

Pentagon cautions Turkey over new operation against Syria Kurds

Author:

Thu, 2018-12-13 21:51

Any unilateral military action in northern Syria would be “unacceptable,” the Pentagon said Wednesday after Turkey announced it would launch an operation against a US-backed Kurdish militia.

The warning came after President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said Turkey would soon begin a mission targeting the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG), which Ankara considers a “terrorist” group.

“We will start an operation to free the east of the Euphrates from the separatist terrorist organization in the next few days,” Erdogan said during a speech in Ankara, referring to territory held by the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG).

American forces have worked closely with the YPG under the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) alliance, which has played a key role in the war against the Daesh extremist group

The Pentagon has repeatedly warned that any fighting between the Turks and the SDF is a dangerous distraction from the core US mission in Syria of fighting Daesh.

Pentagon spokesman Commander Sean Robertson said any unilateral military action in northeast Syria would be a “grave concern,” as it could potentially jeopardize US troops working with the SDF in the region.

“We would find any such actions unacceptable,” he said in a statement.

Turkey says the YPG is a “terrorist offshoot” of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), which has waged an insurgency against the Turkish state since 1984.

PKK is blacklisted as a terror group by Ankara and its Western allies.

“The target is never American soldiers but terrorist organization members active in the region,” Erdogan told the audience at a defense industry summit.

Flashpoint

American forces are with the SDF east of the Euphrates as well as in the flashpoint city of Manbij, which is west of the river.

“We should not and cannot allow Daesh to breathe at this critical point or we will jeopardize the significant gains we have made alongside our coalition partners and risk allowing Daesh to resurge,” Robertson said.

The YPG also said a Turkish offensive would be to the benefit of Daesh.

“The (Turkish) threats coincide with the advance of our forces against the terrorists, this time with the entrance into the town of Hajjin,” YPG spokesman Nuri Mahmud said.

The SDF launched an offensive on September 10 to expel IS from the Hajjin pocket, on the eastern bank of the Euphrates River close to the Iraqi border.

“Any attack on the north of Syria will have a direct impact on the battle of Hajjin. The forces who are fighting (there) will return to defend their areas and their families,” Mahmud said.

Washington’s relationship with the YPG, seen as a key ally, is one of the main sources of tensions between the United States and NATO member Turkey.

Ankara has repeatedly lambasted Washington for providing military support to the Kurdish militia.

Erdogan has previously threatened to attack areas held by the YPG. In a bid to avoid any clash, the NATO allies agreed a “roadmap” for Manbij in June.

Erdogan’s comments came a day after the Pentagon announced the setting up of US observation posts on the northeast Syria border region intended to prevent altercations between the Turkish army and the YPG despite calls from Ankara not to go ahead with the move.

Erdogan claimed Turkey was not being protected from terrorists but “terrorists were being protected” from possible action by Turkey.

Elizabeth Teoman, analyst at the Institute for the Study of War (ISW), said Erdogan may be threatening the attacks “to compel a change in US policy regarding the US observation posts along the Syrian-Turkish border.”

She added that “Turkey may attempt to target YPG rear areas without a definitive US presence in the form of an observation posts.”

Turkey has previously launched two operations in northern Syria. The first offensive began in August 2016 with Turkish forces supporting Syrian opposition fighters against IS and was completed by March 2017.

Then in January 2018, Turkish military forces backed Syrian rebels to clear the YPG from its northwestern enclave of Afrin.

In March, the operation was completed with the capture of Afrin city.



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Erdogan threatens to launch military operation against Syria Kurd militia 'within days' Washington says observation posts in place on Syria-Turkey border

[2 babies die at camp for displaced in Jordan](#)

Author:

Thu, 2018-12-13 21:37

AMMAN: Two babies have died of illness in the past week at a camp for displaced people on the Syrian border with Jordan, the UN children's agency UNICEF said Thursday.

The deaths prompted UNICEF to reiterate calls for humanitarian access for the thousands of people at Rukban camp, which lies in an inhospitable stretch of desert.

"Another sad week for children and families in Rukban. Two sick babies under

six months old died in Rukban,” said Geert Cappelaere, UNICEF regional director for the Middle East and North Africa.

“Freezing temperatures and lack of supplies including of basic commodities, threaten the lives of nearly 45,000 people – among them many children, leaving them at the risk of disease and death,” he said in a statement.

Last month the UN and Syrian Arab Red Crescent announced the first delivery of humanitarian aid at Rukban in 10 months.

Civilians trapped at the camp face the risk of starvation amid a deteriorating humanitarian situation after Jordan sealed its border following a Daesh attack on its soldiers.

Soon afterwards, the army declared Jordan’s desert regions that stretch northeast to Syria and east to Iraq “closed military zones.”

Amman believes the responsibility of the camp lies with Damascus since it is inside Syrian territory.

Syria has been embroiled in a civil war that killed more than 360,000 people and displaced millions since it started with the brutal repression of anti-government protests in 2011.



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US-backed Syrian forces smash Daesh defenses in east Syrian state seizes opponents’ property, rights activists say

Jordan braces for more anti-austerity protests

Author:

Reuters

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Thu, 2018-12-13 16:34

AMMAN: Jordanian authorities deployed hundreds of riot police in the capital and warned activists to stay within the law on Thursday ahead of another protest against the government's tough austerity measures backed by the International Monetary Fund.

