a US official said.

The defense secretary confirmed that the US will send in an armored force to the region, but he did not provide details or the number of troops.

His comments at a news conference at NATO headquarters in Brussels reflected one more change in what has been a rapidly shifting US stance on American forces in Syria.

Just last week, President Donald Trump insisted that all 1,000 American forces in Syria would leave the war-torn country. Then he acknowledged that a couple hundred would stay at the Al-Tanf garrison in the south.

In tweets Friday, Trump said "Oil is secured. Our soldiers have left and are leaving Syria for other places, then... COMING HOME! ... When these pundit fools who have called the Middle East wrong for 20 years ask what we are getting out of the deal, I simply say, THE OIL, AND WE ARE BRINGING OUR SOLDIERS BACK HOME, Daesh SECURED!"

Esper, when asked about America's shifting Syria strategy, said the US mission has always been to prevent the resurgence of Daesh. "That mission remains unchanged," he said.

But Esper said at NATO that the US is "considering how we might reposition forces in the area in order to ensure we secure the oil field." He added: "We are reinforcing that position. It will include some mechanized forces."

The US official who sent the deployment probably would include tanks offered no more details. This official was not authorized to discuss internal discussions about military planning and spoke on condition of anonymity. He said the US wants to ensure that Daesh militants do not get access to the oil, which could give the insurgent group to obtain resources to rebuild. Trump in the past days has turned a greater focus on the Syrian oil facilities in the eastern part of the country, saying US will stay in Syria to protect them.

According to officials, top military leaders have pushed for the US to leave forces in Syria to guard against a Daesh resurgence. While the group's physical zone of control was largely destroyed by US and Syrian Kurdish forces, insurgents remain in small pockets throughout the country and in Iraq.

Russian and Turkish leaders have now divided up security roles in northeast Syria following America's abrupt troop withdrawal from the Turkey-Syrian border region. The American move triggered widespread criticism that the Trump administration had abandoned the Syrian Kurdish fighters who fought alongside the US against Daesh for several years.

Trump spurred a fresh wave of condemnation when he tweeted Thursday that he had spoken with Syrian Kurdish military chief Mazloum Abdi and said that perhaps "it is time for Kurds to start heading to the Oil Region." That was an apparent reference to the oil fields in Deir Ezzor. US military commanders see that region as critical to holding off a Daesh resurgence there.

"We've secured the oil, and, therefore, a small number of US troops will remain in the area where they have the oil," Trump said. "And we're going to be protecting it, and we'll be deciding what we're going to do with it in the future."

White House officials did not respond to requests for greater clarity about Trump's tweet suggesting Kurds head to the oil region.

The Pentagon released a statement Thursday saying it was committed to sending additional military forces to eastern Syria to "reinforce" control of the oil fields and prevent them from "falling back to into the hands of Daesh or other destabilizing actors."



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[Yemen government strikes power-sharing deal with southern rebels](#)

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Fri, 2019-10-25 10:08

RIYADH: Yemen's southern separatists have struck a power-sharing deal with the internationally-recognized government aimed at ending the conflict between the two sides, sources said Friday. The deal would see the secessionist Southern Transitional Council (STC) handed a number of ministries, and the government return to the southern city of Aden, according to officials and reports in Saudi media.

Saudi Arabia's Al-Ekhbariya TV channel said a government of 24 ministers would be formed, "divided equally between the southern and northern governorates of Yemen."

Under the deal, the Yemeni prime minister would return to Aden to "reactivate state institutions," it added.

Al-Ekhbariya said the Arab coalition which backs the Yemeni government against the Houthis would oversee a "joint committee" to implement the agreement.

Security Belt Forces – dominated by the STC – in August took control of Aden, which had served as the government's base since it was ousted from the capital Sanaa by the Iran-backed Houthis in 2014.

The clashes between the separatists and government forces – who for years fought on the same side against the Houthis – had raised fears the country could break apart entirely.

The warring factions have in recent weeks been holding indirect and discreet talks mediated by Saudi Arabia in the kingdom's western city of Jeddah.

"We signed the final draft of the agreement and are waiting for the joint signature within days," an STC official currently in Riyadh told AFP.

Both Yemen's President Abedrabbo Mansour Hadi and STC leader Aidarous Al-Zoubeidi are expected to attend a ceremony in Riyadh, he added.

A Yemeni government official, declining to be named, confirmed the deal had been agreed and was expected to be signed by Tuesday.

It sets out "the reformation of the government, with the STC included in a number of ministries, and the return of the government to Aden within seven days after the agreement being signed," he told AFP.



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