

US sanctions Iranian militias for turning refugees into 'cannon fodder'

Thu, 2019-01-24 18:13

WASHINGTON: The United States on Thursday imposed sanctions on two Iranian militias made up of Afghan and Pakistani refugees, including children, and sent as "cannon fodder" to Syria battlefields.

The Fatemiyoun Division and Zaynabiyoun Brigade prey on the millions of undocumented migrants and refugees in Iran "coercing them to fight in Syria under threat of arrest or deportation," the designation said.

They are overseen by the Quds Force, the branch of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps responsible for overseas operations, which the US and many other countries consider a terrorist organization.

Today, [@USTreasury](#) sanctioned [#Iran](#)'s regime for preying on refugees, using them as cannon fodder in Syria. This comes just days after Germany banned Mahan Air, and after recent action against the regime's despicable use of child soldiers. Maximum pressure continues.

– Secretary Pompeo (@SecPompeo) [January 24, 2019](#)

Several hundred Fatemiyoun Division fighters, including children as young as 14, have died fighting Iran's war in Syria, the department said.

Iran is accused of bringing in 80,000 Shiite fighters from countries like Pakistan and Afghanistan as part of its military support for Bashar Al-Assad during the nearly eight-year war.

The Fatemiyoun Division targets Afghans while the the Zaynabiyoun Brigade is comprised mostly of Pakistanis.

"The brutal Iranian regime exploits refugee communities in Iran, deprives them of access to basic services such as education, and uses them as human shields for the Syrian conflict," Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin said.

The sanctions are part of an "ongoing pressure campaign to shut down the illicit networks the regime uses to export terrorism and unrest across the globe," he added.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said the sanctions punished Iran for using refugees as "cannon fodder in Syria" and the regime's "despicable use of child soldiers."

The sanctions come as the US is under pressure to show that it can still act

as a bulwark against Iranian influence in Syria after Donald Trump said he would withdraw American soldiers from the country.

The sanctions, issued by the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control, also targeted two companies linked to the blacklisted Iranian airline Mahan Air and two aircraft.

Qeshm Fars Air, which is staffed by Mahan employees, operates two aircraft which regularly deliver weapons shipments to Damascus on behalf of the Quds Force. Mahan had already been sanctioned by the US for flying fighters, equipment and funds into Damascus. On Monday, Germany banned Mahan from operating there because of its involvement in the Syria war.

The Treasury Department also sanctioned an Armenian based company, Flight Travel LLC, for providing services to Mahan.

The sanctions mean all property and interests in the US of the groups are blocked and anyone who engages with them may also be targeted.



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US sanctions Iranian militias for turning refugees into 'cannon fodder' Iran will not comply with US sanctions as they are 'illegal': oil minister

[Car bomb hits Damascus: Syrian state media](#)

Author:

Reuters

ID:

1548334087929325900

Thu, 2019-01-24 12:41

BEIRUT: A car bomb exploded in the Al-Adawi neighbourhood of Syria's capital Damascus on Thursday causing damage but no casualties, state media said. Syrian state news agency SANA called it a "terrorist explosion" and gave no further details.



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Foreign Ministry denies claims of Saudi Arabia opening embassy in Damascus
Russia says 'arbitrary' Israeli airstrikes on Syria must stop

Algeria frees journalist month into one year jail term

Author:

AFP

ID:

1548319706268161000

Thu, 2019-01-24 08:46

ALGIERS: An Algerian court has released a journalist a month after he was sentenced to one year in jail for taking part in an unauthorised protest, his lawyer said.

Adlene Mellah, who heads the news websites *Algerie Direct* and *Dzair Presse*, was arrested on December 9 for attending a rally in support of an imprisoned singer.

He was found guilty of unlawful assembly and sentenced to one year in jail on December 25.

On Wednesday a court in Algiers gave him a suspended six-month sentence and released him on appeal, said the lawyer, Nouredine Benissad.

Mellah was first arrested on October 22 in a separate case of alleged blackmail, before being released a month later.

He still faces charges of blackmail, defamation and invasion of privacy in that case which is due go before a court on February 7.

Media watchdog Reporters Without Borders ranked Algeria 136th out of 180 countries on its press freedom index for 2018.



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Algeria sets April election, no word on Bouteflika candidacy
Algeria sentences journalist to year in jail over demo

[Erdogan and Putin vow closer cooperation on Syria at Moscow talks](#)

Author:

Maria PANINA | AFP

ID:

1548276731963329800

Wed, 2019-01-23 19:33

MOSCOW: Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan at a meeting in Moscow on Wednesday vowed to coordinate their actions more closely in Syria.

“Cooperation between Russia and Turkey is a touchstone for Syrian peace and

stability," Erdogan said in translated comments at a joint press conference after their talks, which lasted around three hours.

"With our Russian friends we intend to strengthen our coordination even more."

"We agreed how we'll coordinate our work in the near future," Putin said, calling the talks which included the countries' defense ministers "effective."

