

Assad jets threaten Turkish troops despite deal to curb Idlib fighting

Author:

Thu, 2019-08-29 01:00

ANKARA: Assad regime airstrikes pounded militant positions in northwest Syria on Wednesday a few meters from a Turkish military post.

The new strikes came less than 24 hours after Russian and Turkish presidents Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdogan reached an accord during talks in Moscow to “normalize” the situation in Idlib.

There were fierce clashes on Wednesday between Assad regime forces and militant fighters 500 meters from the Turkish post in Sher Maghar village. “The conflict is taking place very close by and it is violent,” a Turkish military source said.

Clouds of smoke billowed in the air as regime airstrikes hit targets around the village, and one strike was so close to the Turkish observation post that it damaged the walls.

The airstrikes and fighting so near Turkish forces illustrated the fragility of Turkey’s presence in northwest Syria, analysts told Arab News. “The hit was unlikely to be a mistake, as some pro-Russian media have claimed,” Navvar Saban, a military analyst at the Omran Center for Strategic Studies in Istanbul, told Arab News.

“It reflects the continuing dispute between Russia and Turkey and the failure to reach a final agreement on the general situation in Idlib.”

To avoid being dragged into a direct confrontation, Ankara and Moscow may now “send messages” to each other through their proxies in the region, Saban said. “In the absence of a final agreement between Russia and Turkey, it is very likely that both countries will put more effort into strengthening their local agents.”

Military ties between Moscow and Ankara have deepened since Turkey’s purchase of the Russian S-400 missile defense system, against the wishes of the US and Turkey’s other NATO allies. Washington responded by removing Turkey from its F-35 fighter jet program, and Erdogan was observed at a Moscow air show on Tuesday gazing approvingly at Russia’s new Su-57 stealth fighter.

However, they support opposite sides in the Syrian conflict. Russian-backed Assad regime jets carried out at least 15 airstrikes in the region on Wednesday, targeting Syria’s former Al-Qaeda affiliate Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham and the Turkish-backed National Liberation Army.

Turkey has 12 military observation posts in northwest Syria, many of them at risk from Assad regime attacks. The post at Morek in southern Idlib is effectively under siege and is being protected by Russian military police.

The Assad regime welcomed Russian forces but has demanded that Turkey withdraw its troops because their presence violates Syria's territorial sovereignty.



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[Arab states and EU pledge support for Lebanon's stability](#)

Author:

Thu, 2019-08-29 00:29

BEIRUT: Kuwait's Ambassador to Lebanon Abdel Aal Al-Qenaei said that Arab states support Lebanon's stability and are concerned about its security.

He confirmed support for all measures and policies Lebanon takes to protect its security, stability and territorial integrity.

Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri met with Arab envoys on Wednesday as part

of efforts to reduce tension following Israel's attack in Beirut and its strike on a Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC) base.

The meeting was attended by ambassadors from Oman, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Algeria, Sudan, Iraq, Tunisia, Egypt, the UAE, Kuwait, Palestine, and the chargé d'affaires of the Jordanian Embassy.

Al-Qenaoui said: "Hariri has presented Lebanon's vision on the recent events, and we stressed that its stability is our demand. There is an Arab concern to ensure that Lebanon is spared all that threatens its security and stability."

He added that the diplomats have heard Hariri state that Lebanon will request an Arab League meeting to discuss the Israeli aggression.

Ghattas Khoury, political adviser to Hariri, told Arab News: "The meeting was held at the request of Hariri to call upon Arab nations to use their influence and relations to calm the situation in the region and restore respect for UN resolution 1701."

He added: "The Lebanese leaders are still concerned about potential escalation. All channels are open with the US, European and Russian sides to ensure the stability of Lebanon."

The Arab stance was preceded by a similar position announced by the EU, which affirmed its support for Lebanon's security and sovereignty.

Maja Kocijancic, spokesperson for EU foreign affairs and security policy, said: "It is the responsibility of all parties in the region to exercise maximum restraint, comply with international law and avoid any further escalation. The EU expects all parties to fully comply with the relevant UN Security Council resolutions, especially 1701 and 1559."

Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah said during a religious meeting: "The response will not be now, so sleep comfortably. We have a specific weapon but will not waste it on drones."

Nasrallah recalled the attack on Hezbollah in Quneitra, Syria in 2015, which killed six fighters. He said: "The atmosphere was charged at the time, and we waited 10 days. Now, we are not in a hurry at all. Let Israel remain on alert."

Former Lebanese Prime Minister Fouad Siniora called on Hezbollah to "exercise greater insight and bear in mind what Israel can plot in the light of its current election campaign."

He added: "We are now experiencing the consequences of Hezbollah's actions outside Lebanon, which expose us to unforeseen risks."

Israel continues to impose a state of alert in areas along the Lebanese border.

Russia Today quoted DEBKAFfile, an Israeli military intelligence website, that

the Israeli Army had closed a 6-km strip of airspace up to the Lebanese border to civilian air traffic.

Israel's move followed restrictions on the movement of nonmilitary vehicles in areas bordering Lebanon, in addition to the deployment of several Iron Dome anti-missile batteries.

The Times of Israel alleged that the targets of the strike on Beirut's southern suburb were two crates of material for a Hezbollah program, which aims to turn its stock of rockets into precision-guided missiles.

It added that the targets were "a specialized industrial mixer and a computerized control unit, which is necessary for the creation of the solid fuel used in long-range missiles and was the only machine of its kind inside Lebanon."

