

Pentagon to cut troop levels to 2,500 in Iraq, Afghanistan

Author:

By ROBERT BURNS and LOLITA C. BALDOR | AP

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Tue, 2020-11-17 19:22

WASHINGTON: The US will slash troop levels in Afghanistan and Iraq to their lowest levels in nearly 20 years of war after President Donald Trump pledged to end conflicts abroad, the Pentagon announced Tuesday.

Acting Defense Secretary Chris Miller said around 2,000 troops would be pulled from Afghanistan by January 15, and 500 more would come back from Iraq, leaving 2,500 in each country.

The moves reflect Trump's policy "to bring the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq to a successful and responsible conclusion and to bring our brave service members home," Miller said.

Miller said the US had met its goals, set in 2001 after the Al Qaeda attacks on the United States, to defeat Islamist extremists and to help "local partners and allies to take the lead in the fight."

"With the blessings of providence in the coming year, we will finish this generational war and bring our men and women home," he said.

"We will protect our children from the heavy burden and toll of perpetual war, and we will honor the sacrifices made in the services of peace and stability in Afghanistan, Iraq and around the world."

The announcement came 10 days after Trump fired defense secretary Mark Esper, who had insisted on the need to keep 4,500 troops in Afghanistan to support the Kabul government while it negotiates a peace deal with the Taliban insurgents.

US troops had already been cut by nearly two-thirds from about 13,000 this year, following the February 29 peace deal between the United States and the Taliban.

The two sides agreed that the Taliban would then negotiate a peace pact with the Afghan government, and that US troops would be gone by May 2021.

But until Esper's replacement with Miller, Pentagon generals had said that the Taliban had not lived up to pledges to reduce violent attacks on government forces, and that further reductions would take pressure off them to negotiate.

The announcement came over the objections of allies and senior US politicians worried that the reductions would leave the Afghan and Iraq governments vulnerable to extremist groups.

"Afghanistan risks becoming once again a platform for international terrorists to plan and organise attacks on our homelands," NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg warned Tuesday.

"And ISIS (the Islamic State group) could rebuild in Afghanistan the terror caliphate it lost in Syria and Iraq," he said.

On Monday US Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell warned the Afghan cuts could lead to a debacle like the US withdrawal from South Vietnam and be a

propaganda victory for Islamic extremists.

"The consequences of a premature US exit would likely be even worse than president Obama's withdrawal from Iraq back in 2011, which fueled the rise of ISIS and a new round of global terrorism," McConnell said on the Senate floor.

"It would be reminiscent of the humiliating America departure from Saigon in 1975."

But Trump, who lost his bid for reelection on November 3 to Democrat Joe Biden, has been determined to make good on a campaign pledge made in 2016 to bring US troops home and end costly wars abroad.



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NATO chief warns of high price if troops leave AfghanistanTrump to order troop reductions in Afghanistan, Iraq

HRW slams lack of accountability for Iran's 2019 crackdown

Tue, 2020-11-17 22:06

LONDON: One year since anti-regime demonstrations rapidly engulfed Iran, Human Rights Watch (HRW) on Tuesday slammed Tehran for having "failed to provide any real measure of accountability for the violent crackdown" that resulted in the deaths of hundreds of protesters.

Demonstrations began in November 2019 over a large and abrupt increase to the price of fuel, but rapidly morphed into popular discontent with Tehran's repression and corruption.

At least 304 people were killed in what HRW dubbed Iran's "most brutal crackdown against protesters in decades."

Its condemnation comes one day after Amnesty International decried Tehran's use of internet shutdowns to hide human rights abuses and the killing of protesters.

HRW said: "People interviewed and videos on social media indicated that in several instances, security forces shot people who were fleeing the scene of protests. Also, family members and people with close knowledge of cases of people killed said that victims died from gunshots to the head and/or chest."

It added: "The authorities have not published any detailed investigation or held anyone accountable for the alleged abuses."

