

Kurds' ambitions caught in power games

Author:

Wed, 2019-01-09 22:24

BEIRUT: They always anticipated US support would run out, but President Donald Trump's abrupt decision to rapidly pull US forces out of northeast Syria has nevertheless stunned the Kurds there, who for the past three years have been America's partner in fighting Daesh.

A withdrawal will leave Syrian Kurds exposed to Turkish threats of an invasion from one side and Syrian government troops on the other.

It stung even more because the Kurds in the Middle East have been abandoned before by the United States and other international allies on whose support they'd pinned their aspirations.

What happens next is uncertain because of confusion in the US plans. Initially, Trump declared the pullout of the 2,000 American troops would happen "now," but White House officials have since suggested it would not be immediate. Further muddling the policy, Trump's national security adviser John Bolton, on a visit Monday, tried to win assurances from Turkey that Ankara would not harm the Kurds but was apparently snubbed.

Over the past century, Kurds have gotten close to setting up their own state or autonomous regions on several occasions, only to have their dreams shattered after being abandoned by world powers. An old Kurdish proverb reflects a history of disappointments: "We have no friends but the mountains." Here's a look at that past:

Who are the Kurds?

The Kurds are an ethnic group numbering some 20 million people spread across four nations – 10 million in Turkey, 6 million in Iran, 3.5 million in Iraq, and a little over 2 million in Syria. They speak an Indo-European language, related to Iran's Farsi, and are overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim.

The 191,000-sq. km Kurdish area arcs through a mountainous zone from southeast Turkey to the Zagros mountains in northwest Iran. They're divided not only by borders but by tribal, political and factional splits that the regional powers have often used to manipulate them.

Struggle and betrayals

With the Ottoman Empire's collapse after World War I, the Kurds were promised an independent homeland in the 1920 Treaty of Sevres. But the treaty was never ratified, and "Kurdistan" was carved up. A Kurdish state was briefly established with support from the Soviet Union in Mahabad, northern Iran, in January 1947, but it collapsed 11 months later. Since then, there have been almost continuous Kurdish rebellions in Iran, Iraq and Turkey.

Over the following decades, two events have been burned in the Kurds'

memories as betrayals by Washington.

In 1972, the US helped arm the Iraqi Kurdish insurrection against Baghdad. It did so on behalf of Iran, then led by America's ally, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, who was hoping to pressure the Iraqi government in an ongoing border dispute. Three years later, the shah signed a border agreement with Baghdad and shut off the weapons pipeline. Then-Kurdish leader Mustafa Barzani wrote an impassioned letter to US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger pleading for support, but the American help ended. The Iraqi government crushed the Kurdish rebellion.

Iraq's Kurds rose up again, in the 1980s, with Iranian backing, during the Iran-Iraq war. Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein's army waged a brutal scorched-earth campaign, using poison gas and forcibly resettling up to 100,000 Kurds in the southern desert.

The second event came in 1991, after the US-led Gulf War that liberated Kuwait from Iraqi forces. Then-President George H. W. Bush called on Iraqis to rise up against Saddam. The Kurds in the north and Shiites in the south revolted, at one point controlling 14 out of Iraq's 18 provinces. Saddam responded with a brutal crackdown and while Bush had not explicitly promised support, Kurds and Shiites felt left in the lurch.

Still, a US-enforced no-fly zone over northern Iraq helped ensure a degree of Kurdish autonomy there. After Saddam's fall in 2003, the US helped ensure that Iraq's new constitution enshrined that autonomous zone. But Washington has drawn the line against Kurdish independence. In September 2017, a referendum in the self-rule region overwhelmingly backed independence.

The US opposed it and the Baghdad government took over the zone's border crossings and closed its airports for months, forcing the Kurds to back down.

In Syria, everything to lose?

Syria's Kurds have hoped for autonomy in the northeast corner of the country where their population is concentrated. The Damascus government has not allowed it, and Turkey is vehemently opposed to it. Ankara views the main Syrian Kurdish militia, which is linked to Kurdish insurgents in Turkey, as a terrorist group. During Syria's civil war, as Damascus was busy in the fight against rebels, the Kurds succeeded in setting up a degree of self-rule that had been unthinkable before.

The US needed a partner on the ground to fight the Daesh group after its takeover of the eastern and northern third of Syria, and found in the Kurds an effective, organized force. The US armed the Kurdish militia, along with some Syrian Arabs and Christian Assyrians, and backed them with US troops and airpower.

The Kurds had their own interest in allying with the Americans, hoping to give weight to their autonomy ambitions. It took more than a year of fighting, with thousands of Kurds killed, but Daesh was driven out of almost all the territory it once held.

