

US Senate wants troops to stay in Syria, Afghanistan

Author:

Fri, 2019-02-01 22:52

WASHINGTON: The Republican-led US Senate advanced largely symbolic legislation on Thursday opposing plans for any abrupt withdrawal of troops from Syria and Afghanistan.

The Senate voted 68-23 in favor of a non-binding amendment, drafted by Republican Majority Leader Mitch McConnell saying it was the sense of the Senate that militant groups in both countries continue to pose a "serious threat" to the US.

McConnell said he had introduced an amendment to a broader Middle East security bill urging a "continued commitment" until Al-Qaeda, Daesh and other groups are defeated.

"We're not the world's policemen, but we are the leader of the free world, and it's incumbent upon the United States to lead, to maintain a global coalition against terror and to stand with our partners," McConnell said in a speech in the Senate.

The procedural vote to cut off debate meant that the amendment would be added to a broader Middle East security bill likely to come up for a final Senate vote next week.

The amendment acknowledges progress against Daesh and Al-Qaeda in Syria and Afghanistan but warns that "a precipitous withdrawal" without effective efforts to secure gains could destabilize the region and create a vacuum that could be filled by Iran or Russia.

It calls upon the Trump administration to certify conditions have been met for the groups' "enduring defeat" before any significant withdrawal from Syria or Afghanistan.

Thursday's Senate action marked the second time in two months that the Republican-led Senate has supported a measure going against Trump's foreign policy, although legislation to change his policies has yet to become law.

The potential impact of Thursday's vote was uncertain, since the amendment McConnell offered was non-binding and there has been no indication of when, if ever, the broader Middle East security bill would come up for a House vote.

Trump has decided to withdraw 2,000 US troops from Syria on the grounds that Daesh militants no longer pose a threat, saying on Twitter on Wednesday, "We have beaten them" as he disputed Senate testimony by his director of national intelligence, Dan Coats, on Tuesday that the group still posed a threat.

Trump said earlier on Thursday he would bring American troops home if a peace deal were reached to end 17 years of war in Afghanistan. The US and the Taliban have sketched the outlines for an eventual peace accord, a US special envoy said on Monday, but there was no sign the insurgent group had accepted key US demands.



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[Australia admits 'may have killed' civilians in Mosul raid](#)

Author:

AFP

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Sat, 2019-02-02 00:49

SYDNEY: Australia on Friday acknowledged it may have killed as many as 18

civilians in an air strike on Mosul two years ago, during a massive and ultimately successful campaign to dislodge extremists.

Following an internal investigation, the Australian Defence Force said coalition raids against Daesh positions in the then-occupied northern Iraqi city on June 13, 2017 "may have caused civilian casualties."

"The coalition assesses that between six and 18 civilians may have been killed," during strikes on the Al Shafaar neighborhood.

Air Marshal Mel Hupfeld indicated there was no firm information about the number of deaths or whether they came as a result of the Australian strike, or from other coalition members.

The intense aerial bombardment to retake what had been Iraq's second-largest city has already been the subject of intense scrutiny, with the US-led coalition admitting over 1,100 civilian casualties.

A total of 30,008 strikes against Daesh were carried out between August 2014 and the end of August 2018, with the Mosul campaign being particularly intense.

Critics have alleged the coalition strategy leaned too much on overwhelming air power. While quicker and posing fewer risks for coalition forces, they allege it put civilians at greater risk.

Monitoring group Airwars says the number of civilian deaths acknowledged by the coalition is well below the true toll of the bombing campaign, estimating that at least 7,468 civilians were killed.

Daesh was known to hold civilians as human shields in a deliberate effort to evade detection, deter air strikes and shape Western public opinion against the war.

Hupfeld said the Australian strike was requested by Iraqi security forces and was in "full compliance with the law of armed conflict and applicable rules of engagement."

"The Australian Defence Force takes all feasible precautions to minimize the risk of civilian casualties."

Ahead of the strike, seven extremists were identified in a building and adjacent courtyard, armed with heavy weapons.

They were hit with a "500lb precision guided munition" which "achieved the effect desired."

Australia's defense forces said the civilian casualties were in a nearby building.



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[Sudan police fire tear gas on protest after prayers](#)

Author:

AFP

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1549026467614490200

Fri, 2019-02-01 13:02

KHARTOUM: Sudanese police fired tear gas on Friday at worshippers leaving a mosque in the metropolis chanting "freedom, freedom" in an anti-government protest after the main weekly Muslim prayers, witnesses said.

Worshippers have held regular demonstrations after prayers at the mosque run by the opposition Umma Party in the capital's twin city Omdurman since its veteran leader, former premier Sadiq al-Mahdi, threw his support behind the

protest movement.

