

Turkey urges end to regime attacks on Idlib

Author:

AFP

ID:

1557569620406102100

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ANKARA: Turkey on Friday called for an end to regime attacks on Idlib, accusing Damascus of seeking to extend its control of the province's south in violation of previously agreed boundaries.

Syrian regime forces together with their Russian allies have increased air strikes and shelling in the militant-controlled northwestern province since last April.

"We expect Russia to take effective and decisive measures to ensure regime forces end their attacks on the south of Idlib and the (forces) immediately withdraw to the borders agreed as part of Astana Process," Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar said.

"The regime is trying to widen its area of control in Idlib's south in violation of the Astana agreement," Akar added, quoted by state news agency Anadolu.

He said the attacks were also a "risk" to Turkey's 12 military observation posts around the region.

Akar made his comments during a visit to the Turkish border with Syria, joined by top military commanders.

While Moscow backs Syrian President Bashar Assad, Ankara has called for his ouster and supports Syrian rebels in the civil war which began with anti-government protests in 2011.

Despite being on opposing sides of the war, Turkey has been working closely with regime backers Russia and Iran to find a political solution to the Syrian civil war.

Their talks have been known as the Astana process which was launched in early 2017 in the Kazakh capital now called Nur-Sultan.

A separate deal agreed by Moscow and Ankara last year aimed to set up a buffer zone around Idlib, and avoid a massive Syrian regime assault on the province.



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[Aid groups suspend aid to Syria's embattled northwest](#)

Author:

AFP

ID:

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Sat, 2019-05-11 09:13

BEIRUT: UN-linked aid groups have suspended activities in parts of violence-plagued northwest Syria, where stepped up bombardment by the regime and Russia is jeopardizing the safety of humanitarian workers.

"As of 8 May, at least 16 humanitarian partners have suspended their operations in areas impacted by conflict," the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, or OCHA said Friday.

The World Food Programme said it has suspended “deliveries to about 47,000 people in towns and villages... (that) have come under bombardment.” Since late April, government forces have mounted a major bombardment of southern Idlib and neighboring areas with Russian support. The uptick in air strikes and shelling on the region dominated by Syria’s former Al-Qaeda affiliate has displaced 180,000 people between 29 April and 9 May, OCHA said. It has also affected 15 health facilities and 16 schools, it added. “Some organizations suspended activities as their premises were damaged, destroyed or rendered unsafe by the violence,” OCHA said. “Others have suspended activities in order to keep their staff and beneficiaries safe, or because the beneficiary population has left,” it added. OCHA said five humanitarian workers, including two health professionals, have been reportedly killed due to air strikes and shelling. WFP also said that some of its partners inside Idlib have been “displaced due to the violence, while a few others have sustained injuries.” The northwestern part of Syria controlled by jihadists is made up of a large part of Idlib province, as well as adjacent parts of the Aleppo and Hama provinces. It has been protected from a massive regime offensive by a September deal inked by Damascus ally Russia and rebel backer Turkey. The region of some three million people has come under increasing bombardment since Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham, which is dominated by jihadists from Al-Qaeda’s former Syrian branch, took full control of it in the beginning of the year. Western powers are concerned that the Russia-backed Syrian government will launch a full-scale assault. On Friday, air strikes and shelling killed 10 civilians, the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said. The civil war in Syria has killed more than 370,000 people and displaced millions since it started with the brutal repression of anti-government protests in 2011.



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Syria's Assad sets sights on Idlib, the final showdown? Anti-Kurdish protests in east Syria could endanger US plans

[Battle for Libya's Tripoli gives chance to Daesh](#)

Author:

Imed Lamoum | AFP

ID:

1557549460455744700

Sat, 2019-05-11 01:42

TRIPOLI: The battle for Tripoli between rival Libyan forces both championing the fight against "terrorism" has created a security vacuum, allowing the Daesh group a chance to re-emerge, analysts warn.

Libya expert Emad Badi says the fighting has given Daesh "the opportunity to reorganize, recruit and strike alliances with other groups (and organize attacks) to show they are still around."

Extremist groups capitalized on Libya's descent into chaos after the 2011

uprising that killed veteran dictator Muammar Qaddafi to establish a presence in the North African country.

Daesh had its main stronghold in Qaddafi's hometown of Sirte, east of Tripoli, until it was expelled from the Mediterranean coastal city in December 2016.

The group's demise came at the hands of forces loyal to the Tripoli-based internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA), especially fighters from the western city of Misrata.

Those fighters are among pro-GNA forces now battling the self-styled Libyan National Army of military strongman Khalifa Haftar who launched an assault on Tripoli on April 4.

Haftar has vowed to "cleanse" Libya of jihadists and presents himself as the country's savior.