Tara Sepehri Far, HRW's Iran researcher, said: "One year after the November crackdown, Iranian authorities have avoided any measure of accountability and continue to harass the families of those killed during the protest."

The authorities are "systematically repressing efforts of those seeking justice for the bloody November crackdown," she added.

HRW said Iranian authorities have acknowledged the deaths of 230 protesters, but are steadfastly refusing to investigate whether their killings were justified.

"Families of hundreds of victims, most of them from the more vulnerable segments of Iranian society, deserve to see those responsible for the serious rights violations held accountable," Sepehri Far added.

Sadeq Saba, an editor at Persian-language media organization Iran International, told Arab News that despite the killings, and due to the lack of accountability, the country is likely to face yet more unrest in the future.

"The troubles inside the country – the regime has no solution for them, no way of making people happy. Because of this, the Iranians are looking for an

alternative,” he said.



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Iran protests point to turmoil in the futureTurmoil at memorial for man killed in Iran protests

[Could Turkey's Kurdish peace process be back on track?](#)

Author:

Tue, 2020-11-17 01:17

ANKARA: The debate around peace between Turkey and its Kurdish minority has re-surfaced, hinting at possible preparations by both sides to find middle ground to restart negotiations.

Political changes, shifting voting intentions and trouble along the southern border with Iraq and Syria, experts suggest, might all be playing a part in

moves by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to alter his stance on issues surrounding the country's largest ethnic minority group.

The peace process between Ankara and the Kurds ended in July 2015 after the killing of two policemen in the southeastern province of Ceylanpinar, leading to the resumption of the decades-old Kurdish-Turkish conflict.

During elections in June 2015, the People's Democratic Party (HDP) passed the 10 percent threshold to become the first pro-Kurdish party to win seats in Parliament.

Part of the thinking behind a possible thaw in tensions comes from Ankara's concern that the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) – which it considers a terror group linked to the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) in Turkey – might encourage Turkey's Kurds to try to decentralize power and create a Kurdish state along its southern border.

The PKK has fought a nearly four-decade-long war for autonomy against Turkey. Kurds make up 20 percent of Turkey's population, and such a move would have serious repercussions for Ankara were it to come to pass. Turkey has been targeting Kurdish forces in Syria and neighboring Iraq for some time in light of fears over Kurdish separatism.

Samuel Ramani, a Middle East analyst at the University of Oxford, told Arab News: "In spite of ideological divergences amongst Kurdish communities, peace negotiations between Turkey and the HDP could result in a period of Turkish restraint towards Kurdish communities in Syria and Iraq.

"Erdogan has warned about potentially launching another offensive against Kurdish militias in northern Syria, and Joe Biden's victory in the US elections has caused some to suggest that might occur before January," he added.

HIGHLIGHT

Part of the thinking behind a possible thaw in tensions comes from Ankara's concern that the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) – which it considers a terror group linked to the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) in Turkey – might encourage Turkey's Kurds to try to decentralize power and create a Kurdish state along its southern border.

"Turkey has also stepped up strikes in Iraqi Kurdistan. As the HDP broke with the Turkish political consensus by opposing Operation Peace Spring in October 2019 and endorsed Iraqi Kurdistan's independence referendum, Erdogan will be cautious not to step on the HDP's toes while negotiations are underway," Ramani said.

In the long-run, Ramani thinks that the HDP will have to accommodate Erdogan's military operations in Syria and Iraq, and weigh whether such actions might constitute a sufficient breach to derail a peace agreement. Experts note that Erdogan may also be trying to chart a new direction as a result of growing discord among his own voter base, with recent polling suggesting that opposition parties now enjoyed over 50 percent of popular support.

A political reshuffle is already underway; the country's finance minister resigned on Nov. 8, a day after the central bank governor was suddenly

replaced by presidential decree.

The new period may see liberal figures returning to the political scene, as with the appointment of Lutfi Elvan to the Finance Ministry.

