

Airstrikes again hit Syria's rebel area, displace thousands

Author:

AP

ID:

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BEIRUT: Suspected Russian airstrikes pounded villages on the edge of the last rebel enclave in northwestern Syria, sending thousands of civilians fleeing, activists reported Tuesday – scenes unseen in the area since a cease-fire three months ago.

The violence at the edge of Idlib province is the most serious breach of the cease-fire in place since early March, when an agreement between Turkey and Russia halted the Syrian government's three-month air and ground campaign into rebel-held Idlib.

The Syria Response Coordination Group, a team of aid workers, said the military escalation displaced more than 5,800 civilians in the last 24 hours from areas in southern Idlib and western Hama countryside. Many of the displaced had only recently returned to their villages after the cease-fire, the group said.

On Monday, insurgents launched a limited offensive against government-held positions, briefly seizing a couple of villages. Government troops, backed by Russian air support, responded, repelling the insurgents but also widening their area of operations, targeting 10 villages, according to Mohamed Rasheed, a Syrian media activist documenting the offensive.

Rasheed reported airstrikes, believed to be carried out by Russia's air force, on a number of villages in southern Idlib. He said he documented 45 airstrikes since Monday.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights recorded 15 airstrikes on Tuesday, also saying they were believed to be Russian. The Observatory and other local networks said at least one civilian was killed in Kansafra village.

Meanwhile, Syrian state media said government forces repelled an offensive by the insurgents, and that a soldier was killed.

Russia is a main backer of Syrian President Bashar Assad, while Turkey backs opposition fighters trying to remove him from power. Russia and Turkey have become the main power brokers in the war-torn country.

Rasheed said the insurgent offensive was led by the Al-Qaeda-linked Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham, now the dominant group in the rebel-held northwest.



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North Syria clashes leaves dozens of fighters dead
First Russian airstrikes in three months hit northwest Syria

[Algeria urges cooperation against 'terror' after Qaeda chief killed](#)

Author:

Amal Belalloufi | AFP

ID:

1591721117610345500

Tue, 2020-06-09 16:19

ALGIERS: Algeria's president called Tuesday for international cooperation against "terrorism," in the country's first official response to French forces' killing of the leader of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). French Defense Minister Florence Parly announced Friday that Algerian

Abdelmalek Droukdel and several close associates had been killed by French forces in northwestern Mali, near the Algerian border.

Reacting Tuesday, Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune said his country believes "terrorism has an international dimension and the fight against (it) is the responsibility of the international community."

Droukdel's killing "is in this context," he said.

Despite keeping a low profile, Droukdel was one of the Maghreb region's most powerful Islamist warlords, commanding several groups under the banner of AQIM.

He was active for decades in Algeria, particularly during the country's 1992-2002 civil war between Islamists and the state, in which some 200,000 people died.

AQIM emerged from a group founded in the late 1990s by radical Algerian Islamists, who in 2007 pledged allegiance to Osama Bin Laden's global extremist network, Al-Qaeda.

It calls for an Islamic revolution in the Maghreb and the Sahel, a vast band of territory along the south of the Sahara desert, where it has claimed numerous deadly attacks.

The semi-desert region has been plagued by jihadists since militants seized control of Mali's north in 2012.

Despite a French-led intervention and a long-running UN peace mission there, the conflict has spread to Niger and Burkina Faso and killed thousands of soldiers and civilians.

AQIM is on a US list of "terrorist" organizations, and US Africa Command said it had provided intelligence that had helped track Droukdel down.

Analyst Akram Khariief, head of the regional defense and security website menadefense.net, said Droukdel's death could accentuate rivalries among jihadist factions.

"His disappearance is important because it marks the end of Algerian domination" of extremist groups in the Sahel, Khariief said.

Droukdel is likely to be replaced by a northern Algerian with "few ties and therefore little control" over groups in the south, he said.

That could weaken AQMI's influence over the Group to Support Islam and Muslims (GSIM), a Mali-based extremist alliance, and "rekindle tensions between militant factions, especially in Mali," Khariief said.

The Daesh group also has a franchise in the region, set up by former AQIM member Adnan Abou Walid Sahraoui.



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Algeria to ease coronavirus restrictions on Sunday
Twenty-six killed in central Mali attack

[Hong Kong residents rush for offshore accounts](#)

Author:

Tue, 2020-06-09 01:01

HONG KONG: Banks including HSBC, Standard Chartered and Citigroup have seen a spike in enquiries from Hong Kong residents about opening offshore accounts amid concerns stemming from China's decision to impose a national security law on the city, sources said.