In 2017, he drove hard-line militants out of second city Benghazi after a three-year battle and ousted extremists from Derna, also in the east.

Then in January he launched an operation to "purge the south of terrorist and criminal groups" before setting his sights on Tripoli.

But despite being weakened, the extremists still pose a threat in oil-rich Libya, where they were blamed for around 20 attacks last year.

And over the past week Daesh has carried out two deadly assaults targeting Haftar's forces – on a training camp in the southern city of Sebha on May 4 that left nine dead and an attack Thursday in Ghodwa, also in the south, that killed two civilians.

Instability has reigned over Libya since the 2011 uprising, with rival political and military forces vying for power and fighting for the country's oil wealth and cities.

Extremist groups such as Daesh have fed on this chaos to grow, and divisions that persist as reflected by the battle for Tripoli only serve to bolster them, analysts say.

"The divisions give terrorists an unexpected opportunity to mobilize and reorganize," said Khaled Al-Montasser, a professor of international studies who lectures at Libyan universities.

After losing Sirte and Derna, Daesh was weakened but not totally defeated as its fighters withdrew to the country's remote and vast desert in the south or infiltrated coastal communities.

The threat militants pose was highlighted in a statement Thursday by the GNA, which also blamed Haftar's offensive for giving groups like Daesh another chance to regroup.

"GNA forces continue to repel the Haftar militias but their attacks... destabilize our country and allow terrorist groups like IS to re-emerge," it said.

Karim Bitar, director of research at the French Institute for International and Strategic Affairs, draws a parallel with Syria and Iraq, where Daesh built a "caliphate" after a lightning offensive in 2014.

"In Libya, as in Iraq and Syria before it, IS took advantage of a vacuum... and the collapse of the state's structures to anchor itself," he said.

"As long as Libya is divided and as long as the state's sovereign authority is not re-established across the country, there is a risk that Daesh will be able to regain ground," he said.



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UN calls for talks, ceasefire in Libya

[Dazzling lights, swelling crowd give Al-Quds the Ramadan feel](#)

Author:

Fri, 2019-05-10 22:21

JERUSALEM: Salaaheedeen, the main business street in East Jerusalem, was busy but not extremely full around noon on Tuesday, the second day of the holy month of Ramadan.

But once you pass the structures planted to house Israeli soldiers at the Damascus Gate, and you get inside the walls of Jerusalem, you get an entirely new feeling.

The tiled streets are narrow and naturally more crowded with people of all colors, faiths and languages. The crucible of the Abrahamic religions reflects the nature of its believers, whether Jewish, Christian or Muslim.

Some are easily identifiable as celebrating Ramadan by the fact that they are carrying their food, while others belonging to other faiths are eating outdoors at local restaurants without even noticing locals fasting from sunrise to sunset.

On this day, well-known eateries like Abu Shukri's humus in Wad Street and Bustami restaurants outside the hospice are packed with tourists.

Local tour guides say that this year the number of tourists visiting Jerusalem will break records. The Palestinian restaurant owners are all fasting yet their business dictates that they serve those walking the streets of the old city, visiting the cradle of world religion.

The jewel in the crown of Jerusalem is Al-Aqsa Mosque. And on this second day of Ramadan, the courtyards were full of Muslim worshippers.

Scattered in various locations throughout the 144 dunums that comprise the UNESCO world heritage site, groups of women gather in the shade of trees to carry out prayers.

As you get closer to Al-Aqsa Mosque, Islam's third holiest site, the crowds of worshippers get bigger.

At the western end of Al-Aqsa two Israeli security officers sit quietly under a tree keeping an eye on Bab Al-Rahmeh, the Golden Gate area which had been barred to Muslims for 16 years.

In recent months Palestinians, with support from the newly appointed Jordanian waqf council, broke the chains and regained use of the area.

Othman Sunqrot sits on a chair outside. He tells Arab News that Palestinian families in Jerusalem take turns in manning the location, which Israel wants to close again.

"We took a decision that every Jerusalem family will nominate a member to make sure that this area remains open, often having to break the chain that Israel has put up." Ahmad, a local guard, tells Arab News that at first Israel would arrest every person who broke the chain. Eventually, the entire gate was simply ripped from its hinges.

On the second floor of the waqf offices just outside Bab Al-Hadid sits Sheikh Azzam Al-Khatib, the director general of the Islamic waqf – the Jordanian ministry entrusted with running the mosque.

He has just completed a TV interview about the many projects that Jordan's King Abdullah has funded in the area. Al-Khatib tells Arab News that the issue of the Bab Al-Rahman is not resolved.

"We have a court case on May 15 and we are worried that the Israeli court

might take a decision to permanently close it." Al-Khatib offered compromises to the Israeli objection of turning this site into a mosque.

