

# Kurdish authorities to release 800 Syrians from Al-Hol camp: official

Author:

Sun, 2019-06-02 16:46

AIN ISSA, Syria: Kurdish authorities in northeast Syria said Sunday they plan to hand 800 women and children, including relatives of militants, to their families in the first such transfer from an overcrowded camp.

The women and children – all Syrians – are living among the dregs of Daesh in the Kurdish-run Al-Hol camp, home to nearly 74,000 people including more than 30,000 Syrians.

They will be released Monday and “taken to their families” at the request of local Arab tribes, according to Abd Al-Mehbach, co-chair of the Kurdish administration’s executive council.

It is to be the first in a larger wave of releases that aim to empty Al-Hol of its Syrian residents, he said.

The next batch is expected to follow the Eid Al-Fitr holiday marking the end of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.

Hoovered up during a final offensive against the militants by a US-backed Kurdish-led force, thousands of wives and children of Daesh fighters have been trucked into Al-Hol from a string of Syrian villages south of the camp in recent months.

Their numbers have created a major headache for the semi-autonomous Kurdish administration and have sparked concerns that the camp is emerging as a fresh militant powder keg.

But not all of those being released are relatives of Daesh fighters, Mehbach said of the group set to leave Monday.

Some sought shelter at the camp to escape tough humanitarian conditions in areas levelled by months of fighting, he said.

Monday’s group consists of residents from the northeastern city of Raqqa – once Daesh’s de facto capital in Syria – as well as the town of Tabqa, 70 kilometers (43 miles) west, according to Mehbach.

Those among them with suspected links to Daesh will be kept under surveillance by local Arab tribes, who have given guarantees, he said.

“It is the (Kurdish) administration’s duty to its people to play a role in the rehabilitation of these women and children, and their reintegration into society,” he added.

The Daesh proto-state was declared defeated on March 23, following a nearly five-year-long offensive against the group.

Thousands of foreign fighters are being held in Kurdish-run prisons, while their wives and children languish in displacement camps.

Among the hordes of Syrians and Iraqis, some 12,000 foreigners are held in a fenced-off section of the Al-Hol camp, under the watch of Kurdish forces.



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## [Algeria cancels July 4 presidential vote, rejects candidates](#)

Author:  
Reuters  
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1559475261047589500  
Sun, 2019-06-02 11:26

ALGIERS: Algeria's Constitutional Council on Sunday canceled the July 4 presidential election in this energy-rich North African country, plunged for months in a political crisis, after the two candidates – both unknowns – were rejected.

The council said in a statement that it is now up to the interim president, Abdelkader Bensalah, to set a new date for the vote.

Only two candidates turned in their files by the May 25 deadline, but the Constitutional Council rejected them. It did not say why.

A presidential election was ordered after ailing long-time leader Abdelaziz

Bouteflika stepped down on April 2 under pressure from the public and the powerful army chief, ending two decades of rule.

Citizens have held pro-democracy protests each Friday since Feb. 22 to press for a new era with new leadership that has no links to Bouteflika, who was rarely seen in public since a 2013 stroke.

The protests were triggered by Bouteflika's plan to seek a fifth term.

Protesters want other top officials, including the interim president – an ally of Bouteflika – to leave office to ensure a new era for Algeria, which has been run since independence from France in 1962 by a generation that fought in the seven-year-long war.

Bensalah was named interim leader for a 90-day period, in keeping with the constitution. The Constitutional Council's decision to cancel the July 4 voting and ask him to organize a new election suggests that he will remain in office beyond that limit, which will end in the second week of July. The council statement said that organizing elections was the interim leader's "essential mission."

The cancelation of the elections, decried by protesters, carried little surprise. Army chief Ahmed Gaid Salah appeared to acknowledge that the date was no longer firm, in an address last week to soldiers in which he called for dialogue – but rejected a transitional period demanded by numerous party leaders and by protesters, out of fear it could lead to chaos and a dangerous vacuum.

He said elections should be held "in the shortest delay possible."

Judicial authorities, meanwhile, have gone after Bouteflika's entourage, with a military court investigating his brother Said Bouteflika and two former generals once in charge of intelligence for "plotting against the authority of the state." Said Bouteflika was widely viewed as the real power behind the ailing former president, and alleged by many to have contributed to raising corruption in an already corrupt system to new levels. Top business leaders also have been jailed.



