

A battle of nerves for the control of Idlib city

Fri, 2019-01-11 23:25

BEIRUT: The Idlib area in northern Syria is now fully ruled by Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS), a militant organization dominated by members of Al-Qaeda's former affiliate.

Some of the other factions in the region are already allies, the others will either have to leave to other areas or be absorbed into the so-called Salvation Government run by the HTS.

How was this de-facto "emirate" allowed to consolidate and what consequences could it have for the nearly eight-year-old Syrian conflict and its main protagonists?

A deal was struck between opposition-backer Turkey and Damascus ally Russia in September to stave off a threatened government offensive on Idlib.

It has successfully prevented a massive Russian-backed regime assault on an area that is home to around 3 million people but its terms have remained unfulfilled.

Moscow had tasked Turkey, whose proxies fell under an umbrella known as the National Liberation Front (NLF), with disarming hard-line factions in Idlib.

It failed to do so and it was HTS that went on the offensive instead.

NUMBER

3.6m

Syria refugees have been provided shelter in Turkey.

They made rapid gains and intense clashes that left more than 130 dead this year, which led to a deal on Thursday that saw the two Turkish-backed remaining factions stand down, capping the militants' clean sweep.

Turkey, which has troops deployed in parts of Idlib and elsewhere in northern Syria, appeared to do little to stop HTS' expansion.

"Turkey didn't prevent HTS' takeover, but it's not obvious that it was in a position to do so," said Sam Heller, an analyst with the International Crisis

Group.

HTS has an estimated 25,000 seasoned and well-armed fighters in its bastion, and has long been the dominant force in Idlib.

The militants' lightning advance across Idlib earlier this year mark an unequivocal defeat for several outfits that were directly supported by Turkey.

"For Turkey, it's the defeat of its allies," said Fabrice Balanche, a Syria expert and geographer.

Two factions in the Turkey-backed NLF that had been battling HTS stood down and signed the deal on Thursday which essentially sees them absorbed.

Ahrar Al-Sham and Suqur Al-Sham said they were keeping some of their forces in the Idlib area for now, but they will fall under the newly expanded administration of the Salvation Government.

Just like the forces from the Nureddine Al-Zinki group that HTS defeated last week, the rebels who reject militant rule will most likely relocate to other Turkish-controlled areas such as Afrin.

Turkey has been training and equipping Syrian proxies to use against the Kurdish militia that controls the northeast of the country.

They have threatened a cross-border assault against the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), but the main deterrent has been the presence of a US-led coalition.

The troop pullout announced by US President Donald Trump last month, and which the coalition confirmed on Friday was under way, could clear the way for a Turkish offensive.

HTS' takeover of Idlib means the terms of a deal reached in the Russian resort of Sochi on Sept. 17 have not been respected.

After the agreement with Damascus sponsor Russia, Turkey was tasked with using its proxies in Idlib to rein in militants.

The Sochi deal froze a threatened Russian-backed government offensive which had seemed imminent four months ago.

An onslaught on the area would have caused an unprecedented humanitarian catastrophe.

Turkey, which already provides shelter to 3.6 million Syria refugees, is keen to avoid a fresh round of violence that could spark another wave of displacement.

The HTS takeover revives the threat of a Syrian offensive but Balanche predicted it might not be the regime's priority.

“The Russians are ready to attack at any moment but they won’t do it,” he said.

“They are using (Turkish President Recep Tayyip) Erdogan to put pressure on the Americans to leave northeastern Syria,” he said.

Turkey on Thursday reacted angrily to the mixed messages the US administration has been sending about the pace of the troop withdrawal, and warned that any further delay would prompt it to trigger its invasion.



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Cease-fire deal sees extremists take over Syria’s Idlib
Idlib clashes stir debate over de-escalation deal

[Arrest ordered after Emirati forced caged Asian workers to cheer for UAE football team](#)

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Fri, 2019-01-11 20:32

ABU DHABI: The UAE's Attorney General ordered the arrest of a man who posted a video on social media showing him forcing a group of Asian employees to cheer for the UAE national football team ahead of their Asian Cup encounter with India.