Yet elsewhere, problems between the Kurds and Turkish authorities abound. After a book titled "Devran," penned by Selahattin Demirtas, the former co-chair of the HDP, was branded a "terrorist document," by a Turkish prosecutor, it led to the arrest of a man named Necmettin Islek in the southeastern province of Bitlis.

On Sept. 30, a Kurdish villager, Servet Turgut, died from injuries incurred while he was in military custody, allegedly after being thrown from a helicopter, according to witness statements.

Demirtas himself, meanwhile, has been imprisoned since Nov. 4, 2016, with his attorneys recently taking his case to Turkey's top court after the country rejected to implement a European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ruling.

Necdet Ipekyuz, the HDP deputy for southeastern province of Batman, said despite myriad issues, nothing was off the table when it came to the peace process.

"Considering the ongoing developments in our region, the decision-makers in Ankara should have recognized that security-oriented paradigms remain inefficient to resolve the Kurdish issue. There is a need for confidence-building measures to put the resolution back on track," he told Arab News. Ipekyuz, who was involved in the last peace process, said decision-makers should learn from previous mistakes.

"I want to see the light at the end of the tunnel. It is like changing the wheel of a heavy-laden truck. Kurdish people are now afraid of being involved in politics. The state authorities should win back their hearts and minds with positive steps like backing away from appointing trustees to the Kurdish-majority towns or opening more space for freedom of speech."



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Lebanese FM asks US for Bassil sanction files

Author:

Tue, 2020-11-17 01:12

BEIRUT: Lebanon's foreign minister has urged US Ambassador to Lebanon Dorothy Shea to provide the information and documents that led to sanctions against Gebran Bassil.

Charbel Wehbe, who was made minister in Lebanon's caretaker government, met with Shea on Monday to discuss bilateral ties and the sanctions placed on the leader of the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM).

The Lebanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs said the meeting came "within the framework of the foreign minister's meetings with diplomats in Lebanon," meaning that Shea was not summoned.

On Nov. 6, the US Treasury imposed sanctions against Bassil, the first Lebanese official to be punished under the Magnitsky Act, the US legislation that targets human rights violations and corruption.

Individuals targeted by Magnitsky sanctions face seizure of property and financial assets, investigations into associated companies, entities and individuals and a ban on entering the US.

Following the sanctions against his son-in-law, Lebanese President Michel Aoun asked Wehbe to "make the necessary contacts to obtain the evidence and documents that prompted the US Treasury to press charges and impose sanctions against Bassil, and hand over these documents to the Lebanese judiciary in order for it to take the necessary legal measures if any information on these accusations is available."

US Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin said: "The systemic corruption in Lebanon's political system, exemplified by Bassil, has helped to erode the foundation of an effective government that serves the Lebanese people. Lebanon has long suffered from corruption and economic mismanagement by power brokers who advance their own interests at the expense of the Lebanese people they are supposed to represent."

On Monday, the Lebanese Foreign Ministry said that Shea affirmed her country's "support for Lebanon in several areas, in addition to the issue of negotiations over the demarcation of maritime borders, the issue of the return of the displaced to their country, the stage of transition from the current administration to the new administration in the US, in addition to

the measures taken by the US administration against some Lebanese, including former deputies and ministers, and the head of a parliamentary bloc.”

FASTFACT

Lebanese President Michel Aoun asked Wehbe to ‘make the necessary contacts to obtain the evidence and documents that prompted the US Treasury to impose sanctions against Bassil.’

Former Foreign Minister Nassif Hitti, under Prime Minister Hassan Diab, previously summoned Shea after she released statements describing Hezbollah as a “terrorist group.” Following the ambassador’s comments, a Lebanese judge controversially prevented media from publishing the statements or meeting with her.

Shea said during an interview with the Institute for International Strategic Studies three days ago that the US “will continue to pursue a policy of pressure on Hezbollah,” adding that “the relationship of Gebran Bassil with Hezbollah constitutes a cover for the party’s weapons in exchange for Hezbollah overlooking Bassil’s corruption.”

Shea said: “Washington is insisting on its position in helping to fight corruption in Lebanon so that progress is achieved in this field, step by step, and there will be nothing free after today.