Turkey sent troops into Syria in August 2016 to clear a border area from Daesh militants and limit Kurdish expansion. In early 2018 it overran the northwestern enclave of Afrin to oust the Kurdish militia, leading to the displacement of tens of thousands of Kurds while the US stood by and watched.

Now if the Americans leave, they stand to lose everything.

“So far it’s unclear what will happen, but the Syrian Kurds feel betrayed,” said Wladimir van Wilgenburg, an Iraq-based Kurdish affairs analyst. “They say they were the ones who sacrificed their sons and daughters in the fight against” Daesh.

The situation raises shades of Kissinger in the eyes of some Kurds, he said. “President Trump in the past praised Kurds as great fighters and great people,” said van Wilgenburg.

“Now he risks putting them in grave danger by pulling out ... Turkey could attack them at any time.”



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Syria](#)

[Beirut](#)

[syrian kurds](#)

[Kurds](#)

[Daesh](#)

[US](#)

Syrian Kurds boost fight against Daesh in east after setback Turkey angrily rejects French offer to mediate with Syrian Kurds

Kurds capture 8 extremists including US teenager

Author:

Associated Press

ID:

1547051067300777900

Wed, 2019-01-09 (All day)

BEIRUT: A Syrian Kurdish militia says its fighters have captured eight foreign fighters with the Daesh group in eastern Syria, including an American teenager.

The force known as the People's Protection Units, or YPG, says the militants were captured in a special operation in the eastern province of Deir Ezzor, where Daesh extremists are still holding on to pockets of territory.

Among the eight are an American, a German, a Russian, a national from the Ukraine as well as Tajik and Uzbek nationals.

In a statement, the YPG identified the 16-year-old American teenager as Soulay Noah Su. No other details were immediately provided.

On Sunday, the Kurdish group announced the capture of five fighters, including two US citizens, one of whom has been identified as a former school teacher from Houston.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Kurds](#)

[US](#)

[teenager](#)

[‘Hope for further Yemen negotiations’ UN envoy tells Security Council](#)

Wed, 2019-01-09 18:13

LONDON: UN Yemen envoy Martin Griffiths told the Security Council on Wednesday that both sides have largely stuck to the Hodeidah ceasefire and there has been a significant decrease in hostilities.

The briefing was the first since the agreement struck during talks in Sweden last month swung into effect.

The internationally recognized Yemeni government and the Arab coalition providing it military support against enemy Houthi militants, have accused the Iran-backed group of dozens of violations of the ceasefire.

And while Griffiths acknowledged there had been some problems but he was still "hopeful" that further negotiations will be held "in the near future."

Talks are ongoing on a redeployment of forces from Hodeidah, providing security in the city and opening up access routes to allow humanitarian convoys to reach millions in dire need of food aid, he added.

A meeting will be held in Amman next week to follow up on an agreed prisoner swap that could pave the way to an airlift of "many, many thousands" of detainees from both sides.

"It is my view and it is shared by the leadership of both parties, but also others, that substantial progress, particularly on Hodeida of course, is something that we would like to see before we reconvene the next consultations," said Griffiths.

Griffiths briefed the Security Council after a round of shuttle diplomacy in the region including talks with militia leaders in Sanaa and President Abedrabbo Mansour Hadi in Riyadh on shoring up the ceasefire deal.

The United Nations is working to schedule a new round of talks, possibly in Kuwait, to build on the Stockholm agreement and advance toward a final deal to end the conflict.

The war between the Houthis and troops loyal to the government started when the Houthis seized the capital Sanaa in 2014.

The conflict has unleashed the world's worst humanitarian crisis, according to the UN, which says 80 percent of the population are in need of aid.

Nearly 10 million people are just one step away from famine, UN aid chief Mark Lowcock told the council.

"Millions of Yemenis are hungrier, sicker and more vulnerable than a year ago," said Lowcock, who stressed that while the political process was important "it does not in itself feed a single starving child."

The Security Council is considering the creation of a new observer mission to Yemen to monitor the ceasefire in Hodeida, oversee the pullback of forces and allow the delivery of humanitarian aid.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has proposed the deployment of up to 75 observers to Yemen for an initial period of six months to shore up the ceasefire while talks on a broader peace deal are held.

An advance team of about 16 international monitors, led by Dutch general Patrick Cammaert, has been deployed in Yemen, under a resolution adopted last month that endorsed the Stockholm agreement.

