

US-backed Syrian Kurdish forces detain 71 militants in raid

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BEIRUT: Syria's Kurdish-led forces arrested 71 suspected militants, including a religious leader and a militant recruiter, in an ongoing security sweep at a sprawling camp that houses families and supporters of Daesh, a spokesman said Wednesday.

The campaign, which started Sunday, is assisted by the US-led coalition and aimed at curbing the escalating violence and killings inside Al-Hol camp. The Kurdish-led forces have put the number of killings there since the start of 2021 at nearly 50 but US officials say it's more than 60.

Many fear the camp, which initially housed refugees and is now home to 62,000 people from more than 50 countries, is becoming a breeding ground for the next generation of Daesh militants. Kurdish and US officials have called for countries to repatriate their citizens languishing in the camp.

Ali Al-Hassan, spokesman for the Kurdish-led internal security forces, said the sweep is still ongoing. Those arrested so far include a Daesh religious leader inside the camp, a recruiter, a communications expert and a security officer. All of them are Iraqi, aged between 18 and 62. He said more details on the nationalities of those arrested would be made public later, not ruling out that they include foreign nationals.

"The (Islamic State) group is trying to reorganize through active cells in the camp," Al-Hassan said in a WhatsApp message.

The religious leader, a native of Iraq's Anbar province, had joined militants long before IS was formed in 2014 and later became a judge with a self-styled Daesh tribunal. He continued his work with Daesh after hiding among residents of the camp, the Kurdish-led forces said. Al-Hassan said he was issuing religious edicts on who is to be killed inside the camp.

Al-Hol's residents include wives and children of Daesh members, most of them held there since 2019 as the final coalition-led push against the militant group unfolded. At the time, family members and Daesh supporters holed up in areas once controlled by the group fled or were evacuated to Al-Hol and other camps.

The Syrian Kurdish-led forces and the US-led coalition announced victory against Daesh in March 2019, after the militants lost all their territorial holdings. Thousands escaped into the desert while others were detained and held in detention facilities.

About 5,000 troops took part in Al-Hol sweep, which also uncovered an underground tunnel under construction.

More than 80% of the camp's residents are women and children, two-thirds of them under the age of 12. The majority are Syrian and Iraqi but about 10,000 are from 57 other countries. Conditions in the squalid camp have been described as dire, with sparse basic services and poor health care.

Malnutrition is high among children.



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Yemen's government: Houthis are working with Al-Qaeda and Daesh
Kurds say 53 Daesh members arrested in Syria's Al-Hol camp

[Maritime border dispute emerges between Lebanon, Syria](#)

Author:

Wed, 2021-03-31 22:23

BEIRUT: The Syrian government signed a 4-year contract with a Russian company for oil and gas exploration in the Mediterranean Sea that could spark a new border crisis between Lebanon and Syria.

The two blocks to be explored under the new contract overlap with Lebanese

maritime areas for energy exploration along the country's northern border.

According to this demarcation, the Syrian side grabbed a Lebanese area of 750 square kilometers from Block No. 1 alone, where the Russian exploration process will begin.

Lebanon had previously demarcated its maritime borders in 2011, and in 2014 launched a round of primary licenses and invited bids for Block No. 1 in the north. But Syria did not recognize the Lebanese demarcation.

For years, Lebanon was busy demarcating its southern maritime and land borders with Israel. Last November, Israel accused Lebanon of changing its position seven times regarding the demarcation of the maritime borders, which led to indirect negotiations that took place under US and UN supervision.

The two countries differed over a maritime area of about 860 square kilometers, known as Block No. 9, based on a map sent in 2011 to the UN. But it was later found that the map was based on wrong approximations. In the most-recent negotiations, Lebanon demanded an additional area of 1,430 square kilometers, including part of the Karish field.

During negotiations with Israel, Lebanese President Michel Aoun told his delegation to "adhere to and defend the internationally recognized Lebanese rights."

However, the concern for the southern borders with Israel has not been shared for the northern borders, despite the Russian-Syrian agreement getting signed March 1.

"Lebanon's demarcation of its borders came by decree, which is an internal legislation issued under Lebanese national laws, and it has no mandatory character," Bashar Jaafari, Syrian permanent representative to the UN, said in his 2014 objection to the Lebanese demarcation.

Marc Ayoub, an expert on energy affairs in Lebanon and the Middle East, told Arab News that Lebanon must inform Syria of its objection by the available means.

"It could be through the Syrian ambassador to Lebanon or a visit by the Lebanese foreign minister to Syria," he said. "If Syria refuses to acknowledge this objection, Lebanon must resort to the UN to object to any exploration process that will take place. It can request a halt to exploration if Lebanon presents documents proving its ownership of these areas."

