

Syrian army vows to keep up campaign against last rebel area

Author:

By ALBERT AJI | AP

ID:

1581262958523551800

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DAMASCUS: Syria's military vowed on Sunday to keep up its campaign to regain control of the whole country, days after capturing large chunks of territory from the last rebel holdout in northwestern Syria.

Russia has heavily backed the Syrian government's offensive. The fighting led to the collapse of a fragile cease-fire that was negotiated with Turkey in 2018.

The advance of forces supporting Syrian President Bashar Assad into rebel-held areas of Idlib and Aleppo province has also sparked a largescale humanitarian crisis.

Nearly 600,000 people have fled the fighting since December. Most of the displaced are living in open-air shelters and temporary homes in freezing winter conditions closer to the Turkish border. Half of the displaced are believed to be children.

A main backer of the armed Syrian opposition, Turkey has sent in large military reinforcements into the rebel-held areas. But the buildup has not stopped the Syrian government advance.

Syrian military spokesman Gen. Ali Mayhoub said that government forces had gained a strategic advantage in recent days, according to a statement carried by Syria's state news agency. He said that Syrian troops advancing from around Aleppo's southern countryside had linked up with those coming from eastern Idlib.

The Syrian army had seized a geographical area of more than 600 square kilometers (230 square miles) and captured dozens of towns and villages, he added.

But the government campaign appears to be aimed at securing a strategic highway in rebel-controlled territory for now, rather than seizing the entire province and its the densely populated capital, Idlib.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said government troops were only a few kilometers (miles) from seizing full control of the strategic highway, know as M5. The highway links the national capital of Damascus with the country's north, which has for years been divided between government and opposition forces.

Turkey sent hundreds of military vehicles and troops into Idlib province in the past week. The buildup and the continued government advances sparked a rare clash on Feb. 3 between Turkish and Syrian soldiers that killed eight Turkish military personnel and 13 Syrian troops.

On Sunday, Mayhoub said the efforts to back the armed opposition "will not succeed in preventing the fast collapse" of the rebel groups. Damascus considers all armed opposition as "terrorist organizations."

Rebels, including some of the most radical militant groups, control much of

Idlib province and parts of the neighboring Aleppo region. These areas are home to some 3 million people – many of them displaced from other parts of Syria.

On Friday, Turkey's Defense Ministry warned its army would respond "even more forcefully" to any attack on Turkish observation posts in northern Syria, adding: "Our observation posts will continue carrying out duties."



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Author:

Amal BELALLOUFI, avec Aymeric VINCENOT à Paris | AFP

ID:

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Sun, 2020-02-09 13:07

BLIDA: An Algerian military court Sunday started hearing an appeal against the 15-year jail term for the brother of former president Abdelaziz Bouteflika, who was brought down amid anti-regime protests last year. Said Bouteflika, 62, had long served as a key presidential aide and was seen as the real power behind the presidency after the head of state suffered a debilitating stroke in 2013.

Abdelaziz Bouteflika quit office in April last year following weeks of mass protests against his bid for a fifth term running the North African country. His brother Said was detained in May and sentenced in September, along with several other high-level regime officials, to 15 years in jail for "conspiring" against the state and undermining the authority of the army. The appeals hearing opened in the mid-morning under tight security and behind closed doors at the Military Court of Appeal in Blida, south of Algiers, according to local media.

Also in court to appeal their jail terms were two former intelligence chiefs and a former political party leader.

One was General Mohamed Lamine Mediene, known as "Toufik," who had for 25 years headed the powerful Department of Intelligence and Security.

Also there were his former right-hand man, General Athmane "Bachir" Tartag, and Louisa Hanoune, who had served as secretary general of the left-wing Workers' Party.

All four had allegedly met in March 2019 in a bid to derail plans by the army high command to force the departure of president Bouteflika.

Said Bouteflika allegedly wanted the intelligence bosses to dismiss the army chief of staff at the time, General Ahmed Gaid Salah.

Defense lawyers hope the four will be released after Algeria's power balance shifted following the December 23 death of Gaid Salah at the age of 79.

"The person who, in our opinion, was at the origin of these proceedings has passed away," said Mediene's lawyer Farouk Kessentini.



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Algerian president welcomes visiting Saudi foreign minister

[Elderly Chinese woman fully recovers from coronavirus in UAE](#)

Author:

Sun, 2020-02-09 19:14

DUBAI: An elderly Chinese woman has fully recovered in the UAE after she had coronavirus diagnosed.

Liu Yujia, 73, who was among seven people in the Emirates infected, contracted the illness in the Chinese city of Wuhan, the center of the outbreak.

On Sunday, the Ministry of Health and Prevention said she had been treated at an isolation ward since Jan. 23 and had “recovered fully and can carry on

with life normally”

Liu thanked the UAE for the medical care she received and the treatment given to three of her family members who were also infected.

“I would like to thank the Consul General of China and the representative of UAE’s Ministry of Health for their visit,” she said as she met Chinese consular and Emirati health officials.

The ministry’s Assistant Under-Secretary for Health Centres and Clinics, Dr. Hussein Al-Rand, said Liu’s case raised hope that other cases in the UAE can also be fully recovered.

“Individuals diagnosed are receiving proper health care in accordance with leading World Health Organisation standards, with each individual case being monitored until full recovery is attained,” he added.

Consul General Li Xuhang said: “UAE leadership, government and people have demonstrated the true meaning of solidarity with the People’s Republic of China in confronting this latest outbreak.”

Along with Liu and her three family members, another Chinese man and two Filipinos have also had the coronavirus diagnosed.

The coronavirus emerged in central China at the end of last year and has killed at least 800 people and infected more than 37,200 have been infected.