HSBC and Standard Chartered have each seen a 25-30 percent jump in enquiries,

they said. All five have direct knowledge about the rise in interest but did not want to be named as they were not authorized to speak to the media.

The queries add to concerns about capital flight from the Asian financial hub, which has been roiled by pro-democracy protests in the past year, and underline worries about the liquidity of assets as the new law inflames Sino-US tensions.

President Donald Trump has said he will strip Hong Kong of its special status under US law if China moves ahead with the law that aims to curb sedition, secession, terrorism and foreign interference.

"What I'm worried about the most is I might not be able to freely exchange Hong Kong dollar anymore if the US decided to sanction Hong Kong," said 39-year-old May Chan, who recently asked HSBC about opening an offshore account.

The city's de facto central bank has sought to allay concerns, saying it has all the means necessary to defend the Hong Kong dollar's peg to the greenback.

None of the leading global retail banks with operations in the Chinese-ruled city have seen large outflow of deposits in the last two weeks, said two of the sources, noting it can take at least a month to open an offshore account.

But the rise in enquiries has been strong enough to slow banks' response times, the sources said, adding places including Singapore, Britain, Sydney and Taiwan, are popular destinations.

Chan was told by HSBC she would have to wait a month just to get information about opening an offshore account.

She has already changed 70 percent of her savings into foreign currencies including the US dollar and British pound.

"If things get messy here I might not even be able to transfer my money out in the worst-case scenario, so it's good to diversify risks."

While authorities insist the legislation will target only a small number of "troublemakers," critics say it could erode the high degree of autonomy of the former British colony.

Many Hong Kong residents are renewing their British National Overseas passport, after the proposed new law prompted Britain to offer a potential refuge to the almost 3 million eligible for it.

"Now is the second wave of opening offshore accounts; the first wave was after June last year during the protests," said one of the sources, referring to the sometimes violent unrest against a now-withdrawn bill that would have allowed people to be extradited to the mainland.

HSBC declined to comment on offshore account enquiries, but a spokeswoman said the bank "had not seen any signs of significant outflows."

A Standard Chartered spokeswoman said there had been enquiries about offshore accounts, but it had “not seen any noticeable capital outflows.”

A Citigroup spokesman said the bank had seen a pick up in local account openings as Hong Kong lifted coronavirus-related curbs, but it had not seen capital outflows or a rise in offshore account openings.



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[Countdown begins on UAE Mars mission aiming to bring Hope to the Arab world](#)

Tue, 2020-06-09 00:37

LONDON: In just 40 days, the UAE will become the first Arab country to send a mission to Mars, part of a wider regional effort to build knowledge and create opportunities, particularly for your people.

“This mission is not just about the UAE it’s about the region, it’s about the Arab issue,” Omran Sharaf, the mission’s project manager at the Mohammed Bin Rashid Space Center (MBRSC), said.

“The region is going through tough times and we do need good news and we need the youth in the region to really start looking inwards, building their own nations and putting differences aside to co-exist with people with different faiths and backgrounds and work together.”

The Hope Mars Mission will start its journey on July 14 and is expected to reach the planet by February, coinciding with the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the UAE.

The project has been planned, managed and implemented by an Emirati team

overseen and funded by the UAE Space Agency.

The MBRSC has developed the probe in cooperation with international partners, including the Universities of Colorado, Berkeley and Arizona.



The UAE's mission to Mars, the Hope Probe. (Courtesy of UAE Space Agency)

Speaking at a webinar on the mission on Monday, Sarah Al-Amiri, the UAE's Minister of State for Advanced Sciences, outlined why the project was so important to the Emirates.

"Today the UAE is an economy based on services, logistics, and oil and gas, and within the region it is considered a diversified economy, but if we project that down the line, the importance of knowledge-intensive sectors becomes more and more prominent for the country, as well as creating new knowledge-intensive organizations," she said.

Developing talent, creating opportunities for engineers, scientists, and researchers working in natural sciences are the next important endeavours for the country, the minister added.

"Mars provided us with the necessary challenge to rigorously develop talent in engineering, it gave us an appetite for risk and being able to circumvent the risk and push forward with the mission for development. It allows us to start integrating and creating new opportunities for scientists within the UAE and those that are studying the natural sciences," Al-Amiri said.

Since the project was launched in 2014, the team has designed, developed and assembled the spacecraft, and repeatedly tested it through the harsh conditions it is expected to encounter.



The Hope probe will study the Martian atmosphere to understand how it developed into its current state. (Courtesy of UAE Space Agency)

As the UAE does not have a launch pad, the spacecraft was shipped to Japan in April. It was moved three weeks ahead of schedule, due to the increasing travel restrictions being imposed to combat the spread of COVID-19.