The men, who are employees of the Emirati citizen seen in the video, are in a chicken wire fenced cage and being urged to switch allegiances and cheer for the UAE national team over India. When they do as ordered, they are then released from the cage.

The Attorney General said the arrest order was issued, "given that such conduct is deemed illegal in the UAE and against the country's values of tolerance."



A screen grab of the Emirati citizen urging his employees to cheer for the UAE. (Social Media)

The person who filmed and posted the video has been apprehended and referred to "the Public Prosecution for investigation," Sharjah Police Headquarters said.

Sharjah Police also said that the behavior shown in the video is contrary to the "customs and traditions" of UAE citizens.

Sharjah police urged all members of society to familiarise themselves with laws relating to social media use so that they are not disciplined.



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Alberto Zaccheroni hopes UAE can kick on from win over India
Hosts UAE beat India 2-0 to go top of Asian Cup group

[Houthi drone control center destroyed in Yemen as US condemns Lahaj attack](#)

Fri, 2019-01-11 19:49

JEDDAH: A Houthi communications center controlling drones has been destroyed, the Arab coalition supporting the legitimate government in Yemen said Friday.

The location of the drone control center was formerly occupied by a Yemeni communications company but was then taken over by Houthi militia who turned it into an operations center.

On Thursday, six people were killed when the Houthis exploded a drone above a military parade in Lahaj province.

The United States on Friday “strongly condemned” the attack at Al-Anad Air Base, which jeopardizes a ceasefire for the port of Hodeidah agreed at talks in Sweden last month.

“This attack contravenes the spirit of the Hodeidah ceasefire and the progress made last month at the UN-led talks in Sweden,” the State Department said. “We urge all sides to honor the commitments they made in Sweden to their fellow Yemenis by refraining from violence and provocative acts.”

The escalation came after the UN envoy to Yemen, Martin Griffiths this week warned “substantial progress” was needed on the ground before full-blown negotiations could be launched on ending the civil war.

Britain on Friday presented a UN Security Council draft resolution that would expand the international observer mission monitoring the Hodeidah ceasefire and allow humanitarian aid to reach millions.

The council is expected to vote on the measure next week, diplomats said.

The mission would provide for the deployment of up to 75 monitors in the rebel-held city of Hodeida and its port along with the ports of Saleef and Ras Issa for an initial period of six months, AFP reported.

Secretary-General Antonio Guterres to “expeditiously” deploy the full mission, led by retired Dutch General Patrick Cammaert.

Meanwhile, a large explosion took place at an oil refinery in Aden on Friday evening, Al Arabiya reported. The cause of the blast was unclear



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UN 'alarmed' over renewed Yemen violence after drone attack Six killed in Houthi drone attack on Yemen military parade

[Israelis, Palestinians segregated on new West Bank highway](#)

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By ILAN BEN ZION | AP

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Thu, 2019-01-10 (All day)

JERUSALEM: Israel inaugurated a new highway in the occupied West Bank on Thursday that features a large concrete wall segregating Israeli and Palestinian traffic.

One side of Route 4370 – located northeast of Jerusalem – will be open to Israeli vehicles only, while the other half will only be open to Palestinian traffic. Critics have branded it an “apartheid” highway, saying it is part of a segregated road system that benefits Jewish settlers.

The highway was built as part of a planned ring road east of Jerusalem that would connect the northern and southern West Bank. Construction began in 2005, but the 5-kilometer (3-mile) road lay unfinished for years until 2017. Israeli officials inaugurating the new road on Wednesday touted it as a means of better connecting West Bank settlements north of Jerusalem to the city. Israeli Public Security Minister Gilad Erdan called the highway “an example of the ability to create coexistence between Israelis and Palestinian while guarding (against) the existing security challenges.”

The Palestinian Authority said in a statement that the “apartheid” road “poses a challenge to the credibility of the international community.”

“It’s a shame on the international community to see an apartheid regime being established and deepened without doing anything to stop it,” the statement said.

