

Blast at Iraq weapons depot injures 13, cause unclear

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BADHDAD: Iraq's interior ministry says a large explosion at an ammunition depot southwest of the capital, Baghdad, has injured 13 people, most lightly. Maj. Gen. Saad Maan, a ministry spokesman, said it was not immediately clear what caused the blast at the Al-Saqr military base.

The explosion was heard throughout the city and smoke billowed in the air Monday evening.

The base houses a weapons depot for the Iraqi federal police and the mainly Shiite militias known as the Popular Mobilization Forces.

The state-sanctioned PMF militias, which also receive backing from Iran, have fought alongside Iraq's regular armed forces against Daesh



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Iraqi forces launch anti-Daesh operation north of Baghdad
Suicide bombers attack Baghdad mosque

US team in southern Turkey to work on joint operations center

Author:

Mon, 2019-08-12 22:00

ISTANBUL: A US delegation has arrived in Turkey's southern province of Sanliurfa to start work on the establishment of a joint operations center to coordinate a planned safe zone in neighboring Syria, Turkish authorities said on Monday.

The two NATO allies agreed in talks last week to establish the center that would manage the zone in northern Syria though no agreement has been announced on key details of the zone, including the size of the area in question and the command structure of joint patrols that would be conducted there.

There has been cautious progress on the center despite other disputes straining bilateral relations, including Turkey's purchase of the Russian S-400 missile defense system, as well as trials of local US Consulate employees in Turkey on terrorism charges.

Work to establish the center has begun and it is expected to become active in coming days, the Turkish Defense Ministry said on Twitter.

"Within this context, a six-person US delegation has arrived in Sanliurfa with the purpose of preliminary preparation," it said.

Washington and Ankara have been at odds over plans for northeastern Syria, where US allies on the ground in the battle against Daesh include the Kurdish YPG militia, which Turkey considers an enemy and a terrorist group.

The allies have been discussing a safe zone near the Turkish frontier that would be kept free of combatants and heavy weapons, but Turkey wants it to extend more than twice as far into Syrian territory as the US has proposed.

Turkey has suggested it will act militarily if the US fails to agree on a solution that will safeguard the border. Turkey says the YPG is an extension in Syria of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which has waged an insurgency against the Turkish state since the 1980s.



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US, Turkey agree to 'work together' to resolve disputes
US, Turkey say plan reached to resolve rift over Syria town

[Impoverished Gazans lament stagnant livestock market](#)

Sun, 2019-08-11 22:07

GAZA CITY: Livestock traders in Gaza are frustrated by the reluctance of Palestinians to buy sacrificial livestock for Eid Al-Adha because of the deteriorating economic situation. Many locals lack purchasing power due to the Israeli siege and a wage crisis.

Traders and customers blamed the stagnant market on unprecedented levels of poverty.

In order to encourage people to buy, livestock owners have resorted to a system of sale by installments. Others are skeptical of this system, fearing the inability of some to pay, especially in light of the financial crisis experienced by Palestinian Authority (PA) employees.

Mohammed Khadr and five friends agreed to join together and buy a sacrificial calf by payments in monthly installments.

Khadr, a 53-year-old taxi driver, said he would not have been able to buy it without the installment system. He said he and his friends have agreed to buy a calf in installments of 1,800 shekels (\$510) per person over nine months.

Khadr said that he used to always buy the Eid sacrifice outright, but he would not have bought it for the past three years without help from the installment system.

Despite the system, Mohammed Al-Assar said he would not buy a sacrifice for the third year in a row because of the salary crisis.

"I have used the Eid sacrifice for a decade. We had income, but now with the big deduction on salaries, I have not been able to buy a sacrifice over the past two years," said Al-Assar, a PA employee.

He said that the salary drop caused a deterioration in the living conditions of thousands of PA employees in Gaza. He added that some of them are barely able to provide basic necessities, while many are exhausted by debts and loans.

Since April 2017, the PA has imposed financial cuts on the salaries of more than 50,000 employees in the Gaza Strip, ranging from 30 to 50 percent per capita.

"The majority of those who buy the sacrifices this year are friends and acquaintances, according to the financial installment system," said Abu Karim Al-Satari, a livestock merchant who owns a farm in the southern Gaza Strip.

He added that the low demand for sacrifices comes despite a decline in prices compared with previous years. This, he said, is due to the deteriorating economic conditions of the majority of the population.

According to Al-Satari, the average price ranges from 16 to 20 shekels per kg.

The Israeli siege and internal Palestinian political divisions have caused a collapse in the living conditions of about 2 million Palestinians, most of whom depend on humanitarian assistance provided by the UN.

According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, about 53 percent of the population of the Gaza Strip are impoverished.

Cattle merchant Aziz Afanah agrees with Al-Satari that "the livestock market for this year is witnessing a marked decline in the demand to buy sacrifices due to a lack of cash and purchasing power of the majority of Gazans."

But Afanah, despite the sharp recession in the livestock market, refuses to sell in installments to avoid problems of inability to pay.

"Selling by installments needs guarantees, and in Gaza there is no guarantee

after the majority of people entered the cycle of financial crisis,” he said.



