

Shanahan: We have destroyed Daesh's capabilities, it is no longer able to detain civilians

Fri, 2019-02-15 17:06

LONDON: Daesh's capabilities have been destroyed and it is no longer able to detain civilians, Acting US Secretary of Defense Patrick Michael Shanahan said Friday at the Munich Security Conference.

Shanahan also said that the global coalition to defeat Daesh has "eliminated the group's hold over 99 percent of the territory it once claimed as part of its so-called caliphate." "We have ensured ISIS no longer holds the innocent people of Syria or Iraq in its murderous iron fist."

Daesh has been defeated but has not disappeared and may take on a new form, the Acting US Secretary of Defense Patrick Michael Shanahan added.

Shanahan said he envisioned a "bigger and stronger" coalition to fight Daesh globally. "We will continue to support our local partners' ability to stand up to the remnants of ISIS."

US President Donald Trump's announcement in December that he was withdrawing all 2,000 US troops from Syria surprised and rattled allies. US officials have crisscrossed the Middle East in recent weeks to reassure them that Washington remains committed to the region.



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[Patrick Shanahan](#)

[Daesh](#)

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US-backed Syrian forces clearing Daesh remnants from villages
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[**New UN Syria envoy seeks Syria constitution talks, no firm timeframe**](#)

Author:

Reuters

ID:

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Fri, 2019-02-15 12:31

GENEVA: The new UN envoy tasked with forging peace in Syria hopes to convene a constitutional committee in Geneva "as soon as possible," he said on Friday, without giving a firm timeframe for the latest attempt to end the country's devastating war.

Formation of a constitutional committee is key to political reforms and new elections meant to unify Syria and end an almost eight-year-old war, which has killed hundreds of thousands and displaced about half of Syria's pre-war 22 million population.

Geir Pedersen, the fourth Syria mediator after Kofi Annan, Lakhdar Brahimi and Staffan de Mistura, said he also had ideas about how to build trust and confidence between the two sides, who have previously attended nine rounds of largely fruitless talks as the war rumbled on.

"I think we have identified the challenges and we have agreed on how we should move forward and that I see as a very, very positive sign," Pedersen told reporters.

"My hope (is) that they will be able as soon as possible to have the constitution committee to meet in Geneva."

Syria's opposition last year agreed to join a process of rewriting the constitution under UN auspices following a peacemaking conference in the Russian city of Sochi.

But President Bashar Assad, who is emerging triumphant in the conflict and has sworn to retake every inch of Syria still outside his control, has objected to the world body naming members of the committee.

Pedersen said he could not be more specific about the timeframe for a meeting of the committee, but he said his discussions with relevant parties were good.

Asked if he would have failed if he had not presided over an end to the war by the end of his tenure, Pedersen said the aim was to negotiate an agreement between the two parties.

"To be able to get to a situation where you can say that we have been able to put eight years of conflict behind us and that we as Syrians agree that we will begin the process of creating a future for coming Syrians, that... would be the definition that we have been successful."

Pedersen met the opposition Syrian National Coalition (SNC) in Riyadh last month, shortly after a visit to Damascus, where Assad's forces have made large territorial gains on the battlefield, largely thanks to Russian and Iranian support.

Russia, Iran and Turkey, supporters of the main sides left in Syria's complex war, have so far failed to agree on the make-up of the constitutional committee.

But chief opposition negotiator Nasr Haririr said on Jan. 19 after talks with Pedersen that Syria had a good opportunity to reach a political solution to its war because cease-fires have brought calm to many areas of the country. Pedersen added that he saw the constitutional committee as "a potential door opener" for the political process.

In parallel with this, work was also needed on other issues and he hoped to discuss this in more detail with the Syrian parties, including the government and SNC, he said.

As a sign of increasing confidence, Pedersen said he hoped to see more prisoner exchanges, and clarity on missing persons, following a swap between the government and rebel forces a few days ago, where each side handed over 20 prisoners.



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[Yemen FM says seated next to Netanyahu in 'error'](#)

Author:

AFP

ID:

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Fri, 2019-02-15 11:55

DUBAI: Yemen's top diplomat said a "protocol error" landed him next to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at a conference in the Polish capital Warsaw and that his country's stance on the Palestinian issue remained unchanged.

"Protocol errors are the responsibility of the organizers, as is always the

case in international conferences,” Foreign Minister Khaled Al-Yamani wrote on Twitter late Thursday.