An apparent silence from Lebanese officials regarding the maritime border issue was met with political backlash from those who oppose the ruling authority in Lebanon.

MP Rola Tabsh, from the Future Movement bloc, said: "Where do the official Lebanese authorities stand on this issue? What is this suspicious coma? We waited for the violation from the south, from the enemy, but it came from the north, from a brotherly country."

Richard Kouyoumjian, former minister and serving member of the Lebanese Forces parliamentary bloc, said: "The government and the relevant ministries are required to have a sovereign position and clear clarification."

He called for the "resumption of demarcation negotiations in the south, an end to Syrian complicity and plundering of our money and oil wealth."

Druze leader Walid Jumblatt said Lebanon's Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri worked for 10 years to define the country's southern border and was surprised by "the death of the demarcation" of the maritime borders with Israel.



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Lebanon army chief: No compromise on sovereignty in maritime border negotiations with Israel
Off-duty soldier shoots two men dead in southern Lebanon outside pub

[**Palestinian elections will lead to**](#)

national unity: Senior politician

Wed, 2021-03-31 21:02

AMMAN: Upcoming elections will help bring Palestinians back together and restore national unity, one of Palestine's most senior politicians claimed on Wednesday.

Jibril Rajoub, secretary of the Fatah movement, told Arab News he was confident that the May 22 legislative and July 31 presidential elections would heal the rift between Fatah and Hamas. "Elections will lead to an end of this division," he said.

On Fatah's strategy to win at the polls, the 67-year-old political figure noted that a successful list must take into consideration geography and the struggle profile of those standing for office, while it was also important to have candidates covering all Palestinian communities.

"People are not going to ask what you want to do in the future, but they want to know what sacrifices you made in the past," Rajoub added.

Four small factions, including an independent group headed by businessman Munib Al-Masri, have announced they will be part of the Fatah list headed by the party's deputy head, Mahmoud Alloul.

But despite the unity talks, Rajoub's own movement was facing major divisions after supporters of the imprisoned leader Marwan Barghouti agreed to join a list fronted by Nasser Al-Qudwa, nephew of the late Yasser Arafat, with Barghouti's attorney wife, Fadwa, being No. 2 on the Palestinian Democratic Forum. Former minister Bassem Khoury is also on the list.

Barghouti's support for the list of Al-Qudwa means that the undeclared conflict between him and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas could cause a major split during the presidential elections, which Barghouti has vowed to contest from the Israeli prison where he is serving multiple life sentences.

A senior Fatah source told Arab News that the recent developments would permanently scar the leading Palestinian national movement, especially if Barghouti joined the fray for the presidency.

Renegade Fatah leader Mohammed Dahlan's supporters have also announced a list headed by Gazan Samir Masharawi with Jerusalemite Sari Nusseibeh as their No. 2 candidate.

Former Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad will head the Together We Can list that includes Makram Abbas, Jaber Wishah, and Anwar Zakaria. Two left-wing parties – the People's Party and Fida – have agreed to run on a joint list.

More than 30 lists have been announced although it is unclear if they will all be certified. The deadline for submissions was midnight on Wednesday although lists could be withdrawn later. Pollsters are predicting that many

votes will be wasted.

Hamas has announced a list of its top leaders headed by Khalil Al-Haieh. The Fatah source said that while its opponents were disciplined and would get a strong showing, many secular nationalist votes would be wasted because most lists would not pass the 1.5 percent threshold, which required about 25,000 votes.

At least 2 million Palestinians in the West Bank (including East Jerusalem) and the Gaza Strip are registered to vote, with 1 million of them voting for the first time.



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Left-wing Palestinian factions fail to agree on unified list for May 22 vote
Palestinian delegations plan to meet in Cairo to discuss elections

EU to sanction Iran militia, police, three entities over 2019 protests: Diplomats

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BRUSSELS/PARIS: The European Union will target eight Iranian militia and police commanders and three state entities with sanctions next week over a deadly crackdown in November 2019 by Iranian authorities, three diplomats said on Wednesday.

The travel bans and asset freezes will be the first time the EU has imposed sanctions on Iran for human rights abuses since 2013 and are set to be put in place some time next week after the Easter holidays in Europe, the diplomats said.

The individuals to be targeted include members of Iran's hard-line Basij militia, who are under the command of the Revolutionary Guards, the most powerful and heavily armed security force in the Islamic Republic.

Reuters reported on Tuesday that the EU was planning the sanctions. The bloc declined to comment on Tuesday and Wednesday.