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[Turkey, Russia ties overloaded by Idlib conflict](#)

Author:

Sat, 2020-02-08 23:49

ANKARA: A Russian military delegation held meetings with Turkey on Saturday about a looming conflict in Syria's Idlib province.

Last week saw clashes between Turkish troops and Russia-backed Syrian regime forces – the first since the beginning of the civil war in 2011. Eight Turkish officers were killed.

Although Moscow said Turkish forces had come under fire because Ankara did not inform Russia about the movement of its troops, Syria's assault on Turkish personnel was considered a shock to Russian-Turkish cooperation in Idlib, which is currently under the control of Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham, a former Al-Qaeda affiliate.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan gave an ultimatum to President Bashar

Assad to withdraw his troops behind Turkey's observation post lines by the end of this month or pay the price, adding that "nothing will be the same" after Monday's attack.

Erdogan also criticized Russia, which is an ally of convenience, for violating its commitments under the 2018 Sochi agreement.

Kyle Orton, a UK-based researcher on Syria, said Turkey has been adding diplomatic pressure against Russia as the regime coalition's Idlib offensive has progressed such as visiting Ukraine, reiterating support for Georgian NATO membership, and publicly declaring the Astana process, crucial to Moscow's effort to politically rehabilitate Assad internationally, to be dead.

"The pro-Assad coalition could withstand this, and Russia could not restrain Assad/Iran ground forces even if it wanted to, but Turkey has now decided to add resources where it matters, on the ground," he told Arab News.

Joint patrol missions between Turkish and Russian military forces have been skipped following the attack.

The issue is that pro-Assad forces were likely to call Turkey's bluff quite quickly, he added. It has generally been assumed that Russia's involvement provided those troops with immunity from Turkish attack.

"If that remains true, then pro-Assad forces will prevail, thousands of people will be killed, and Turkey will be dealing with a new, massive wave of refugees, a crisis that will almost certainly spill into Europe. If Turkey actually does stand its ground, it will seriously weaken relations with Russia, though that brief alignment appears to be coming to an end anyway as the common interests that bound them in Syria dissipate," he said.

Turkey already hosts about 3.7 million registered Syrian refugees, a population that has become politically, socially and economically costly for the country, and no further influx is expected to be allowed in.

HIGHLIGHT

- **Erdogan also criticized Russia, which is an ally of convenience, for violating its commitments under the 2018 Sochi agreement.**
- **A political calculation is that the West can influence by offering support to Turkey.**

The bottom line was that Turkey could assert itself against the remnants of Assad's army and Iran's militias, Orton said. It came down to a political calculation, one the West could influence by offering support to Turkey. Abdullah Agar, a security expert and retired special warfare and commando officer, said Turkey had dispatched a task force consisting of at least 1,000 tactical vehicles equipped with aerial defense and fire capabilities.

"This reinforcement may be read as a move of deterrence or retaliation. But it may also mean preparation for a battle or a conventional war," he told Arab News.

"President Erdogan hinted several times at taking a stronger initiative to achieve Turkey's political and demographic targets in the region."

Agar said that ongoing negotiations between Ankara and the Kremlin will be

determinant on the outcome and on Turkey's incoming moves on the ground. "It seems that Ankara will insist on creating a safe zone free of rebels and heavy weapons in the region stretching from M4 and M5 highways to observation posts. However, the Kremlin and Assad's regime may insist on taking M4 and M5 as a demarcation line."

He said it was the first time Turkey had sent such a strong reinforcement to Syria, unlike it had done in the past while reinforcing positions along its border with Syria during previous cross-border operations.

"This time, it means something, and the days to come will show this meaning." While Turkey has bolstered its military positions in Idlib, there are reports of Russia using Turkish airspace and waterways to transport ammunition to Syria to support regime troops who are fighting against Turkey.



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Russians headed to Turkey for talks on Syrian offensive in IdlibSaraqib is new hotspot in Turkey and Syria's fight for Idlib

[Israel strikes Gaza after projectile](#)

Author:

AFP

ID:

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JERUSALEM: The Israeli army said its tanks attacked military posts in the Gaza Strip Saturday, after militants in the Palestinian enclave fired a projectile at the Jewish state.

The army said tanks “targeted two Hamas military posts in the northern Gaza Strip” in response to the projectile, in the latest round of violence in the wake of the United States unveiling its controversial peace plan.

There were no immediate reports of damage or casualties from the Israeli attack.

The projectile from Gaza had activated an alert “for open areas only,” according to the army, while a spokeswoman for the regional council in Shaar Hanegev, next to northeast Gaza, said it apparently hit an open field, causing no damage or casualties.

Palestinian attacks have increased since January 28 when US President Donald Trump released his vision for resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – a plan firmly rejected by the Palestinian leadership in both the West Bank and Gaza.

It would grant Israel a number of its long-held goals, including full control of disputed Jerusalem and a green light to annex all settlements and other parts of the West Bank.

In exchange the Palestinians would be offered a state in the remaining parts of the West Bank and Gaza.

Palestinians in Gaza, an enclave ruled by Hamas, have launched rockets, mortar shells and balloons rigged with explosives at southern Israel on a near-daily basis since the plan’s launch.

In the West Bank, four Palestinians have been killed in clashes with Israeli troops since Wednesday.

An Israeli Arab who opened fire on police near Al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem’s Old City was shot dead on Thursday.

Over a dozen Israeli soldiers were wounded in a car ramming attack in West Jerusalem on Thursday.

Israel reinforced troops in Jerusalem, the West Bank and around Gaza ahead of the weekend.



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Israel hits Hamas targets in Gaza after renewed rocket fire