**With AFP*



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Yemen](#)

[Martin Griffiths](#)

[UN Security Council](#)

15 Houthis killed attempting to launch missile at Saudi Arabia from Yemen
UN envoy holds talks with Yemen president amid preparations to boost Hodeidah monitoring team

[UN envoy holds talks with Yemen president amid preparations to boost Hodeidah monitoring team](#)

Author:

Wed, 2019-01-09 00:10

JEDDAH: The United Nations envoy for Yemen held talks Tuesday with the country's president, as he sought to shore up a truce in key port Hodeidah.

Martin Griffiths met with the Yemeni authorities after seeing Houthi militant leaders in Sanaa on a tour aimed at ensuring both sides make good on a ceasefire deal agreed in Sweden last month.

Yemen's internationally recognized leader Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi expressed his "support for the efforts and work" of Griffiths at the talks in the Saudi capital, the Saba news agency reported.

The head of the president's office Abdullah al-Alimi wrote on Twitter that Hadi remained committed to the Sweden accord and stood ready to open up "all humanitarian access."

Griffiths is set to brief the UN Security Council Wednesday on the ceasefire deal, AFP reported.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has asked the Security Council to approve the deployment of up to 75 observers to Hodeidah for six months to monitor the ceasefire, Reuters reported.

The council will need to take action on Guterres' request by about Jan. 20, when a 30-day authorization for an advance monitoring team led by retired Dutch General Patrick Cammaert expires.

It was not immediately clear how many monitors were currently on the ground with Cammaert.

The United Nations has said the monitors are not uniformed or armed.

In his Dec. 31 proposal to the council, seen by Reuters, Guterres described the proposed 75-strong team as "a nimble presence" to monitor compliance of the deal and establish and assess facts and conditions on the ground.

The UN has said the truce has largely held in the city since the agreement came into force on Dec. 18.

The pro-Hadi Arab coalition, which includes Saudi Arabia, has accused the Houthis of dozens of violations of the truce.

Griffiths is looking to push on with steps agreed in Sweden, including the redeployment of rival forces from Hodeidah.

He is also hoping to bring the sides together again for a new round of peace talks later this month.

The war in Yemen was sparked when the Houthis seized the capital Sanaa in 2014.

The conflict has unleashed the world's worst humanitarian crisis, according to the UN, which says 14 million Yemenis are on the brink of famine.

**With AFP and Reuters*



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Yemen](#)

[Hodeidah](#)

[Martin Griffiths](#)

[Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi](#)

UN envoy arrives in Yemen to push Hodeidah truce
Yemen government following up reports of aid looting

[Children tortured in Iraq Kurdistan for 'Daesh links'](#)

Author:

Tue, 2019-01-08 22:25

BAGHDAD: Security forces in Iraqi Kurdistan have been “torturing children” to force them to confess to having links with Daesh, Human Rights Watch said on Tuesday.

The rights group said it interviewed 23 boys aged between 14 and 17 who were charged with, or convicted of, belonging to Daesh, and that 16 of them said

they had been “tortured” during questioning.

Some boys said members of the Kurdish security forces known as Asayesh beat them with plastic pipes, electric cables or rods while others said they were subjected to electric shocks or a painful stress position dubbed the “scorpion,” the watchdog said.

“Several boys said the torture continued over consecutive days, and only ended when they confessed” to involvement with Daesh, it said.

“Most said they had no access to a lawyer and they were not allowed to read the confessions Asayesh wrote and forced them to sign,” it added. It said the punishment inflicted by security forces of the Kurdistan Regional Government in northern Iraq took place in 2017 and 2018 despite promises by authorities to investigate the torture claims.

“Nearly two years after the Kurdistan Regional Government promised to investigate the torture of child detainees, it is still occurring with alarming frequency,” said Jo Becker, children’s rights advocacy director at HRW.

The watchdog said its staff interviewed the boys during a November visit to a detention center in Irbil, where 63 children are being held.

A senior Kurdish official dismissed the allegations.

Dindar Zebari, international affairs adviser to the Kurdish government, told AFP that “HRW never visited” the detention center.

According to HRW, most of the boys said their interrogators told them what they should confess and many said they gave false testimony only to stop the torture.

“My confession says that I joined Daesh for 16 days, but actually I didn’t join at all,” a 16-year-old child told HRW.

A 14-year-old said: “First they said I should say I was with Daesh, so I agreed. Then they told me I had to say I worked for Daesh for three months. I told them I was not part of Daesh, but they said, ‘No, you have to say it’.”

The boy said that after two hours of interrogation and torture he agreed to their demands.

“The Kurdistan authorities should immediately end all torture of child detainees and investigate those responsible,” HRW said.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Baghdad](#)

[Iraq](#)

[Kurdistan](#)

[Iraqi Kurdistan](#)

[Daesh](#)

In Kurdish Iraq, women strive to end genital mutilation
Iraq extends air blockade of Kurdistan by 3 months