At the start of their meeting in the Kremlin, Putin addressed Erdogan as "dear friend," saying that their countries "work on issues of regional security and actively cooperate on Syria."

Erdogan used the same term for Putin and said "our solidarity makes a weighty contribution to the security of the region."

The two leaders are on opposite sides of the Syria conflict: Russia provides critical support to the Syrian government, while Turkey has backed rebel groups fighting President Bashar Assad's forces.

Despite this, they have worked closely to find a political solution to the seven-year conflict.

Russia and Turkey have agreed to coordinate ground operations in Syria following US President Donald Trump's shock announcement last month about pulling 2,000 American troops out of Syria.

Putin said that if carried out, the withdrawal of US troops from northeastern Syria "will be a positive step, it will help stabilize the situation in this restive area."

Turkey has also welcomed Washington's planned withdrawal, but the future of US-backed Kurdish militia forces labelled terrorists by Ankara has upset ties between the NATO allies.

Erdogan had said on Monday he would discuss with Putin the creation of a Turkish-controlled "security zone" in northern Syria, suggested by Trump. The US-allied Kurds, who control much of the north, have rejected the idea, fearing a Turkish offensive against territory under their control.

Putin said Wednesday that Russia supports "establishing dialogue between Damascus officials and representatives of the Kurds."

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov last week said that Damascus must take control of the north.

The northwestern province of Idlib earlier this month fell under the full control of a jihadist group dominated by Syria's former Al-Qaeda affiliate. The Russian foreign ministry said earlier Wednesday that the situation in the province remained of "serious concern."

Putin said that the leaders discussed the situation in Idlib "in great detail today."

"We have a shared conviction that we must continue jointly fighting terrorists wherever they are, including in the Idlib zone," the Russian leader said.

Erdogan said that the countries will wage a "lengthy fight" in Syria.

Nearly eight years into Syria's deadly conflict, the planned US pullout has led to another key step in Assad's Russian-backed drive to reassert control. Kurdish forces who were left exposed by Trump's pledge to withdraw have asked the Syrian regime for help to face a threatened Turkish offensive.

The Kremlin hailed the entry by Syrian forces into the key northern city of Manbij for the first time in six years after Kurds opened the gates.

Moscow plans to organize a three-way summit with Turkey and Iran early this

year as part of the Astana peace process, launched by the three countries in 2017.

Putin said Wednesday the next summit would be held “in the near future” in Russia, saying the leaders still needed to agree the time and location with Iran.

The last meeting between Putin, Erdogan and Iran’s Hassan Rouhani took place in Iran in September last year with the fate of rebel-held Idlib province dominating the agenda.

Ties between Russia and Turkey plunged to their lowest level in years in November 2015 when Turkish forces shot down a Russian warplane over Syria. But after a reconciliation deal in 2016, relations have recovered at a remarkable speed with Putin and Erdogan cooperating closely over Syria, Turkey buying Russian-made air defense systems and Russia building Turkey’s first nuclear power plant.



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Russia says ‘arbitrary’ Israeli airstrikes on Syria must stop
Jordan officials hold talks in Syria on resuming flights

[Russia says ‘arbitrary’ Israeli airstrikes on Syria must stop](#)

Author:

Wed, 2019-01-23 22:21

MOSCOW: Russia said on Wednesday that Israel should stop carrying out what Moscow called arbitrary airstrikes on Syria, days after the Israeli air force targeted what Israel said were Iranian forces there.

Israel has repeatedly attacked what it describes as Iranian targets in Syria and those of allied militia, including Lebanon's Hezbollah. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu describes the effort as an open-ended campaign to push back arch-foe Tehran.

The strikes have long caused friction between Israel and Russia, which apart from Iran is Bashar Assad's other major foreign backer.

Israeli officials have spoken in the past of an agreement with Moscow under which they have made clear their strikes on Syria would not threaten Assad, while Russia has promised to help limit Iranian influence near the Israeli frontier. A hotline set up since 2015 is aimed at ensuring Russian forces in Syria are not surprised by Israeli attacks.

"The practice of arbitrary strikes on the territory of a sovereign state, in this case, we are talking about Syria, should be ruled out," Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said, in answer to a question from Russian news agency TASS about recent Israeli airstrikes on Syria.

She said such strikes added to tensions in the region, which she said was not in the long-term interests of any country there, including Israel.

"We should never allow Syria, which has suffered years of armed conflict, to be turned into an arena where geopolitical scores are settled," TASS cited her as saying.

Her comments follow Israeli strikes in Syria on Monday. Israel did not immediately respond.

Earlier on Wednesday, Netanyahu signaled that the Syria sorties would continue.

"The IDF (Israel Defense Force) is the only military that is fighting the Iranian army in Syria," he said during a visit to an Israeli army base. "I am certain in our ability to defeat the enemy."



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Putin and Erdogan to hold Syria talks Israel bombs Iranian targets in Syria