“The US administration has not yet acted like the Gulf states, which moved away from Lebanon and stopped supporting it, and the US did not support Hassan Diab’s government because it was Hezbollah that formed it, but it stood by the Lebanese people.” “We will monitor what the next government will look like to determine the US position.”

In light of a severe economic crisis, the formation of a rescue government headed by Saad Hariri is facing political obstacles from the FPM and other Hezbollah allies.

MP Bilal Abdullah, a member of the parliamentary alliance Democratic Gathering, told Arab News that “The US side is not enthusiastic about any rescue mission in Lebanon and has coolly dealt with the French initiative.” Now, after the visit of French envoy to Lebanon Patrick Dorrell, which ended in failure, it seems that Lebanon will be left in isolation.” The Americans believe that it is the right time to put pressure on Lebanon.

On the other hand, Hezbollah and its allies are trying to play on time. In the midst of this, we are just around the corner from total collapse. The picture is very bleak because the state is spending its last savings and the citizens are spending their savings as well.

“Where were the objectors to the sanctions against Bassil when the Syrian regime classified the leader of the Progressive Socialist Party Walid Jumblatt and the head of the Lebanese Forces, Samir Geagea, as terrorists? They were silent at the time, but today their voices are loud against the sanctions against Bassil. People are not interested in what happens to political leaderships. If the government is not formed, the country is heading to the abyss. It is a farce.”



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Lebanon begins 2-week lockdown as COVID-19 cases surge Lebanon's Basecamp sets the pace for citizens' initiatives in fragile states

[Pandemic tests the endurance of Middle East's cultural industry](#)

Tue, 2020-11-17 00:30

DUBAI: As second and third waves of the coronavirus pandemic sweep the globe, the human and economic costs continue to mount. One area that has been found to have especially weak immunity to a disruption of this kind is arts and culture.

Governments, businesses and individuals suffered serious financial setbacks earlier in the year when the initial wave of infections led to a total lockdown in many countries.

However, those working in the creative industries proved exceptionally vulnerable to the containment measures as exhibitions and concerts got canceled, festivals postponed and many other cultural activities delayed until further notice.

UNESCO has put annual revenue from cultural and creative sectors at \$2.3 trillion and exports at more than \$250 billion. The sectors employ nearly 30 million people worldwide while some forecasts put its contribution to global gross domestic product at about 10 percent in the near future.



'Complain' (Supplied)

Even as GCC countries reopened after months of lockdown, the art world was relegated to digital platforms for the foreseeable future.

As a result, many musicians, artists, photographers and comic illustrators saw their sources of income evaporate. Some cultural enterprises were forced out of business altogether.

Although a few professionals were able to shift online, others have struggled to adapt. For Huda Alkhamis-Kanoo, founder of the Abu Dhabi Festival, digital will never compare with the real thing.

"The whole future is in this balance between virtual and real-life

experience. Energy with people can't be replaced," she told a webinar in September, organized by the Washington DC-based Middle East Institute, on the impact of COVID-19 on festivals.

For Raed Asfour, an Amman-based theater director who also took part in the webinar, new technologies can play a role in recording and streaming concerts online, but the process may be prohibitively expensive.

Eckhard Thiemann, artistic director of Shubbak, London's largest festival of contemporary Arab culture, said it may be a struggle convincing audiences to pay for concerts streamed online.

"We need to educate audiences to pay for online content. ... If we provide authentic and genuine content, people will pay for it," Thiemann said.

FASTFACT

Culture during COVID-19

- * 30m People employed worldwide in cultural and creative sectors.**

- * 10% The sectors' projected contribution to global GDP.**

For artists and the creative industries, the shift to online has been a mixed bag of experiences. For some it was an opportunity to shake up tired old formats, while for others it offered a chance to collaborate.