"Nothing about this mission has been easy, since day one the timeframe has been challenging, the budget itself has been a bit challenging, there were very strict requirements when we came to the budget and it was limited and then the COVID-19 situation came into place on top of all the other challenges," Sharaf said.

He added that the details of the budget would be announced at a later stage.

"When it comes to these projects, the public understands the importance for the UAE," Sharaf said. "It's about addressing our national challenges and building capabilities. We live in a region with geographical challenges, when it comes to water, food and clean energy and everybody is quite excited about this mission because they understand the value it brings."

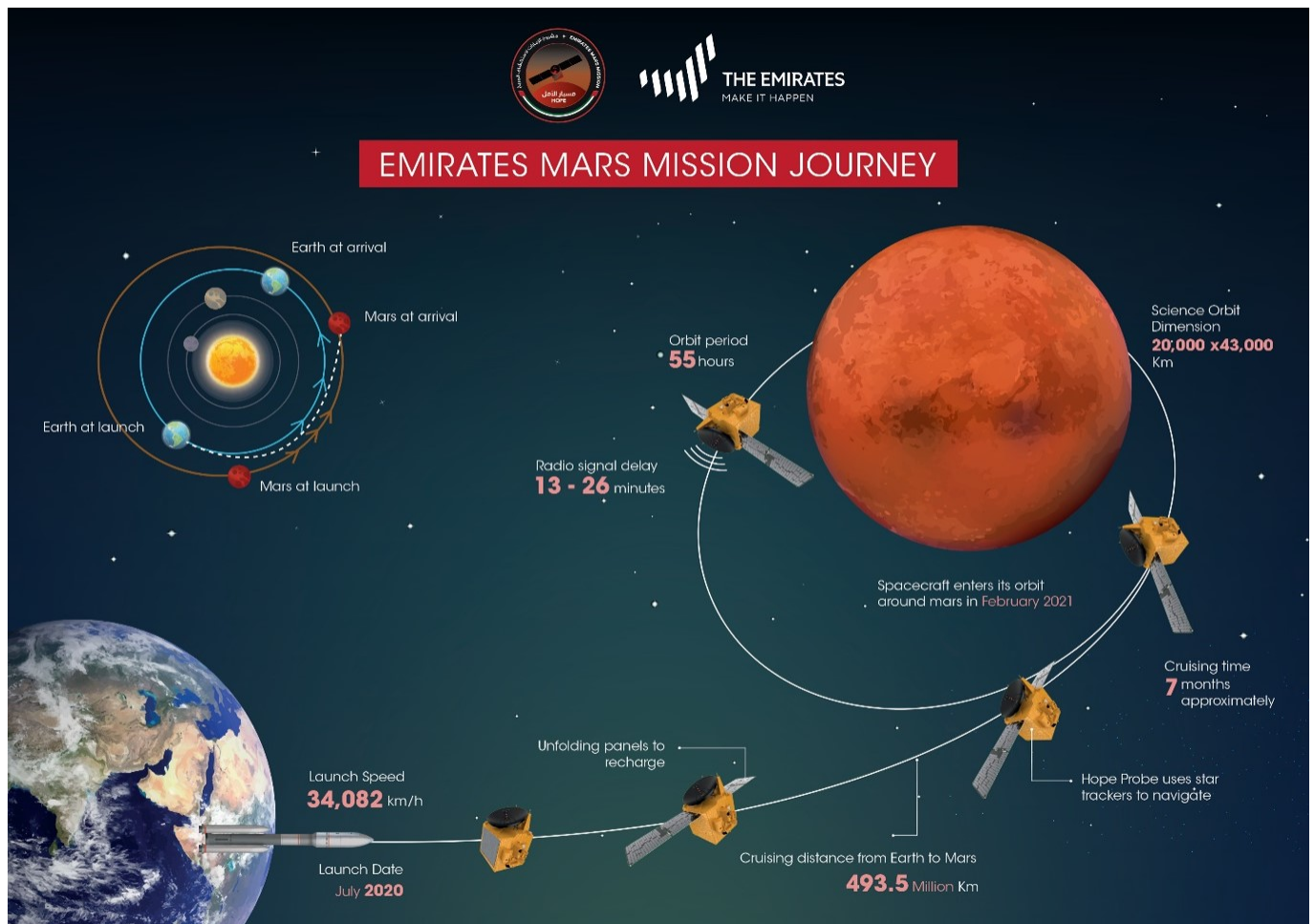
Al-Amiri said the data from the mission would be publicly available from two months after the spacecraft starts to orbit Mars between August and September next year.

