

Turkish military visit raises fears of Syrian operation

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ANKARA: A further visit by Turkey's Defense Minister, Hulusi Akar, and senior military officials to troops along the Syrian border, along with plans to hold meetings with commanders, have raised fears of a new Turkish military operation.

The Chief of General Staff, Gen. Yasar Guler, accompanied the high-profile visit, while President Recep Tayyip Erdogan also attended some meetings via telephone.

Turkey has conducted three cross-border operations in Syria against Daesh and the Kurdish YPG militia since 2016.

Navar Saban, a military analyst at the Omran Center for Strategic Studies in Istanbul, said an imminent operation is unlikely, due to the increasing cost of a military move.

"Logistically speaking, it doesn't make sense to launch another operation in an area that has this many complexities, including a Russian presence, Daesh cells and Syrian regime operations. Even if they win, it will bear significant costs for troops on the ground because of security problems in northwestern Afrin and northwestern Idlib provinces," he told Arab News.

However, Saban also said the visit is unlikely to be random.

"It is for coordination on the ground to manage clashes with different actors. But it wouldn't trigger a new operation in the short term," he said.

On Friday, US-backed Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces announced a new campaign to fight remnants of Daesh across the border with Iraq following a recent increase in attacks.

Last month, the UN Human Rights Office (OHCHR) blamed Daesh for exploiting the coronavirus pandemic to "regroup and inflict violence on the population."

"Intermittent clashes and ground-based strikes between pro-government forces and armed groups continue to be reported in western Aleppo and southern Idlib," the OHCHR said.

The resumption of violence in Idlib has sparked concern in Ankara about a possible wave of immigration toward the Turkish border, where Turkey has deployed troops.

On Friday, one Turkish soldier was killed and two were wounded following an attack on an armored ambulance in Idlib. The region has seen an increase in attacks since December.

On May 27, a Turkish soldier was killed in an explosion on a highway in Idlib.

Kyle Orton, a UK-based Syria researcher, said that another Turkish operation into Syria remains unlikely for now, as previous cross-border operations already gave the country a military foothold.

"The American presence in Syria has always been the major roadblock to Turkey

dismantling the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) statelet, and the Americans want a withdrawal from Syria, quite possibly before the election in November," he told Arab News.

Orton said that Turkey can get what it wants by maintaining its position, as there are potential political advantages in fighting Daesh in the vacuum left by the US.

"If the Americans are still in Syria in, say, a year, then Ankara might reconsider its view," he added.



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normal for Turkish politics?

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Sat, 2020-06-06 22:08

ISTANBUL: After three opposition politicians were stripped of their status as members of parliament in Turkey on Thursday, June 4, the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) made it clear that a new period had begun in Turkish politics, given the country's preoccupation with economic deterioration and rising unemployment that has already rendered many voters disenchanted.

Two deputies from the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) and one deputy from the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) lost their positions, and were arrested in an overnight operation on terror charges. The Kurdish politicians, Leyla Guven and Musa Farisogullari, were detained, while the CHP deputy, Kadri Enis Berberoglu, was released from police custody after less than 24 hours as part of anti-coronavirus measures in Turkish prisons. Several HDP deputies were later beaten by police during a protest in Ankara over the imprisonment of their colleagues.

Insights from Ankara suggest two more parliamentarians from the HDP may be stripped of their seats soon as their files are being reviewed by the Turkish Court of Cassation.

The crackdown on opposition figures does not end with politicians. The government is also working on a legislative change to the way bar associations elect their board members. Fifty bar associations recently released a joint statement against any move to limit their power and to increase pressure on the country's already weakened judiciary.

The AKP and its coalition partner, the Nationalist Movement Party, are also working on another legislative amendment to ban the transfer of parliamentary deputies to other parties over fears that newly founded opposition parties could be strengthened with the transfer of deputies from the CHP to take part of upcoming elections.

