

Kurdish official: Syria's 'safe zone' off to a good start

Author:

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DARBASIYAH, Syria: The creation of a so-called "safe zone" in northeastern Syria has gotten off to good start, with US-backed Kurdish-led forces pulling back from a small, initial area along the Turkish border, a Syrian Kurdish official said – but calm can only prevail if Turkey also removes its troops. Ilham Ahmed, co-chair of the executive committee of the U.S-backed Syrian Democratic Council, said the understanding reached between Washington and Ankara last month, and in coordination with the Syrian Kurdish-led forces, constitutes a step toward starting a dialogue over mutual security concerns. "We seek to find a way to dialogue, and starting to implement this plan expresses our readiness and seriousness," Ahmed said in an interview Tuesday with The Associated Press.

"We want to tell the world and the coalition that we are ready to take serious steps to get to dialogue," she added.

Turkey views the US-backed Kurdish People's Protection Units, or YPG, in Syria as an extension of a Kurdish insurgency within Turkey.

Ankara has already carried out military offensives inside Syria to push the group away from the western end of the border. Over the last weeks, Turkish officials threatened a similar offensive in northeastern Syria, where troops from the US-led coalition are deployed to help the Syrian Kurdish-led forces in combatting remnants of the Daesh group.

The Syrian Kurds have been America's only partners on the ground in Syria's chaotic civil war. With US backing, they proved to be the most effective fighting force against the Daesh group and announced its territorial defeat earlier this year. The Kurds now worry about being abandoned by the US amid Turkish threats to invade Syria, and are keen to work out an agreement with both parties that would safeguard their gains.

Ankara and Washington announced last month that they would begin measures to implement a border "safe zone" to address Turkish security concerns. The Kurdish-led forces are expected to pull out of the zone, but details must still be worked out – including who then would patrol and administer it. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan over the weekend repeated threats of an offensive if Turkey's demands on the zone are not satisfied, including that its soldiers control the area.

Ahmed said more US troops will probably be needed to implement the zone, though the Americans have not said whether they will deploy any.

"In the coming days, and because of the needs of the formation and implementation of the security mechanism, they may need more forces. It is not yet clear what the US administration would decide," she said.

There was no immediate comment from the US-led coalition.

There are around 1,000 US troops in Syria on a mission to combat IS militants. President Donald Trump had said he wants to bring the troops home, but military officials have advocated a phased approach.

Ahmed said initial steps have been positive but for calm to prevail Turkish

troops must also retreat from the Syrian borders. She said while Turkey expresses concerns about the Kurdish-led forces, it is Ankara that has been a source of threat to Syria with the various military operations and its military posts in western Syria.

The Kurdish-led forces have begun removing fortifications along the border and have moved some troops away from the border. At least two U.S-Turkish joint reconnaissance flights have flown over the area, and on Tuesday, joint patrols between US troops and Kurdish-led forces also examined the area where fortifications have been removed.

The deal envisions an area five to 14 kilometers deep (three to eight miles) with no YPG presence, as well as removal of heavy weapons from a 20-kilometer-deep zone (12 miles), she said. Turkey wants a deeper zone. The length of the zone has not yet been agreed on, but will likely stretch hundreds of kilometers (miles).

Ahmed said discussions over other details of the security mechanism will open the way for Syrians who had been displaced from those areas, many of them fled to Turkey, to return. Turkey is home to 3.6 million Syrian refugees and Ankara said it wants the safe zone to provide an opportunity for many to return home.

Ahmed said only those originally from eastern Syria would be allowed to return. Kurdish officials worry Turkey wants to bring back large numbers of Syrians to the areas, which were previously controlled by IS militants, changing the demographic balance in the area. Syria's Kurds are predominantly from the country's northeast, living in mixed or Kurdish-dominated villages and towns there. She said no residents will be displaced because of the implementation of the safe zone.

"Calm must bring with it sustainable dialogue. Calm alone is not enough," Ahmed said. "If Turkish troops don't pull away from the borders, it will always be considered a threat."