Iran has repeatedly rejected accusations by the West of human rights abuses. The Iranian Embassy in Brussels was not immediately available for comment, nor were other Iranian officials.

About 1,500 people were killed during less than two weeks of unrest that started on Nov. 15, 2019, according to a toll provided to Reuters by three Iranian interior ministry officials at the time. The United Nations said the total was at least 304.

Iran has called the toll given by sources "fake news."

On March 9, UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran, Javid Rehman, presented a report saying Tehran used lethal force during the protests and chided it for failing to conduct a proper investigation or for failing to hold anyone accountable.

Asked why the bloc had taken so long to process its sanctions response, one EU diplomat involved in the preparations cited the need for strong evidence against those hit with the punitive measures.

The bloc has also shied away from angering Iran in the hope of safeguarding a nuclear accord Tehran signed with world powers in 2015.

The three diplomats said the sanctions were not linked to efforts to revive the nuclear deal, which the United States pulled out of but now seeks to re-join. That deal made it harder for Iran to amass the fissile material needed for a nuclear bomb – a goal it has long denied – in return for sanctions relief.

After days of protests across Iran in November 2019, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei issued an order to crackdown on protesters, Reuters reported in December 2019. That order, confirmed by three sources close to the supreme

leader's inner circle and a fourth official, set in motion the bloodiest crackdown on protesters since the Islamic Revolution in 1979. In a statement following publication of the Reuters article, a spokesman for Iran's Supreme National Security Council described the death toll figure as "fake news," according to semi-official Tasnim news agency. The United Nations has warned about a deterioration of human rights in Iran. Its March 9 report documented Iran's high death penalty rate, executions of juveniles, the use of torture to coerce confessions and the lawful marriage of girls as young as 10 years old.



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sharp rise in infections

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ANKARA – Turkey is re-introducing weekend lockdowns in most provinces and will impose restrictions over the Muslim holy month of Ramadan following a sharp increase in COVID-19 cases.

Infections in Turkey have soared less than a month after authorities divided the 81 provinces into four color-coded categories and relaxed restrictions in some provinces under a “controlled normalization” effort.

The number of infections hit a record on Tuesday, with the Health Ministry confirming 37,303 new cases in the past 24 hours. The country of nearly 84 million also reported 155 deaths on Tuesday, up from around 65 at the start of the month.

In a televised address following a Cabinet meeting late Monday, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said 58 out of Turkey’s 81 provinces, including Istanbul and Ankara, were now designated as “red” or “very high-risk” areas and would be subjected to lockdowns on both Saturdays and Sundays.

Nighttime curfews that are in place across the country would continue, he said.

Only 17 provinces were in the “red” category on March 2, when schools partially resumed face-to-face education, cafes and restaurants were allowed to operate at half-capacity and weekend curfews were eased in several cities. “The increase in the number of cases and patients as well as the increase in the number of deaths, is forcing us to review the existing measures,” Erdogan said in an address to the nation. “The number of our provinces which are in the red category, which constitutes the very high-risk category, has reached 58 – representing 80% of the population.”

“We will have to make some sacrifices during the month of Ramadan,” he said, adding that restaurants and cafes would be allowed to serve takeout food only during the holy month, which starts on April 13 in Turkey.

Mass gatherings for Ramadan meals held before sunrise and after sunset would be barred, he also announced.

The Turkish Medical Association meanwhile, blamed the increase in infections on inadequate contact-tracing, the government’s reluctance to impose measures in a timely manner out of economic concerns as well as the premature relaxing of the restrictions.

“We, as health care professionals and society, are paying for these wrong policies,” the group said on Twitter.

Erdogan has come under intense criticism for holding his ruling party’s congresses inside packed sport complexes across the country, despite a new surge of COVID-19 cases. He has been accused of double standards for disregarding the government’s own social distancing rules. In one such event, Erdogan boasted about the size of the crowds.

Critics say the political rallies have likely contributed to the surge.

Health Minister Fahrettin Koca told reporters Tuesday that he saw no benefit

in “keeping the issue on the agenda.”

Variants of the initial coronavirus now account for around 75% of the cases in Turkey, he said.

The minister also said Turkey has received 2.8 million doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine and is set to receive 1.7 million more within the next 10 days.

Turkey rolled out its inoculation program in January with the vaccine developed by China’s Sinovac company. More than 15 million shots have been administered so far. Around 6.7 million people have received two doses. The total number of infections in the country since the start of the outbreak last year stands at more than 3.2 million. The COVID-19 death toll has reached more than 31,000.



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Turkey’s daily COVID-19 cases exceed 30,000 for first time this yearDoctors say Turkish COVID-19 outbreak worse than reported as hospitalizations swell