Ten new political parties were established in Turkey over the past five months, bringing the total number to 91 – two of them, the Democracy and Progress Party, and the Future Party, to target disillusioned AKP voters and liberal segments of society.

"Turkey has been a consolidated authoritarian state for some time and attacks on the HDP are certainly not new," said Paul T. Levin, director of the Stockholm University Institute for Turkish Studies.

"Going after the CHP would be a dramatic escalation, but they have been focused on Berberoglu for some time due to his involvement in the arms truck scandal," he told Arab News.

Berberoglu, a former journalist, was arrested for providing dissident daily newspaper Cumhuriyet with confidential footage of Turkish National Intelligence Organization trucks allegedly carrying weapons to Syria.

According to Levin, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan may be trying to weaken the opposition in advance of a snap election, that is widely expected to be held next year.

“As for the bar associations, they have long been an important source of opposition to attempts to undermine the rule of law. It would really be a terrible blow to what remains of judicial independence if they were neutered,” he said.

There are still dozens of Kurdish politicians behind bars in Turkey, including parliamentarians, mayors and the party’s former co-chairs. The HDP released a statement following the arrests of Guven and Farisogullari, and said: “Turkey now witnesses yet another coup – this pro-coup mindset has been prevailing in parliament for 26 years.”



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[Syrian pound plummets as new US](#)

sanctions loom

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Sat, 2020-06-06 13:15

BEIRUT: Syria's pound hit record lows on the black market Saturday trading at over 2,300 to the dollar, less than a third of its official value, traders said, ahead of new US sanctions.

Three traders in Damascus told AFP by phone that the dollar bought more than 2,300 Syrian pounds for the first time, though the official exchange rate remained fixed at around 700 pounds to the greenback.

After nine years of war, Syria is in the thick of an economic crisis compounded by a coronavirus lockdown and a dollar liquidity crunch in neighboring Lebanon.

Last month, the central bank warned it would clamp down on currency "manipulators."

Analysts said concerns over the June 17 implementation of the US Caesar Act, which aims to sanction foreign persons who assist the Syrian government or help in post-war reconstruction, also contributed to the de fact devaluation.

Zaki Mehchy, a senior consulting fellow at Chatham House, said foreign companies – including from regime ally Russia – were already opting not to take any risks.

With money transactions requiring two to three weeks to implement, "today's transactions will be paid after June 17," he said.

Heiko Wimmen, Syria project director at the conflict tracker Crisis Group, said that with the act coming into force, "doing business with Syria will become even more difficult and risky."

Both analysts said the fall from grace of top business tycoon Rami Makhlouf despite being a cousin of the president was also affecting confidence.

"The Makhlouf saga is spooking the rich," Wimmen said.

After the Damascus government froze assets of the head of the country's largest mobile phone operator and slapped a travel ban on him, the wealthy feel "nobody is safe," he said.

They are thinking "you better get your assets and perhaps yourself out preparing for further shakedowns," he said.

Mehchy said the impact of the pound's decline and ensuing price hikes on Syrians would be "catastrophic."

Most of Syria's population lives in poverty, according to the United Nations, and food prices have doubled over the past year.

The UN food agency's Jessica Lawson said any further depreciation risked increasing the cost of imported basic food items such as rice, pasta and lentils.

"These price increases risk pushing even more people into hunger, poverty and food insecurity as Syrians' purchasing power continues to erode," the World Food Programme spokeswoman said.

"Families may be forced to cut the quality and quantity of food they buy."



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[Palestinians, Arabs 'must learn lessons of Naksa'](#)

Sat, 2020-06-06 00:46

AMMAN: Leading Palestinian and Arab figures have used the 53rd anniversary of Naksa – the displacement and occupation of Arab territories that followed Israel's victory in the 1967 war against Egypt, Syria, and Jordan – to highlight political mistakes made during and after the conflict.

Adnan Abu-Odeh, political adviser to Jordan's King Hussein and King Abdullah II, told Arab News that Arab countries and the Palestinian leadership had failed to understand the goals of Zionism.