“Riot police swiftly moved in and fired tear gas at them,” a witness told AFP.

“They were also chanting freedom, peace, justice,” the rallying cry of the protests that erupted in December against the three-decade rule of President Omar al-Bashir, the witness said.

Demonstrations first broke out in the farming town of Atbara on December 19 after the government tripled the price of bread.

But they swiftly escalated into a broader protest movement that has been seen as the biggest threat to Bashir’s rule since he took power in an Islamist-backed coup that toppled Mahdi’s elected government in 1989.

Officials say 30 people have died in violence related to the protests. Human rights groups say children and medics have been among more than 40 people killed.



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Facebook removes more accounts tied to Iran

Thu, 2019-01-31 22:48

Facebook Inc. said on Thursday it removed pages, groups and accounts tied to Iran for using and coordinating fake accounts. These accounts targeted people across the world, although more heavily in the Middle East and South Asia, the company said.



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Facebook has 'new tools' against EU election meddling

In former Daesh bastion, displaced

Syrians clamor to go home

Author:

Thu, 2019-01-31 22:43

HAJJIN, Syria: In the former militant bastion of Hajjin in eastern Syria, 50-year-old Khaled Abed shouts at the top of his lungs amid the rubble, asking why he cannot go home.

The US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) expelled Daesh from the town last month, but it has since forbidden anyone from returning to its town center.

"I want to go home. Why can't I?" Abed bellows in the street near what was once the town market but has become a cordoned off military area.

"Our sons are the ones who liberated" this town, says the father of four SDF fighters, wearing a checkered red-and-white scarf on his head.

"Why won't they allow us back? By God, it's outrageous."

Backed by airstrikes of the US-led coalition, the SDF is still battling the last militants south of Hajjin.

Abed fled Hajjin last year while it was still under Daesh rule, seeking refuge in a camp for the displaced in SDF-held territory.

He returned in recent days to find his family's five homes destroyed, but wants access to rebuild them.

The SDF has allowed people to return to others parts of the town, but not in its devastated center.

"No civilians allowed," they repeat all day long, to anybody trying to enter.

The main road is closed, but two trucks carrying people and their belongings drive down a side road toward an adjacent neighborhood.

Abu Khaled, an SDF field commander in charge of the area, tells AFP the road needs to be checked for ordnance before it can reopen.

Daesh has often planted land mines before retreating, causing casualties among advancing SDF troops and returning civilians.

But these warnings do not deter residents like Abed.

"We'll clear the mines ourselves," he says, still shouting. "We've become experts. They tried all sorts of weapons on us... Just let us go home!"

Sixty-year-old shepherd Aswad Al-Aysh is also defiant.

"No problem, we'll get our sheep and make them walk in front of us," he quips, to show if there are mines.

His brother Abed Al-Ibrahim, who fled town with him a year ago, says the town's people need to return to their land.

"Where else are we supposed to go?" he asks quietly.

Hajjin was once a bustling Daesh hub, but today food is hard to come by, and the town's water and electricity networks have been ravaged in the fighting.

At the town's entrance, a young boy sells cigarette packs displayed on a broken table, while a man next to him peddles cans of fuel.

An armored vehicle pulls up, and an SDF fighter swings open its door to distribute small bottles of water, and children come running.

After receiving his share, a young boy pleads for more.

"Give me another one for Granny," he says.

On the banks of the Euphrates, trucks pump up water from the river before distributing it in the area.

In recent weeks, the SDF has cornered Daesh in a small patch of 4 sq km south down the river.

The SDF commander-in-chief last week said he expected Daesh to be flushed out within a month, before operations to root out any remaining sleeper cells.

Unable to return to the Hajjin town center, residents are staying in a nearby village and commuting daily to see whether the SDF has lifted its ban.

Even the town's mayor, Ali Jaber Ali, no longer lives there – though he says "there's nothing left of the town hall" anyway.

With his destroyed home out of reach in central Hajjin, the 56-year-old is staying in the village of Abu Hamam.

He says he tried to convince the US-backed forces to let his people return.

"There are no more sleeper cells" here, he says he told them. "I know every single one of the townspeople. We need to go home."

Near the town center, some residents are already rebuilding their homes.

A woman wearing a face veil shovels debris off her porch while a man rebuilds a collapsed wall.

Watching the scene, Amer Douada, 35, who hails from the cordoned-off area, is incensed.

"Why don't they open up the roads?" he asks. "We're ready to go back and set up a tent amid the ruins."

"They're scared of us, but we're a peaceful people. They should know that."



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