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Funeral of Algerian activist draws thousands after prison death  
Algerians rally for change despite arrests

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## [US flexes military muscle in Arabian Sea but open to 'no preconditions' Iran talks](#)

Sun, 2019-06-02 14:07

BELLINZONA, Switzerland: US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said Sunday that the Trump administration is ready for unconditional discussions with Iran in an effort to ease rising tensions that have sparked fears of conflict.

But the United States will not relent in trying to pressure Iran to change its behavior in the Middle East, America's top diplomat said.

His comments came as the US military conducted exercises in the Arabian Sea with a B-52 bomber and an aircraft carrier dispatched to the region in response to an Iranian threat.

The exercise saw F/A-18 Super Hornets, MH-60 Sea Hawk helicopters and E-2D Growlers from the USS Abraham Lincoln fly with the B-52 bomber, the Air Force said Sunday.

The aircraft also “simulated strike operations” in the exercise, which took place on Saturday.

In a reminder that tensions are still high, Yahya Rahim Safavi, a top military aide to Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, said Sunday that US military vessels in the Gulf are within range of Iranian missiles and warned that any clash between the two countries would push oil prices above \$100 a barrel.

Pompeo repeated long-standing US accusations that Iran is bent on destabilizing the region, but he also held out the possibility of talks as President Donald Trump has suggested.

Pompeo made the talks offer during a visit to Switzerland, the country that long has represented American interests in Iran, as part of a European trip aimed at assuring wary leaders that the US is not eager for war.



“We’re prepared to engage in a conversation with no preconditions,” Pompeo said. “We’re ready to sit down with them, but the American effort to

fundamentally reverse the malign activity of this Islamic Republic, this revolutionary force, is going to continue.”

Pompeo’s meeting with Foreign Minister Ignazio Cassis in the southern Swiss town of Bellinzona came amid concerns about the potential for escalation and miscalculation with Iran – a situation that has many in Europe and the Middle East on edge.

Cassis, whose country has been an intermediary between the two before, made no secret of that nervousness.

“The situation is very tense. We are fully aware, both parties are fully aware, of this tension. Switzerland, of course, wishes there is no escalation, no escalation to violence,” he said.

Cassis said Switzerland would be pleased to serve as an intermediary, but not a “mediator,” between the United States and Iran. To do so, however, would require requests from both sides, he said.

## Opinion

This section contains relevant reference points, placed in (Opinion field)

Neither he nor Pompeo would say if such requests had been made of the Swiss.

Pompeo thanked Switzerland, which serves as the “protecting power” for the US in Iran, for looking after Americans detained there. Trump administration officials have suggested they would look positively at any move to release at least five American citizens and at least two permanent US residents currently imprisoned in Iran.

Pompeo declined to comment on whether he had made a specific request to the Swiss about the detainees. But, he said the release of unjustly jailed Americans in Iran and elsewhere is a U.S. priority.

Pompeo was in Switzerland on the second leg after Germany of a four-nation tour of Europe in which he is both trying to calm nerves and stressing that the US will defend itself and not relent in raising pressure on Iran with economic sanctions.

Despite the firm stance, Trump has signaled a willingness to talk with Iran’s leadership. Iranian officials have hinted at the possibility but also insisted they will not be bullied.

“If they want to talk, I’m available,” Trump said last week, even as Pompeo and the White House national security adviser, John Bolton, were stepping up warnings that any attack on American interests by Iran or its proxies would draw a rapid and significant US response.

The US is sending hundreds of additional troops to the region after blaming

Iran and Iranian proxies for recent sabotage to tankers in the Gulf and drone attacks on Saudi Arabia's oil infrastructure.

Some analysts believe Iran is acting to restore leverage it has lost since Trump withdrew from the 2015 nuclear deal and the US reimposed sanctions that have hobbled Iran's economy.

Last month, the administration ended sanctions waivers that had allowed certain countries to continue to import Iranian oil, the country's main source of revenue, without US penalties. The U.S. also designated Iran's Revolutionary Guards a "foreign terrorist organization," adding new layers of sanctions to foreigners that might do business with it or its affiliates.

Despite the US withdrawal, Iran has remained a party to the nuclear deal that involves the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, Germany and the European Union.

On Friday, the United Nations' nuclear watchdog reported that Iran may be in violation of limits on the number of advanced centrifuges it can use.

Pompeo declined to comment on the findings of the International Atomic Energy Agency other than to say the US is "watching closely" what is going on in Iran.