"Governments that participated in the war were naive, expecting a repeat of the 1956 Sinai invasion when the US ordered an Israeli withdrawal. This was followed by the mistaken belief that we could liberate the land using guerrilla warfare," he said.

Anees Sweidan, director-general of foreign relations in the PLO, told Arab News that the Palestinian cause is undergoing a complicated phase where political opportunities are limited.

"The US bias towards Israel and absence of unity has put the Palestinian movement in a difficult situation. It is harder to generate external support and the financial crunch is causing much suffering despite the fact that we have made important accomplishments in the UN and Europe."

Abdalqader Husseini, chairperson of the Faisal Husseini Foundation, said that the opportunities the anniversary offers should not be ignored.

"We need to realize that this is an illegal occupation that continues to dig deeper and escalate every day to the degree that the international community has lost interest and world conscience has become numb to Israeli practices. We in Jerusalem have not normalized with the occupiers and we have not accepted the new situation as an inescapable reality that we must accept."

Jordanian MP Kais Zayadin said that the biggest mistake Arab countries made was to trust that the occupying state would make peace and reach a lasting solution to the Palestinian cause.

"We went to Madrid with hope, the Palestinian leadership went to Oslo with optimism that they could reach a phased solution that would lead to statehood. As we remember this Naksa, we must revisit the path that has allowed the occupying entity to steal our land and cause havoc to our people without any deterrence from the international community," he said.

Nibal Thawabteh, director of the Bir Zeit University's Media Development Center, said the biggest mistake since 1967 was focusing on politics and avoiding community development.

"We don't have a strong sense of citizenship, some have become accustomed to religious Islam. We need to work more on the citizenship."

Ahmad Awad, director of the Amman-based Phenix Center for Economic and Informatics Studies, said there is a lack of acknowledgment of the reasons behind the Arab loss.

"Political, economic and cultural factors caused our loss, and we feel that most Arab countries have not learned this lesson. Instead of learning, we are going backwards, failing to defend their existential rights, shifting to isolationism as well as cultural and economic regression in our region."

Instead of looking backward, some Palestinians wanted to look forward.

Mahdi Abdulhadi, head of the PASSIA thinktank in Jerusalem, said that Palestinian youth who never felt the shock of the 1967 defeat but have seen

the exposure of Arab regimes in the face of the “deal of the century” will prevail.

“They personify the meaning of steadfastness for dignity, and they have the will to protect our heritage, our identity, and our holy places.”

Lily Habash, a Exeter University political science graduate, told Arab News that things look different on the ground.

“The world is changing and Israel uses geopolitical and regional changes to its advantage,” she said.

Dangers today encourage despair but Palestinians will be steadfast in the long term, she added.

“Some say we need a savior to get us out of this dilemma but I believe we need to trust in ourselves and work on all fronts.”



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Israel slaps four-month ban on Al-Aqsa Mosque cleric

Protests set to resume in Lebanon but activists are no longer united

Author:

Sat, 2020-06-06 01:06

BEIRUT: Lebanon is gearing up for the biggest street protests in months, after the coronavirus pandemic stifled the popular movement that kicked off in October last year.

Activists have called on people from all walks of life to gather in downtown Beirut on Saturday to protest against the continuing deterioration in living conditions. However, many civil-society groups that took part in the previous demonstrations have announced that they do not intend to do so this time. The enthusiasm of the public seems to be waning, even as the economic crises people are facing increase.

A few activists not affiliated with any organized protest groups assembled in Martyrs' Square, in the heart of Beirut, on the eve of the rally.

"We are here to say that we still hold our positions on the failed power that has brought us to a worsening economic and social situation," said Nazih Khalaf. "However, this time activists are divided; each group has its own opinion. This can be seen on social-media platforms. I fear that people will not take to the streets on Saturday."