According to Channel 13 news: "The planetary mixer had recently been flown into Lebanon from Iran and was being held in Beirut's southern suburb before being transferred to the factory, where the actual work on the precision missile project was being performed. The damage to the mixer rendered it unusable and is believed to have set back this aspect of Hezbollah's precision missile program by at least a year."



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UN envoy warns Mideast tensions could deal huge blow to Iraq

Author:

Wed, 2019-08-28 21:47

UNITED NATIONS: The UN envoy for Iraq is warning that tensions in the Middle East could deal “a huge blow” to efforts to rebuild a stable and prosperous country following the defeat of Daesh extremists.

Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert told the Security Council on Wednesday that “we must spare no effort in avoiding this prospect.”

Iraq’s fragile government is walking a fine line trying to manage its alliances with both the United States and Iran amid rising tensions between the two countries.

Hennis-Plasschaert said Iraqi leaders are “engaging regional and international actors to ensure that their country is a meeting ground for stability and not a venue for proxy conflicts.”

She said she is “very encouraged by the government’s determination to bring all armed actors under state control,” but implementation will be crucial.



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Iraq's leaders condemn deadly drone attack blamed on Israel

[Disaster warning over 'ticking time bomb' Yemen tanker](#)

Author:

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Wed, 2019-08-28 16:27

DUBAI: An abandoned oil tanker anchored off war-torn Yemen that is degrading along with its cargo could explode and cause an environmental disaster, experts said Wednesday as UN inspectors prepared to visit.

The ship "Safer," used as a floating storage platform, is laden with some 1.1 million barrels of crude oil and has been stranded with no maintenance since early 2015, leaving it to deteriorate and potentially allowing explosive gases to build up.

United Nations spokesman Stephane Dujarric said Tuesday that a technical assessment team was waiting in nearby Djibouti preparing to board the Safer for a first-hand evaluation.

"We expect the assessment to start either later this week or early next week. There are obviously some technical preparations that need to be made," he told reporters in New York.

The UN team's visit has been delayed for months as the Houthi rebels who control Ras Issa port, where the ship is anchored, had refused to allow the mission in a dispute over claims for revenues from the oil worth millions. But Dujarric said the United Nations has obtained permission from both Yemen's internationally-recognized government and the rebels to examine the vessel.

The structure of the tanker has had no maintenance at all since the Yemen war started, he said.

Dujarric warned that an "environmental catastrophe" could result "if something were to happen to the tanker."

The aim of the mission is to evaluate the condition of the vessel, perform an initial basic maintenance and assess what could be done technically to strengthen the ship's structure.

The CEO of global maritime consultants I.R. Consilium described the situation as extremely alarming and characterised the ship as a ticking time bomb.

"The situation is serious and this matter will unfold into a crisis if urgent, decisive and effective action is not taken," Ian Ralby told AFP.

A report issued by Consilium said the vessel "has turned into a massive bomb

capable of explosion due to its contents and lack of maintenance.”

The risk of explosion increased by the day and if it happened, “it would create an environmental crisis four and a half times the size of the Exxon Valdez oil spill,” it said.

The report was referring to the 1989 disaster when a tanker spilt some 260,000 barrels of oil into pristine Alaskan waters.

The United Nations has warned that if the Safer ruptures, it could block maritime trade through the Red Sea, which accounts for up to 10 percent of world trade.

It could also threaten the daily passage of some 5.5 million barrels of oil, contaminate drinking water and damage the marine environment across the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden and parts of Gulf waters.

The head of Kuwait’s Greenline Environmental Group, a private NGO, warned that any catastrophe would likely hit waters of Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Egypt, Djibouti, Somalia and Eritrea.

“The environmental system of the Red Sea is at risk of catastrophe if the oil leaks into the sea... It would lead to a large-scale death of fish and birds,” Khaled Al-Hajjeri told AFP.



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Sudan starts trial of agents linked to teacher death: lawyer

Author:

Wed, 2019-08-28 19:43

OMDOURMAN, Sudan: Sudan began the trial on Wednesday of 41 security agents accused of involvement in the death of a teacher held in custody, a lawyer said.

Ahmed Al-Kheir, 36, died in prison after his arrest in January by members of the feared National Intelligence and Security Services (NISS), used by now-ousted veteran leader Omar Al-Bashir to crush dissent.

Kheir was detained in his village of Khashm El-Girba, in the eastern province of Kassala, on allegations of organizing anti-Bashir protests.

Days after his arrest, Kheir's family was told to collect his body from a local mortuary.

His death fueled protests against Bashir who was toppled in April after months of mass rallies against his iron-fisted rule.

"Trial proceedings for the 41 NISS agents started," said lawyer Adel Abdelghani, adding that the case involves officers and other ranks.

"They are accused of subjecting the deceased Ahmed Al-Kheir to torture which led to his death," he said.

The next trial will be held on September 3, according to an AFP correspondent who attended the session.

Under Bashir, the NISS oversaw repeated crackdowns on government opponents and the media, and launched a severe crackdown on the nationwide protests that erupted in December.

In July, the agency was renamed the General Intelligence Services.

Sudan has since embarked on a transition to civilian rule following a deal signed this month between protest leaders and the generals who seized power after Bashir's ouster.

On August 21, the country swore in a joint civilian-military ruling body and a prime minister as part of the roadmap to guide the country through a three-year transitional period.

Bashir himself is now jailed at the maximum-security Kober prison in Khartoum, where thousands of political prisoners were held during his 30-years in power.

The former president is being tried over a raft of corruption charges.



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