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## [Turkey and Russia face escalation of violence over Syria's push into Idlib](#)

Sat, 2019-06-01 23:20

JEDDAH/ISTANBUL: Ankara and Moscow are again facing an escalation of violence in Syria's last opposition-held territory.

An all-out offensive by the Assad regime to capture Idlib in northwest Syria could unleash an unprecedented humanitarian crisis, as the province is home to 3 million people.

Regime ground forces have been advancing from the south of the opposition stronghold under the cover of Syrian and Russian airstrikes.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said 291 civilians and 369 fighters have been killed in Idlib since April 30.

In the same period, 269 regime troops and 22 civilians have been killed in regime-held areas by opposition fire.

The UN children's agency said more than 130 children have reportedly been killed. More than 200,000 people from Idlib have been displaced, according to the UN.

Ankara has accused the Assad regime of violating a cease-fire brokered by Turkey and Russia.

Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar said Ankara has told Russia that "the regime must be controlled."

Syrian opposition spokesman Yahya Al-Aridi said the regime has chosen a military path in handling the popular uprising. "The more tension, the better for the regime and Iran, its main supporter," he told Arab News.

Russia has tried more than 250 kinds of deadly weapons in Syria, he said. "It wanted to tailor a solution that fits its own interests and suits the regime. The pretext is there in Idlib with some Al-Nusra fighters," he added.

What is happening in Idlib, said Al-Aridi, is a violation of accords between Turkey and Russia.

“The losses on both sides are tremendous, with people defending themselves against ground forces. But they can’t do anything against the Russian and regime bombardment,” he added.

“The human loss is horrible. Hundreds of thousands are fleeing their homes with no shelter. It’s a humanitarian disaster, with the world unfortunately watching and doing nothing against those criminals.”

Turkey, which is already hosting more than 3.6 million Syrian refugees, is facing strong pressure from Syria, Iran and Russia to deliver on its pledge to control the armed opposition factions in Idlib.

But Turkey also needs Russia to rein in Syria’s Bashar Assad to prevent a massive outflow of refugees and to keep Turkish soldiers on the ground safe.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Russian President Vladimir Putin “have an incentive to cooperate and ensure that nobody’s interests are totally trampled,” says Aaron Stein, the director of the Middle East program in American think tank Foreign Policy Research Institute.

In September, the two leaders brokered a cease-fire for Idlib in the Russian resort of Sochi, preventing a bloody onslaught, despite the fact that Russia has firmly backed Assad and Turkey supports opposition forces. Nine months later, the truce has failed.

The agreement called for a 15-to-20 km demilitarized zone free of insurgents and heavy weaponry and for two key highways crossing through Idlib to be reopened. The demilitarized zone has been breached and the highways are at the center of the current regime offensive.

## **FASTFACT**

- In September, the two countries brokered a cease-fire for Idlib in the Russian resort of Sochi, preventing a bloody onslaught, despite the fact that Russia has firmly backed Assad and Turkey supports opposition forces. Nine months later, the truce has failed.
- Instead of coming under the umbrella of moderate groups, HTS has used Turkey as leverage against Russia and Assad-supporter Iran.

Syrian ground forces have been advancing from the south of the opposition stronghold under the cover of Syrian and Russian airstrikes.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said more than 291 civilians and 369 fighters have been killed since April 30 in the opposition stronghold. In the same period, 269 regime troops and 22 civilians were killed in regime areas by opposition fire. The UN’s children’s agency said more than 130 children have reportedly been killed.

Already, more than 200,000 people from the stronghold have been displaced, according to the UN, with some seeking safety near the border with Turkey while others crammed into already crowded camps in Syria.

Turkey has accused the Syrian regime of violating the cease-fire and Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar said the country has told Russia "the regime must be controlled."

Russia has launched airstrikes in Idlib and is providing air cover in the Syrian regime offensive. It has complained that the fighters have increasingly been targeting its military base in the nearby coastal province of Latakia.

But for now, Moscow is unlikely to support an all-out Syrian operation in Idlib because the benefits of a long-term alliance with Turkey outweigh one military battle.

"Russia doesn't want to ruin its relationship with Turkey because of Idlib," says Kirill Semenov, a Moscow-based Middle East analyst and expert at the Russian International Affairs Council.

In late April, Putin said he would not rule out a large-scale assault but "together with our Syrian friends, we believe that this would not be advisable" due to humanitarian issues.