Ghina Jamil, a teacher of students with special needs, said: "I am independent and I want the governing authority to hear my voice. I do not care who the ruling class is; what I care about is getting my rights. I have two options: go onto the street and protest, or stay home and die of hunger and the taxes that burden us.

"I do not bet on people anymore. The government, shielding itself under the guise of a technocrat cabinet, managed to deflate protesters' anger while the coronavirus outbreak brought the demonstrations to a screeching halt and stifled the popular movement, allowing the authorities to attract people by playing the card of sectarian strife."

While those activists who remain motivated are preparing for the demonstration so, too, are the security services tasked with maintaining order in the heart of the capital. They have increased the barricades of barbed wire and iron doors blocking the way to the Lebanese parliament. Meanwhile, owners of those shops that remain in business are closing their doors in fear of possible riots.

On Friday night, protesters waved placards with slogans calling for early parliamentary elections, announcing that "there is no confidence in the ruling elite," demanding "the recovery of looted money and fight corruption," and complaining about increasing prices and the high exchange rate of the dollar.

There is a big difference between the popular uprising last October and this latest protest, according to Nizar Hassan, a researcher in social movements. "The Oct. 17 uprising is over and we will not return to the previous situation," he said. "It is a pity that the political class used the three-month grace period (caused by the pandemic) to restore political divisions.

"The first uprising united people of different sects, doctrines and ideologies around common demands – the authority is now trying to cause a rift between them.

"Past events are causing collective frustration and people no longer have the same beliefs they had on Oct. 17. They have chosen to coexist with what does not currently satisfy them."

Hassan noted that one activists' group demands the disarmament of Hezbollah but, he said, this "is not, in my opinion, an urgent demand today, and it will not affect the economic reality Lebanon is facing."

On the contrary, he said, demands for the implementation of UN Security Resolution 1559, which calls for free and fair elections in Lebanon and the withdrawal of all foreign forces, prompted Hezbollah and its supporters to launch a violent campaign against the civil movement, accusing its participants of being Israeli agents and depicting them as being opposed to the resistance.

"I do not rule out the presence of security agencies working as part of this, because this led to the withdrawal of many groups, including those close to Hezbollah, from participation in the upcoming protest," Hassan added.

"Some wealthy groups entered the civil movement as well and demanded a date for early parliamentary elections. When we called on Oct. 17 for early elections, it was one of many demands related to establishing a new election law – otherwise what is the point of holding elections under the current election law? This would simply recreate the same authority and give opportunistic groups the chance to exploit it to their advantage."

Hassan said he still expects "a good number" of activists to take to the streets of Beirut on Saturday, but predicted that they will be making contradictory demands and tensions might flare as a result.

"I know that within each activist group there are two perspectives, which will lead to confusion," he added.

Among those who have declared that their supporters will not participate in Saturday's protest is MP Chamel Roukoz, the son-in-law of President Michel Aoun. He is not currently a member of Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement or its parliamentary bloc because "it gives priority to early parliamentary elections, whereas we want to modify the current election law because it leads to rich businessmen controlling the parliament."

He added: "If the protesters want to overthrow the ruling elite I will not support them, because the responsibility lies with the government and the parliament, since the powers of the president of the republic are limited."

Roukoz urged those who demonstrate this weekend "not to adopt provocative slogans, and to avoid problems between them and the security forces."

There were already some signs of rising tensions in Beirut's Tariq Al-Jdideh on Friday. An existing dispute was blamed for a confrontation between young men armed with sticks, knives and machetes, during which shots were fired into in the air. A number of shops and organizations in the area closed, fearing violence would escalate. An Internal Security Forces patrol and intelligence and army forces were dispatched to the scene and began an investigation.

The dollar exchange rate in Beirut on Friday was between LBP3,890 and LBP3,940, according to a daily statement issued by the Syndicate of Money Changers in Lebanon.

Money changers are expected to decrease the price of the dollar to LBP3200 in

the next 10 days, in response to a Central Bank demand.



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