Yamani was already seated when Netanyahu took his place earlier the same day at an international conference in Warsaw focused on security in the Middle East, with a strong emphasis on Iran.

The two nodded at each other and exchanged brief smiles as Netanyahu sat down.

During a part of the session closed to the press, Yamani lent Netanyahu his microphone when the Israeli premier’s was not working properly.

US President Donald Trump’s Middle East peace envoy Jason Greenblatt hailed the exchange on Twitter, calling it a “lighthearted moment” that could be the sign of “new cooperation” between the Jewish and Arab states.

Yemen and Israel have never had diplomatic relations, and Yamani’s friendly interaction with Netanyahu drew criticism on social media.

“The stance of Yemen and President (Abdrabbo Mansour) Hadi on the Palestinian issue and its people its people and leadership is firm,” Yamani insisted.

He said Yemen’s attended the Warsaw conference not to discuss the Israeli-Palestinian conflict “but to mobilize the international community to confront the Iranian expansion in Yemen.”

Its participation was also “part of the battle to restore” his internationally-recognized government, he added.



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[Lebanon marks 14 years since Hariri assassination](#)

Author:

Thu, 2019-02-14 23:03

BEIRUT: Lebanon on Thursday commemorated the 14th anniversary of the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafic Hariri and 21 others.

Meanwhile, the country awaits the verdict of the special UN tribunal into his assassination, which is to be issued in the first half of 2019.

Prime Minister Saad Hariri, Rafic's son, said: "This year will be the year of truth and justice, and we want it to be clear, no matter how cruel. We will not allow anyone to destroy Lebanon."

At 12:50 p.m., the torch in St. George Street in Beirut was lit to mark the site where Rafic's procession was targeted with about 1,800 kg of high explosives.

More than 12,000 Future Movement supporters came from different parts of Lebanon and gathered in the center of Beirut, led by a large crowd of politicians and diplomats, as well as Nizar Al-Aloula, adviser at the Saudi Royal Court.

Saad said his father "did not die for the country to be destroyed. Rafic Hariri's martyrdom has unified the people of Lebanon, and we will not give anyone the chance to use the verdict as a tool to incite strife among the Lebanese."

He added: "Those who murdered Rafic Hariri meant to destroy Lebanon ... After 14 years, Rafic Hariri remains a cause in the hearts of the Lebanese and Arabs."

Saad said: "In the history of Rafic Hariri and our history, there was never blood on our hands. We did not bear arms and did not open training centers for militants, but we have opened the door for more than 40,000 young people who have become the largest army of graduates from across Lebanon and from all the universities of the world."

He added: "This is not the time to flex muscles, nor is it the time for defiance, settling scores and repeating words that people are tired of hearing. These do not build a state or remove the waste from roads."

He said: "Gone are the days of claiming integrity and ethics while pointing fingers in different directions day and night. The new generation does not want a proto-state for political parties and sects."

In an indirect response to Hezbollah, which had said Lebanon "is going to condemn itself to more debt" and "the state is offering itself for sale outside," Saad said: "These words have nothing to do with the economy or investment programs. Their aim is to disrupt and obstruct. I personally will not be silent in the face of any attempt to disrupt and obstruct the government's work and program."

He added: "We have a clear program with clear funding and working mechanisms that are based on transparency and reforms. There is no room for waste, nor for the thieves of quotas and opportunity hijackers."

Saad highlighted his government's adherence to the Saudi-brokered Taif Agreement, which ended Lebanon's civil war in 1989.

He pledged to never allow anyone to breach it, saying: "We are the guardians of the Taif Agreement today and in the future."

He added: "Lebanon is not a state affiliated with any axis, and not an arena for the region's arms race. Lebanon is an independent Arab state with a constitution, laws, institutions, and international and Arab responsibilities."

On Hezbollah's repeated calls to resume relations with Damascus to facilitate the return of Syrian refugees, Saad said: "The best we can offer Syrian refugees is to ensure their voluntary return to Syria."

He added: "I am convinced that the regime in Syria wants to get revenge on the refugees and set conditions for their return. This is not about us. Look at Jordan – the state has been communicating with the Syrian regime in vain. Even Turkey could not reach a conclusion with the Syrian regime."

He said: "Some security services in Lebanon are coordinating with Syria to activate the return of refugees because our goal is to simply ensure their return to their country. But we do not accept under any circumstances for Lebanon to be a tool for handing over refugees as hostages to the regime."