Israel captured east Jerusalem and the West Bank in the 1967 war, territories the Palestinians want to be part of their future state. The Palestinians and most of the international community consider Israeli settlements to be illegal and an obstacle to peace.

The eastern ring road was conceived as a means of connecting the northern and southern West Bank. Critics of the settlements fear that if the road is completed, Israel will then proceed with settlement construction in an area east of Jerusalem known as E1.

The Palestinians have long feared that construction in E1 would split the West Bank in half, making a future state inviable. With the road completed, Israel could argue that the territory was still contiguous.

Development in E1 has been largely frozen under US pressure, even as Israeli

settlement construction in the West Bank has boomed under the Trump administration.

Betty Herschman, a spokeswoman for the Ir Amim activist organization, said that “we can only speculate” concerning the timing of the highway’s opening after years of dormancy, “but what we do know is that because of the relationship to E1, we should all be on high alert as to what this indicates.”

In a separate development earlier Thursday, an Israeli court sentenced a Palestinian man to 18 years in prison for stabbing a British student to death in Jerusalem.

The Jerusalem district court accepted a plea bargain in sentencing 60-year-old Jamil Tamimi. He killed 20-year-old British student Hannah Bladon on the Jerusalem light rail in April 2017, stabbing her multiple times before an off-duty policeman pulled the emergency brake and subdued him.

Tamimi’s defense team claimed he suffered from mental illness, and the attack was not ideologically or politically motivated.

Bladon was an exchange student at Hebrew University from the University of Birmingham.

Maurice Hirsch, her family’s representative, said he was disappointed her killer would not be serving a life sentence for his crime. But he added “no sentence would have been able to return Hannah.”





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France urges Israel to reconsider settler home approvals in West Bank
Israeli troops arrest dozens in West Bank

[Stranded Syrian refugees braced for 'killer' storm](#)

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Thu, 2019-01-10 (All day)

BEIRUT: Emergency relief operations are underway in Lebanon in a desperate bid to prevent thousands of Syrian refugees freezing to death as another icy storm heads their way.

Aid workers fear that a blizzard, forecast to sweep across the country, poses a serious threat to the lives of up to 70,000 refugees living in makeshift camps.

Gihan El-Kaissi, executive director of the Union of Relief and Development Associations (URDA), told Arab News: "The majority of Syrian refugee camps are in the coldest parts of Lebanon. Even if every refugee could shelter under 10 blankets, they would still freeze to death without fuel oil for heating."

Snow storms that battered Lebanon last week destroyed plastic tents, leaving 11,000 refugees with no shelter and many enduring temperatures as low as minus 10. In Miniyeh, in northern Lebanon, a 10-year-old girl died after being washed away in floods.

Around 850 refugee camps have been set up throughout Lebanon, housing an estimated 40,000 children.

El-Kaissi said: "We have emergency plans in place to distribute fuel oil, blankets and mattresses as a priority. We are also working hard to mend damaged tents and have begun sending out awnings to be placed over them." She added that many children had nothing to wear on their feet and hundreds of pairs of shoes were being dispatched to camps.

In the Lebanese border town of Aarsal, male refugees were reported to be working around the clock to clear snow off tents and erect wooden supports to prevent the flimsy structures from collapsing.

Abu Mohammed, a Syrian refugee from Qusayr, said most people who had fled from his town wished to return to Syria, but he said they were being prevented by the Syrian authorities.

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) representative in Lebanon, Mireille Girard, told Arab News that a lack of official refugee camps in Lebanon was adding to the crisis.

She said 20 percent of refugees in Lebanon were living in camps set up in areas vulnerable to flooding, while many others lived in part-built houses, basements and garages. Hundreds of families had been forced to move into makeshift camps because they could not afford to rent apartments, Girard said.

She added that UNHCR officials were in constant discussions with the Lebanese authorities over the plight of Syrian refugees. "They (the refugees) are not waiting for a plan to reconstruct Syria. They want to return to their country and their homes," she said.

The agency now has eight offices in Syria to help support families returning there.







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Struggling to survive, Syrian refugees in Lebanon fall deeper into debt
Syrian refugees remain skeptical about return