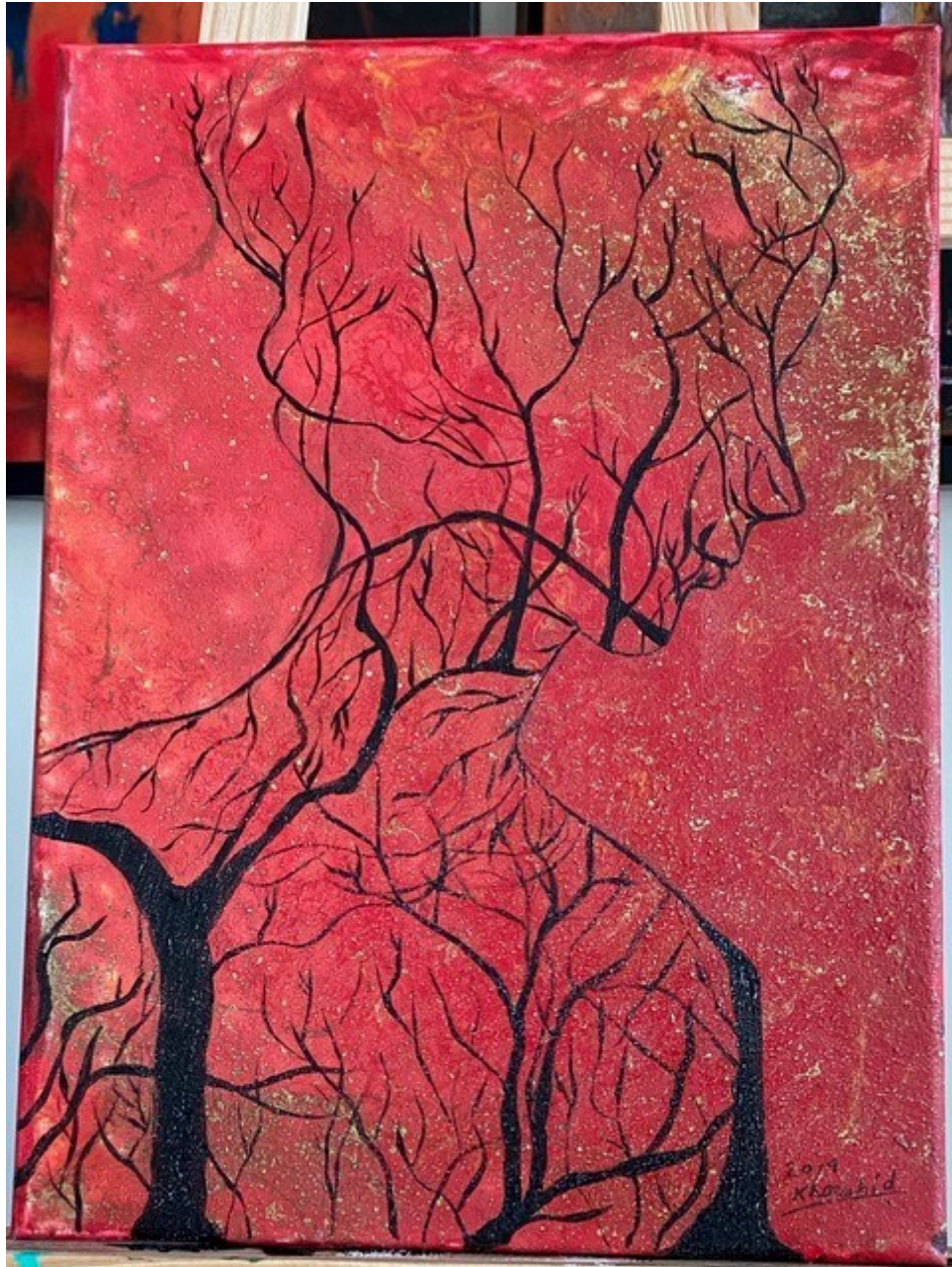
"We have over 30 music centers here in the UAE and we consider each other competitors and we rarely collaborate with each other," Tala Badri, executive director of the Centre for Musical Arts (CMA) in Dubai, told Arab News.