Another top Kurdish official, Aldar Khalil, said the Kurdish-led administration and forces would not accept Turkish forces or permanent bases in the so-called safe zone or a free hand for Turkish flights over the area. He said while an understanding has been reached, a final deal would constitute an indirect Turkish recognition of the Kurdish-led administration in northeastern Syria. He said, however, a final deal is not imminent.



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Syrian Kurds to remove fortifications from Turkish border

[British MPs unruly? Come to Lebanon, Mr. Speaker](#)

Wed, 2019-09-04 21:16

BEIRUT: House of Commons Speaker John Bercow provoked widespread mirth in Lebanon on Wednesday when he told unruly British MPs they were setting a bad example to a visiting delegation of Lebanese politicians.

“I’m not sure at the moment how impressed they’ll be,” said Bercow, pointing to the visitors’ gallery as MPs in the Commons chamber argued and shouted at each other in a heated debate over Brexit.

In fact, the visitors probably thought it was a relatively uneventful session, Lebanese commentators said, pointing out that Lebanon’s

parliamentary speaker Nabih Berri often used his ceremonial hammer to break up actual fights.

“Bercow does not know what happens in the Lebanese Parliament,” writer Hassan Daoud said. “They are not exactly a role model.”

Visiting Parliamentary delegation from [#Lebanon](#) including [@JaberYassine](#) [@NahasNicolas](#) and Ibrahim Azar together with [@LebanonEmbUK](#) [@mortadarami](#) formally welcomed by the Speaker of the [@HouseofCommons](#) Rt Hon John Bercow MP with UK-Lebanon APPG Chair Rt Hon John Hayes MP pic.twitter.com/CY0tBtj0iK

– BGIPU (@BGIPU) [September 4, 2019](#)

Actor and playwright Zaki Mahfoud said: “No matter how loudly the British MPs argue with each other, none of them will challenge another by saying ‘My father is stronger than your father.’”

“They won’t show off about the number of votes they got, or boast that their weapons brought the president to office, as Lebanese MPs do.”

Jad Shahrour, of the SKeyes Center for Media and Cultural Freedom, said: “If Bercow had been following what was happening in the Lebanese parliament, he would have heard the screams and insults exchanged by MPs.”

One of the Lebanese MPs visiting Westminster, Yassin Jaber, also appeared to find the Commons uproar unsurprising. The visit took place “at a sensitive political moment in the history of the UK,” he said.



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[Israel's Netanyahu makes snap trip to London for Johnson talks](#)

Wed, 2019-09-04 20:57

JERUSALEM: With less than two weeks to go before Israel's general election, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office said he is to visit London on Thursday for talks with Prime Minister Boris Johnson.

It said Netanyahu, facing what could be a tough fight for re-election on September 17, would also meet US Defense Secretary Mark Esper while in the British capital.

Netanyahu returns to Israel on Friday.

It would be his first meeting with Johnson or Esper since the two took up their current posts, his office said in a statement.

“The PM will discuss with British prime minister Johnson the situation in the (Middle East) region and how to repel Iranian terror and aggression,” it said.

The meeting with Esper, it added, would focus on “Israel’s security needs” after the two had spoken by phone on Tuesday and agreed to “expand their conversation in London.”

Israeli media have said the United States and Israel are discussing the possible announcement of some form of defense alliance, likely to boost Netanyahu’s image as an international statesman.

Just ahead of inconclusive April 9 parliamentary polls, US President Donald Trump acknowledged Israeli sovereignty over the Golan, in what amounted to a major pre-election gift to his close ally Netanyahu.

On March 25 the two men met in Washington for a signing of Trump’s order recognizing Israel’s right to the strategic Golan Heights it captured from Syria in the 1967 Six-Day War.



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Nancy Pelosi assails ‘weakness’ of Donald Trump, Benjamin Netanyahu

UN envoy on Libya warns conflict could trigger chaos

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Wed, 2019-09-04 16:43

United Nations: The UN special envoy to Libya warned Wednesday that without action by the Security Council, the country's war could escalate if outside patrons step up support for the warring sides.