US Ambassador to Lebanon Elizabeth Richard visited Rafic's shrine and said she is sure justice will be served.

Russian Ambassador to Lebanon Alexander Zasytkin also visited the shrine and placed a wreath of flowers on behalf of his country.

Walid Jumblatt, leader of the Progressive Socialist Party, visited the shrine but did not attend the ceremony held on the occasion.

He tweeted: "Our army today is the army of all, and its weapons will be the only weapons until the end of time. Rafic Hariri, his comrades and the martyrs of freedom will be done justice." Jumblatt met in his house with Al-Aloula.



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[Mideast peace plan expected after Israeli election, says Kushner](#)

Author:

Thu, 2019-02-14 22:06

WARSAW: US President Donald Trump's senior Middle East adviser, son-in-law Jared Kushner, said on Thursday that the Trump administration would unveil its much-awaited Mideast "Deal of the Century" after the Israeli elections on April 9.

Kushner briefed participants at a security conference in Poland about the plan but would not go into details for fear of it leaking, according to a diplomat who watched the presentation. But he did say the plan would be released sometime after Israel's upcoming election. The diplomat spoke on condition of anonymity according to protocol.

The diplomat quoted Kushner as saying that Trump had given him the Israeli-Palestinian "file" to give the long-elusive goal of a peace agreement "a shot." Despite the long odds, he said he believed "privately, people are much more flexible."

The Palestinians have pre-emptively rejected the plan, accusing the Trump White House of being unfairly biased toward Israel. They say that all signs indicate the plan will fall far short of their longstanding goal of establishing an independent Palestinian state in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza Strip.

"There will be no peace and stability in the Middle East without a peaceful solution that leads to a Palestinian state, with Jerusalem as a capital," said Nabil Abu Rudeineh, spokesman for Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas.

The Palestinians skipped Thursday's conference and also asked Arab countries to boycott or downgrade their representation. Some 60 countries are taking part in the gathering.

Kushner has been working on an Israeli-Palestinian peace plan for close to two years but has yet to release any details, and the release of his plan has been repeatedly delayed.

US officials had said Kushner would make some comments in Warsaw about the conflict. But Netanyahu said ahead of time he didn't expect any discussion of the peace plan, with the focus of the conference on participants' shared concern over Iran and its growing influence in the region.

The diplomat quoted Netanyahu joking at some point to Kushner that "having this file" is a "tough one."

"But, if you are crazy enough, and I think you might just be, you can come up with new ideas," he said.

Netanyahu also urged all interested parties, particularly the Palestinians, to wait for the plan to come out before reacting to it or rejecting it.

In later comments alongside Vice President Mike Pence, Netanyahu said he looked forward to "seeing the plan once it is presented."

US officials have signaled the plan will be heavily focused on Palestinian economic development. They also have refused to endorse the concept of a Palestinian state – a goal that has enjoyed wide international backing for the past two decades.

The US recognition of contested Jerusalem as Israel's capital, along with the cancelation of hundreds of millions of dollars in American aid to the Palestinians, have prompted the Palestinians to cut off ties with the White House and pre-emptively reject the peace plan.

Even if it falls short of Palestinian aspirations, the plan could also run into Israeli opposition.

Netanyahu's governing coalition is comprised of religious and nationalist hard-liners who oppose serious concessions to the Palestinians. With Netanyahu seeking re-election, and pledging to form a similar coalition if he wins, it is unlikely that he would make any concessions, particularly before the April 9 vote.

Kushner, according to the diplomat, said the history of the Middle East had shown that "pessimists" about Israeli-Palestinian peace were "usually right." But he stressed that "it's the optimists that bring the change."

With the Palestinians sidelined, Netanyahu has tried to use the Warsaw conference to get closer to other Arab nations aligned with it against Iran.

Netanyahu has long boasted of clandestinely developing good relations with several Arab states, despite a lack of official ties. Bringing such contacts out into the open would mark a major diplomatic coup and put a seal of approval on his goal of improving Israel's standing in the world, and particularly with Arabs.

On Wednesday, he met with Oman's foreign minister, Yusuf bin Alawi, and at Thursday's opening session he was seated next to the foreign minister of Yemen, as representatives of Kuwait, Qatar and others looked on.



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Palestine says Warsaw talks 'normalize' Israeli occupation Israel's Netanyahu

meets Oman's foreign minister in Warsaw