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Egyptian tradition of painting Hajj pilgrims' homes lives on
Jordanians enjoy digital Hajj

[Assad regime forces gain ground in deadly Idlib push](#)

Author:

Sun, 2019-08-11 22:01

BEIRUT: Syrian regime forces seized a town on the edge of Idlib province on Sunday, a monitor said, their first ground advance since resuming an offensive on the opposition-dominated enclave more than three months ago.

The region of northwestern Syria, which is home to an estimated 3 million civilians, has come under almost daily Syrian and Russian bombardment since late April.

The most recent fighting focused on an area straddling Idlib and Hama provinces, a war monitor said, and claimed dozens of lives on both sides.

“Regime forces seized the town of Al-Habeet, in Idlib’s southern countryside, at dawn,” said Rami Abdel Rahman, head of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights war monitor.

The regime’s latest gains were in the north of Hama province, which lies to the south of Idlib.

The area has escaped the control of Bashar Assad’s regime since 2015 and is the last major bastion of opposition to his regime and its allies.

The capture of Al-Habeet, one of several strategic targets for advancing pro-regime forces, came after another night of deadly fighting, the Observatory said.

According to the Britain-based monitor’s tally, 70 combatants were killed on Saturday alone, 32 of them pro-regime forces. The remaining 38 were from the opposing ranks of Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham and allied opposition fighters.

Abdel Rahman said another 27 combatants, nine of them regime fighters, were killed in early fighting on Sunday.

He described Al-Habeet as “the first town in southern Idlib to be taken by the regime since the start of the escalation” in April.

The town is seen as a stepping stone toward Khan Sheikhun, one of the main towns in Idlib and the target of some of the eight-year-old conflict’s deadliest air strikes.

Tens of thousands of people have been displaced in recent weeks and aid groups have warned that an all-out assault on Idlib could turn the current humanitarian emergency into a catastrophe of proportions previously unseen.

The fighting is a violation of a deal which was reached by the battle’s two main foreign brokers – Russia and Turkey – but was never implemented.

Russia is Damascus’ main backer while Turkey holds sway over some opposition and militant forces along its border. The deal’s terms were never realistic but the agreement sealed in the Russian resort of Sochi in September 2018 staved off a fully fledged offensive that risks triggering the Syrian civil war’s bloodiest phase yet.



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Syria army to resume military operations in Idlib
Long-awaited truce gives wary Syrians in Idlib respite from airstrikes

[Jordanians enjoy digital Hajj](#)

Sun, 2019-08-11 21:53

AMMAN: For three years, Dr. Emad Abu Safieh has been filling out online Hajj applications. Every year he fills out two: One for his father Ahmad and his mother Shukrieh, and another for his 71-year old uncle Yousef.

Safieh, 44, a university professor and dean of the business department at the Arab Open University in Amman, told Arab News that he was happy to help with the posting of Hajj request for his older relatives.

“The site is easy to use; after filling out the details, including contacts and a secondary phone number, a confirmation message is sent to both the basic phone number and the alternative one. Hajj digitalization is happening now and it works well.”

Safieh's hope to accompany his father did not materialize this year, as only his uncle's application was accepted. "But at least my dad will go as his companion, and he will also be accompanied by my mother," Safieh said.

Hajj application digitalization covers both Saudi Arabia's internal applications and the massive number of visa applications under the title "electronic visa path." But while the electronic visa path is mostly connected to those wishing to travel by air, companies in countries like Jordan, where the majority of pilgrims prefer the land route, say that the digitization of the Hajj has helped them a lot.

Majdi Batoush, the lead technology officer at Jordan's Islamic Waqf Department, told Arab News that the electronic path for the Hajj set up by the Saudi Ministry of Hajj has made life much easier for many. "In one site we have all the details and we no longer have to file through loads of paperwork as we used to do in the past."

Batoush says that nearly 90 percent of all pilgrims today get a visa using the electronic path created by the Saudi authorities. "Once online, the data can be shared to the benefit of all relevant bodies each as is necessary for their work," he said.

In one site we have all the details and we no longer have to file through loads of paperwork as we used to do in the past.

Ali Daebess has been working at the Teeba Al-Bawadi Hajj and Umrah Tourist Co. for 19 years. Speaking to Arab News, Daebess explained that the digitalization of the Hajj has made life much easier also for tour companies. "We used to photograph and scan passports five or six times, and we had a ton of paperwork. Now everything is online and much easier." Daebess concedes that most pilgrims are older and are not computer or internet literate.

"They come to our office and we upload the information for them, we do it for free and it takes a few minutes to post." The IT specialist, whose company's Facebook page boasts over 27,000 followers, says that social media has been helpful. "We get a lot of feedback on social media mostly from relatives of pilgrims."

Although the digital process appears smooth these days, Hajj companies and government officials admit that things were not easy at first. "It was hard at first to adjust and the site was difficult to navigate," Majdi told Arab News, "but now things are much easier and we are able to process many more applications in a shorter period of time."



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Egyptian tradition of painting Hajj pilgrims' homes lives on
Meet the parents taking their children to Hajj