Large demonstrations in the summer managed to bring down the previous government over an unpopular IMF-backed tax bill.

Protesters have held sporadic protests over the past two weeks and a judicial source said authorities had detained several people for chanting slogans critical of King Abdullah as well as the government.

"(For) anyone who breaches the law there will be punishment," government spokeswoman Jumana Ghunaimat told reporters on Thursday.

"There are those who want to sow destruction... We must safeguard Jordan's stability and security," she said, adding that the government wanted dialogue.

The latest protests erupted after a largely pliant parliament last month approved a tax bill widely seen as making few changes to the unpopular law scrapped after the summer demonstrations.

Many Jordanians say the government, which faces a record public debt of around \$40 billion and desperately needs to raise revenue, is eroding the disposable incomes of poorer and middle class Jordanians while letting the wealthy off the hook.

The protesters complain that Prime Minister Omar Razzaz, appointed by King Abdullah after the summer protests, has not delivered on promises to jail corrupt officials and businessmen.

They also say he has sought public support for tough economic measures while failing to curb lavish public expenditure and improve public services, and that he should resign.

Jordan suffers from high unemployment, with regional conflicts weighing on business confidence. Poor economic growth has reduced tax revenues, forcing Jordan to borrow heavily abroad and also to resort to more domestic financing.



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Jordan to rethink controversial cybercrimes law Likes' are no substitute for action, Jordan's queen tells online influencers

[Netanyahu's adviser accused of sexual assault resigns](#)

Author:

Associated Press

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Wed, 2018-12-12 (All day)

JERUSALEM: An adviser to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has tendered his resignation following allegations of sexual assault. David Keyes, Netanyahu's spokesman with the foreign press, formally resigned

on Wednesday, nearly three months after taking a leave of absence after he was accused of sexual assault by at least a dozen women.

Keyes issued a statement saying he had “decided to pursue new opportunities in the private sector.”

Keyes has denied the assault accusations, saying all were “deeply misleading and many of them are categorically false.”

Israel’s Civil Service Commission closed an investigation into the allegations last month without taking any disciplinary action against Keyes. Netanyahu thanked Keyes in a statement “for his great contribution to Israel’s information effort.”



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[Tunisia’s ‘truth commission’ winds up four-year mission](#)

Author:

Wed, 2018-12-12 22:52

TUNIS: After four years working “under fire” and interviewing almost 50,000

witnesses, Tunisia's commission tasked with serving justice to victims of half a century of dictatorship is poised to submit its recommendations.

Set up in 2014 following the 2011 revolution and in the wake of dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's fall, the Truth and Dignity Institute has a mission to "reveal the truth about the human rights violations" in Tunisia between 1955 and 2013.

In its final act, the commission will submit its recommendations to Tunisia's leadership.

The first version is to be delivered at a public event on Friday and Saturday, before the full report is submitted by Dec. 31.

The government, with the assistance of a parliamentary follow-up committee, will have one year to draw up an action plan based on the recommendations.

The commission's task was to collect and disseminate testimonies, send some of those suspected of rape, murder, torture or corruption to specialised courts, and recommend measures to prevent any recurrence.

Operating in the only Arab Spring country which has kept to a democratic path since the 2011 revolt, its mandate has also been to seek national reconciliation through a revival of the North African state's collective memory.

The commission, whose mandate was extended in the spring until the end of 2018, has been studying more than 60,000 complaints and has this year sent dozens of cases to the courts.

Over the past four years, the panel has heard harrowing testimony from victims of torture in jail, some of which has been aired to large television audiences.

"From the very start we've worked under fire and come up against difficulties, due to the absence of political will," commission official Khaled Krichi told AFP.

He said demands for the handover of judicial cases involving corruption had been rejected, as well as for archive materials from the Interior Ministry on prisoners who had suffered torture.

A contested amnesty law passed in 2017 cleared some officials suspected of administrative corruption.

The commission also faced political resistance with the return of former regime leaders to power, internal disputes as well as the lack of cooperation by state institutions.

Thirteen specialized courts have been set up and started work at the end of May on dozens of cases submitted by the commission.

Twenty trials are underway, mostly of victims of the 2011 revolution and of

radical and leftist opposition figures tortured under the rule of Ben Ali or his predecessor Habib Bourguiba.

Krichi said settlements have been reached in 10 cases of financial corruption involving former regime figures, including that of Slim Chiboub, a son-in-law of Ben Ali, who has agreed to pay back 307 million dinars (\$113 million).

The state, however, faced with accusations of torture and sexual violence, has rejected 1,000 demands for “reconciliation” with the victims. A row has also broken out over compensation cases, with members of Parliament claiming the costs would bankrupt the state and that many claims were designed to benefit supporters of extremist movement Ennahdha.

At the end of November, the commission drew up criteria for compensation that exclude those with post-2011 government or parliamentary posts.

Around 25,000 people are eligible to compensation from the Al-Karama (Dignity) Fund established in 2014, according to Krichi.

It is being financed by donations, a percentage of the funds recovered through settlements and a one-time government grant of 10 million dinars (\$3.7 million).



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