Any scientist would be able to use the information and analyze the figures, she said.

"We are looking at and studying a planet that has indications that it was very similar to our own planet and that has undergone some form of change and

has gone into a point where it can't have one of the major building blocks of life, as we humans know it and as we have defined it.

"Understanding the reasons for the loss of hydrogen and oxygen, the building blocks of water from the atmosphere of Mars and understanding what role does Mars itself play."



The Hope probe will start its journey on July 14, 2020, and is scheduled to arrive to Mars by Feb. 2021, in celebration of the 50th anniversary of the union of the UAE.

The team would also be studying the weather on Mars throughout an entire year.

"We are the very first weather satellites of Mars," Al-Amiri said. "Prior to this we have been studying the weather on that planet and understanding better the climate of Mars by sporadically sampling various areas around the planet but not understanding the changes that happened throughout an entire day."

However, Sharaf said "the UAE has always had plans for the future and we are definitely not going to stop with Mars.

The UAE space program is more of a mean or a tool to build our knowledge economy, so reaching Mars is not the objective and whatever the next phase is will be focused more on transferring that knowledge to the different sectors that we have in the UAE."

Over the last 60 years, only six countries have sent missions to the Red Planet.

"Space travel has by and large been in the group of a small select number of superpowers, so this is a great opportunity for the UAE to go beyond that and

to go into something different,” Alistair Burt, Chairman of the Emirates Society, which hosted the webinar from London, said. The Emirates has already launched two satellites and sent an astronaut to the International Space Station and it has vowed to build a human settlement on Mars by 2117.



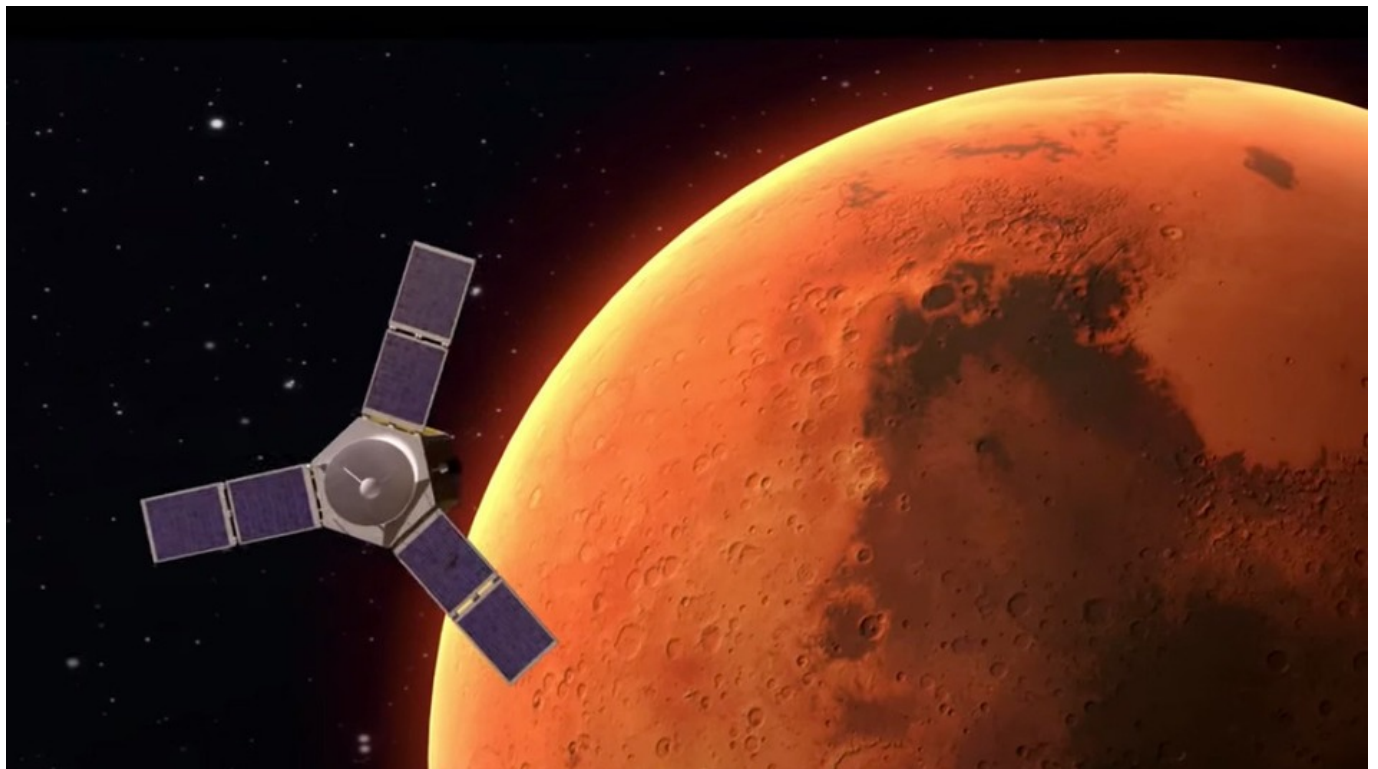
The UAE Astronaut Programme sent the first Emirati and Arab astronaut to join astronauts at the International Space Station (ISS) in September 2019. (Courtesy of MBRSC)