"We are willing to use the location for office space or for a children's kindergarten, but we will not accept to have it closed again. This is part of the mosque area and only Muslims have a right to use it."

The director of the waqf is worried about Israeli extremists entering the mosque under Israeli supervision.

"We have asked them to stop these incursions and for sure we will not allow it in the last 10 days of Ramadan, when the mosque is full of worshippers. This would be a clear provocation."

He adds that while 87 Israelis entered the mosque on May 6, the number went down to 35 the following day. "What is upsetting is that we keep telling the Israelis not to allow the same extremists to keep coming."

Preparations for Ramadan can be seen everywhere in the Haram area. Water fixtures are spread throughout the mosque, and large areas have been covered with tent-like material to provide shade for worshippers.

Many believers will spend entire days in the space and will break their fast on the mosque compound thanks to contributions.

The preparations for Ramadan are not restricted to the mosque. Various neighborhoods in the old city of Jerusalem have been fitted with lights in different arrangements that turn it into a wonderful site at night.

The lighting issue has become a sort of competition, where different communities collect money to pay for lighting up their neighborhoods.

Mohammad Abu Omar lives in the Wadi Joz area. "We got together and asked every family to contribute 1,000 shekels (\$278) to help cover the cost of the lighting ropes. One family offered to use their own electricity. I made the design and we all worked together to put up the lights and the result is very nice."

In the Saadia quarter of the old city, a number of men talk about their lights proudly. "This is from Dahlan, he contributed money for these lights," one of the men standing outside a bakery told us. Dahlan is a former leader of Fatah who is close to the UAE leadership. Other communities say that they got money from the Palestinian government in Ramallah, while in other areas the Israeli municipality supplied and paid for the lighting. The result is that at night the old city of Jerusalem is one amazing site. In the afternoon hours, the streets begin to thin out. Only makeshift locations where fresh qataif pancake patties are being produced attract people, who stand in line to pick up fresh patties to take home.

Slightly before 7:30 p.m. Rajai Sandouka walks up Salaheedin Street and enters the Islamic cemetery. Sandouka has inherited from his family the honor of shooting a canon that signals the end of the fast. For some time this tradition was banned, but eventually the Israelis agreed to help keep it

going. Two Israeli security officers meet Sandouka at the entrance of the cemetery, and walk up the hill with him. At exactly 7:30 Rajai is allowed to use a set of fire crackers that make the loud booming sound. As fasting Muslims hear the sound from Rajai they begin enjoying their iftar meal. Hundreds gathered at Al-Aqsa squat in front of lines of pre-prepared food break their fast with a date, and a sip from a plastic water cup followed by a full meal.



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Abbas in Cairo to discuss Palestine situation
Pakistan to discuss Israeli aggression against Palestine at next OIC summit

[UN council members warn of catastrophe in Syria's Idlib](#)

Author:

AFP

ID:

1557517069271644700

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UNITED NATIONS: Britain, France, the United States and eight other countries at the UN Security Council warned Friday of a potential humanitarian catastrophe from an all-out assault in Syria's Idlib region, in a statement opposed by Russia.

Syrian forces and their Russian allies have stepped up air strikes and shelling in the jihadist-controlled Idlib region since late April, raising alarm over a possible looming full-on offensive by Damascus to seize the territory.

"We express our deep concern of a potential humanitarian catastrophe in the event of a full-scale military operation in Idlib zone," Belgian Ambassador Marc Pesteen told reporters after a closed-door meeting.

Diplomats said Russia, supported by China, opposed the statement during the meeting.

Two other countries – South Africa and Indonesia – did not join the show of unity outside the council chambers by the diplomats from countries including Kuwait, Poland, Peru and Germany.

The council members said they condemned the loss of civilian lives and were alarmed by the displacement of over 150,000 people as well as the targeting of hospitals and schools.

They called on all warring sides to protect civilians and abide by the cease-fire arrangements reached by Turkey, Iran and Russia in September 2018.

Since April 29, 12 health facilities including two major hospitals have been hit in northwest Syria, according to the World Health Organization.

About three million people live in Idlib, the largest bastion to remain outside the control of the Syrian government.

French Ambassador Francois Delattre said he feared a possible repeat of the bloody battle that devastated Aleppo in 2016.

"A new Aleppo must at all cost be prevented in Idlib," said Delattre ahead of the meeting.

Diplomats said the meeting was to draw attention to the crisis and expected Russia to oppose any joint statement. Russia has used its veto power 12 times at the council to block action against its ally in Damascus.

Belgium, Germany and Kuwait, three non-permanent council members, requested the urgent meeting as they are leading efforts to address the humanitarian crisis in Syria, now in its ninth year of war.



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Syria's Assad sets sights on Idlib, the final showdown? Syrian rebels try to retake village from government troops