Still, Russia's patience is wearing thin with the Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham, or HTS, which it accuses of targeting its military base. HTS is considered a terrorist organization by the US, Russia and Turkey, despite its claims it has disassociated from Al-Qaeda.

Top Russian officials have often called Idlib a "breeding ground for terrorists."

Despite the cease-fire deal, Turkey has been unable to neutralize the extremists. Much of Idlib has come under the control of HTS, which has defeated Turkey-backed armed groups.

Emre Ersan, an associate professor of international relations and political science at Istanbul's Marmara University, believes Turkey may have overestimated its influence over HTS. He says Turkey's plan to split the group, with some of its members joining Turkish-backed opposition forces and the group's hard-liners isolated, has not worked.

Instead of coming under the umbrella of moderate groups, HTS has used Turkey as leverage against Russia and Assad-supporter Iran, according to Ersan.

Adding to the risks, Turkish troops are in the line of fire. Two Turkish soldiers were wounded in early May in a Syrian regime artillery attack on an observation post. Three other attacks have been cited by Turkey's official Anadolu Agency, raising the question if the attacks were accidental or designed to pressure Ankara with Russia's knowledge.

"The Turkish Armed Forces will not take a single step back from where it is,"

Akar, Turkey's defense minister, said last week.

Erdogan and Putin have talked on the phone, agreeing to continue working along the lines of the cease-fire agreement to prevent civilian deaths and a refugee flow. They also agreed to meet on the sidelines of next month's Group of 20 conference in Japan.

"Apart from this dialogue and cooperation, there is nothing on the ground that can prevent a catastrophe in Idlib," Ersan says.

The presidents have become close since 2016, rebuilding their relations after a dramatic crisis in 2015 when Turkey shot down a Russian jet near the Syrian border. Their rapport comes amid Turkey's fragile relations with NATO ally US, especially over Washington's support of Syrian Kurdish-led forces who control large swaths in eastern Syria. Ankara considers them an extension of a Kurdish insurgency operating inside Turkey.

Erdogan is so far sticking to his promise to buy Russian-made S-400 missiles despite US warnings the system would jeopardize Turkey's participation in the F-35 fighter jet program and compromise its safety. Stein calls this "a big win for Russia." Turkey is angling for a way to have both the S-400s and the F-35s.

Turkey is also talking with the US about a safe zone in northeastern Syria and has repeatedly asked for the US to end its military support for Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, or SDF. Erdogan will meet US President Donald Trump at the G-20 as well.

Ersan believes Russia may allow Turkey to grab the northern town of Tel Rifaat from the Kurdish fighters, the last town they control in western Syria. Russian support could help Turkey put pressure on the SDF, widen Turkish influence and strengthen its hand in ongoing negotiations with the US

In exchange, he argues, Turkey could be open to some limited Syrian operation toward Idlib.

*(With AP)*



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Almost 950 killed in a month of Syria violence  
Syrian boy survives regime bombing that killed his mother, siblings

## [Tunisia stops rescued migrants from coming ashore](#)

Author:

Sat, 2019-06-01 23:05

TUNIS: Tunisian authorities were on Saturday stopping 75 migrants saved at sea from coming ashore, according to a rights group and the captain of the ship which rescued them.

The migrants were adrift in international waters in a boat with a broken engine when an Egyptian tug boat brought them aboard, the captain said on condition of anonymity.

After notifying authorities in Italy and Malta, the crew headed for the southern Tunisian port of Zarzis where authorities refused to allow the ship

to dock.

"We're in a critical situation, we're nearly 100 on board and we don't have more than two days of supplies of water and food," the captain told AFP by phone.

Tunisian rights organization FTDES said the regional governor demanded government support before accepting the migrants, following an increase in new arrivals from neighboring Libya in recent months.

Tunisian authorities did not respond to AFP's requests for comment.

The crew of the tug boat rescued 64 Bangladeshis, nine Egyptians, one Moroccan and one Sudanese, who had departed from Zuwara in western Libya, according to FTDES.

Last month, around 60 migrants, most from Bangladesh, drowned off the coast of Tunisia after leaving Libya on a boat bound for Europe.

There has been a significant reduction in rescue vessels operating in the Mediterranean Sea in recent months, with humanitarian boats facing legal woes as countries such as Italy impose a hard-line migration policy.



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Three migrants die of thirst in Niger desert  
Italy, Malta rescue stricken migrants in Mediterranean