“Fifty percent of the missions that go to Mars have failed and this is one of the reasons the UAE chose Mars as a target because of the challenges around it and it’s a message that the challenges that we are facing in the region are not easier,” Sharaf said. “The best way to increase the likelihood of succeeding is by testing, testing and again testing, debugging and then fixing, and that’s why the philosophy of the mission is to continue testing till the day that we are going to launch and we won’t stop this.”

Sir Ian Blatchford, director of the UK’s Science Museum Group, described the UAE’s project as fascinating.

“What they are trying to achieve is remarkable for a country that is developing this infrastructure, but particularly I think they’re being very modest in describing the fact that they’re doing it in half the time,” he said.

Three other missions are heading for Mars over the next year, including NASA’s Mars Perseverance Rover, China’s Tianwen-1, which will launch next month, and ExoMars, a collaboration between the European Space Agency and the Russian space agency Roscosmos.



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UAE to launch first Arab probe to MarsDubai Crown Prince reviews preparations for Emirates Mars MissionThere is life on Mars, Musk saysOman desert used for Mars mission spacesuit tests

[Palestinians fear expulsion for Jerusalem high-tech hub](#)

Author:

Tue, 2020-06-09 00:43

JERUSALEM: Palestinian business owners in occupied East Jerusalem are worried they will be forced to shut up shop by Israeli authorities over plans to build a vast high-tech hub in their neighborhood.

The main thoroughfare through the Wadi El-Joz area, close to Jerusalem's Old City, is lined by mechanic workshops and usually hums with the sound of car horns.

But business owners are facing an uncertain future, with fears that more than 200 premises could be forced to close including garages and popular restaurants.

Fathi Al-Kurd, whose workshop opened in 1966, is worried that he and his two sons will not be offered another location.

"My son has four children, if he doesn't work for a week his children will starve," the 77-year-old said.

"We can't confront this government, but we ask that they at least provide us with an alternative," he added.

His son Muhannad Al-Kurd, a car electrician, said a municipal official visited them last summer and warned "eviction is coming."

East Jerusalem was occupied by Israel in 1967 and later annexed in a move never recognized by the international community.

The Jerusalem municipality aims to create a "new high-tech center" that would "reduce social gaps and economic inequality in East Jerusalem," according to city hall.

The \$600 million project has allocated 250,000 square meters (2.7 billion square feet) of land for the technology park. A further 50,000 square meters

has been earmarked for other businesses, and the same amount for hotels. Several Palestinian families own land in the industrial zone of East Jerusalem, including Naif Al-Kiswani who says they will inevitably be drawn into the Israeli project.

"I want to be compensated financially and given licenses to build shops, businesses and flats," he said, sitting inside his hardware store.

Al-Kiswani confirmed that talks about the redevelopment were underway with Israeli officials, with a meeting planned soon between Palestinian landowners and Jerusalem's deputy mayor.

"The project exists and our refusal won't change anything, but we must not lose everything," he said.

Concerns over the redevelopment come as businesses are gradually reopening, after measures to tackle the novel coronavirus brought the city to a standstill.

Muhannad Al-Kurd said his income fell by 70 percent in recent months and the new project could bring further financial losses.

"This eviction will make us start from scratch," he said.

Wearing a face mask at the garage where he works, Khalil Al-Hawash said the project aims to "empty the city of Palestinians."

Standing in front of a sign for the garage in both Arabic and Hebrew, he wanted to know whether there would be compensation or help to relocate elsewhere.

Economist Mohammed Qirsh says if the business owners are expelled without financial redress the impact would be "devastating."

Some of those affected by the redevelopment plans aim to form a committee to challenge the decision.

The president of the Palestinian Chamber of Commerce in Jerusalem, Kamal Obidat, described it as a plan to "liquidate" parts of the city and "Judaize" them.



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Israelis rally against West Bank annexation plan
Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa mosque compound reopens after more than two months