"Many Libyans feel abandoned by part of the international community and exploited by others," Ghassan Salame said by video link with the council.

"Without the unequivocal support of this council and the broader international community for an immediate end to the Libyan conflict, I believe we are faced with two highly unpalatable scenarios," Salame added. One is "persistent and protracted low intensity conflict," he said.

The other is increased support for either warring side by their outside patrons.

This, he said, would lead to "a sharp escalation that will assuredly plunge the entire region into chaos."

"The idea that war should be given a chance and that a military solution is at all possible is quite simply a chimera," said Salame, who has often complained that the council is not united on the Libyan conflict and that some members support one or the other of the warring sides.

Libya has been wracked by chaos since the 2011 uprising in which president Muammar Qaddafi was killed.

Strongman Khalifa Haftar's self-styled Libyan National Army launched an offensive on April 4 to conquer the capital, Tripoli.

His soldiers are fighting those of the Government of National Accord led by Fayed Al-Sarraj.

A member of Lawyers for Justice in Libya, Marwa Mohamed, also told the council there was no clear message on Libya from the international community. During discussions on the conflict, several countries, such as Kuwait, South Africa, Indonesia and Germany, complained about what they called interference in that country's affairs and repeated violations in the past five months of an arms embargo imposed on Libya in 2011.

Major powers such as the US, Russia, France and Britain avoided giving speeches Wednesday, saving their turns for a closed door session to be held after the public one.



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Four wounded in rocket fire on Libyan capital's airport

[Palestinian women demand legal protection after suspected "honor killing"](#)

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Wed, 2019-09-04 16:17

RAMALLAH: Hundreds of Palestinians demonstrated in the West Bank on Wednesday to demand legal protection for women after a 21-year-old woman died last month in what rights groups say was a so-called honor killing.

A Palestinian Authority investigation is underway into the death of Isra'a Ghrayeb, a make-up artist who activists say was beaten by male relatives after a video posted on Instagram allegedly showed a meeting between her and

a man who had proposed to her.

According to Palestinian media reports, Ghrayeb sustained serious spinal injuries after falling from a balcony in her home in Beit Sahour, near Bethlehem, while trying to escape an assault by her brothers. She died on Aug. 22.

At least 18 Palestinian women have been killed this year by family members angered at perceived damage to their honor, which may involve fraternizing with men or any infringement of conservative values regarding women, according to the General Union of Palestinian Women and Feminist Institutions.

Ghrayeb's family has denied the accusations. They said in a statement that Ghrayeb had a "mental condition" and died "after she had a heart attack, following an accidental fall into the (family's) courtyard."

The circumstances surrounding Ghrayeb's death have stirred outrage within the Palestinian territories and on social media, with rights activists demanding action against the alleged perpetrators and legal protection for women under the hashtag #JusticeforIsraa.

In the West Bank city of Ramallah, female demonstrators held signs reading: "We are all Isra'a" and "My body is my property. I don't need your supervision, your care, your honor."

"I'm here to say enough is enough. We've lost enough women. Enough victims have died, have been killed, have been tortured, raped, harassed, and still there's no justice," said Amal Khayat, 30, an activist from Jerusalem.

Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh said this week that several people had been detained for questioning over Ghrayeb's death as part of the inquiry by the Palestinian Authority (PA), which exercises limited self-rule in the Israel-occupied West Bank.

The Palestinian penal code dates to the 1960s and has been criticized for inadequate protection for women and lenient penalties for men who kill them in honor crimes.

"The case of Isra'a Ghrayeb shocked our conscience just like those before her. These are women and girls who dream to live in safety in a society free from violence and injustice," the General Union of Palestinian Women and Feminist Institutions said in a statement.

The group called on the Palestinian government to "develop targeted programs that teach the principle of gender equality" and to reform laws to ensure accountability for perpetrators.

Protesters voiced optimism that Wednesday's rally and others earlier this week would push the PA to make reforms. "The victims are a part of us, they're a part of our history," Khayat said. "We will continue (to protest) until we get justice."