"But when COVID-19 hit, (we) got together and had a meeting to talk about what we were going to do to help each other. This is our livelihoods. Between us, we employ over 500 people (and) we teach over 4,000 people."

Lockdown measures have hit a sour note for music teachers as cash-strapped families cut back on their spending. "We have had no business for nearly six or seven months," Badri said.

"When the lockdown happened in March, we moved all the lessons online. ... That proved quite fortuitous for us, because we could move quickly and do that," she said.

"The difficulties and the challenges occurred more towards the summer when people really started to feel the effects of COVID-19, (when) a lot of people lost their jobs. One of the first things that goes is your extra-curricular activities, isn't it? So, a lot of people decided not to continue with lessons."



‘Bitter Sweet’ (Supplied)

The number of students registered with the school dropped “overnight” from 1,200 to fewer than a third. As a result, the rent, salaries for 30 members of staff, and business loan repayments soon became a major operational challenge.

“From a financial perspective, it was very difficult. I mean, we managed to cope very well, but in coping we were still not able to generate an income to keep ourselves going,” Badri said.

Emirati illustrator Saeed Arjumand, who owns a comic book store in Dubai, has seen similar challenges. “I think that was the biggest change. Out of nowhere, we had to shut down, and this was very sudden,” he said. His store reopened in summer, but business “was not as good as it used to be.”

Recognizing the challenges facing the creative industries, many artists and galleries started banding together, leading to projects and collaborations that, in all likelihood, would otherwise have not materialized.

"The best thing that happened for artists is that a lot of institutions and cultural foundations came together to offer support for us artists, who are struggling during this time," said Fatima Albudoor, an Emirati photographer and printmaker.



"Art Jameel, for example, made an open call for artists to submit proposals and then they would give them a grant. So I applied for that and I was able to get a grant for a project which I came up with because of the lockdown."

Another initiative was the "This Too Shall Pass" auction hosted by Sotheby's in June in partnership with seven galleries from Dubai's Al-Serkal Avenue.

"In the first few weeks of lockdown there were a lot of calls, discussions and surveys about how to support and preserve our arts community," William Lawrie, founder of the Lawrie Shabibi art gallery in Dubai, told Arab News in June.

"In one of the Zoom calls, which included all of the galleries in Al-Serkal

Avenue, the idea of an auction to support the galleries and their artists was mooted, with a charitable component to benefit vulnerable people made even more disadvantaged by COVID-19.”

In May, the Saudi art gallery Athr launched an initiative to provide financial grants to help support the work of artists in the Kingdom. It launched a project titled “Maan” (Arabic for together) in a bid to cushion the impact of the pandemic on the local art scene.

As part of its mission to keep the arts sustained and accessible to a wider audience, Jeddah-based Athr collaborated with seven artists who agreed to produce limited-edition works to fund the grants.



‘Hengam’ (Supplied)

Canadian-Iranian expressionist Khorshid Akhavan says travel restrictions and a fall in commissions have taken a toll on her earnings, as customers have cut back on such luxuries. At the same time, she says, the pandemic has been a powerful source of inspiration.

"For me it has been both positive and negative, I would say," she told Arab News. "The positive would be that all the emotions came up, so I could come up with some great art to express my feelings."

Silver linings, perhaps. And as Alkhamis-Kanoo said during September's webinar, the pandemic has certainly forced artists to be "more resilient" and to start working collectively.

"It is incredible what I am seeing in terms of relations and innovation," she said. "We connect, and we find each other, and we unite through our festivals to fight back."

Looking on the bright side, the Group of 20 culture ministers recently pledged to support the global cultural economy.

Addressing the virtual meeting, organized in the first week of November as part of the International Conferences Program, Saudi Culture Minister Prince Badr bin Abdullah bin Farhan said: "This high-level cultural presence at Saudi G20 presidency illustrates our shared belief in the vital role of culture in propelling the innovation ecosystem of economies. The onus is on us to preserve our shared heritage for future generations and to produce and disseminate culture in a sustainable manner."

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