

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](#)

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1581191120257003300

Sat, 2020-02-08 19:18

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

Egypt grapples with smuggling of artifacts

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Sat, 2020-02-08 21:34

CAIRO: Last week's foiling by police of an attempt to smuggle 269 artifacts out of Egypt was just the latest in a series of such incidents.

One such attempt that succeeded was in late 2018. Police in the Italian city of Naples said they had seized 23,700 smuggled artifacts, including 118 that were smuggled in a container from Egypt's port city of Alexandria to the southern Italian port of Salerno.

At the time, Shaaban Abdel-Gawad, director general of the Egyptian Retrieved Artifacts Department, said the artifacts were stolen as a result of illegal excavations.

Investigations revealed that the perpetrator was Ladislav Otakar Skakal, Italy's former honorary consul in Luxor.

In January, an Egyptian court sentenced him to 30 years in absentia, since he had already left the country.

Egyptian authorities also found many artifacts in Skakal's home in Cairo, as well as in a safe he was renting in a private bank.

At the same time, the Kuwaiti General Administration of Customs said it had seized a Pharaonic sarcophagus lid that was smuggled inside a sofa from Cairo airport.

In August 2018, the Antiquities Ministry said 32,638 artifacts had been lost in the last 50 years.

Egypt has retrieved 1,000 artifacts from 10 countries in the last three years, the ministry added.

Mohamed El-Kahlawy, head of the General Union of Arab Archaeologists, said the 2011 revolution in Egypt caused an unstable security situation that paved the way for more illegal excavations and thefts of artifacts.

From 2011 to 2014, Egypt lost \$3 billion from the theft of artifacts from archaeological sites, museums and places of worship, according to the Washington-based group Alliance Archaeology.

"Christie's auction house sells Egyptian antiquities in public," said Egyptian artifacts expert Bassam El-Shammaa.

Researcher Monica Hanna said Egyptian monument warehouses are "full of unregistered artifacts that are being sold."

Unregistered artifacts are impossible to retrieve. Egyptian artifacts can be purchased via online sites, including eBay.

Other sites display videos of Pharaonic tombs for those interested in taking part in excavation work. Such videos have hundreds of thousands of views.

Egypt's Law on the Protection of Antiquities stipulates 25 years in jail for those found guilty of smuggling artifacts. There is no statute of

limitations.

Anyone found guilty of smuggling an artifact outside Egypt could be fined between 1 million Egyptian pounds (\$63,380) and 7 million.

The tools, equipment, machines and cars used in the process, as well as the stolen artifacts, are confiscated by the Supreme Council for Antiquities. The law stipulates 10 years in jail for anyone who secretly carries out digging or hides an artifact or part of it with the intention of smuggling it.

It also stipulates imprisonment of between three and seven years, as well as a fine of no less than 500,000 Egyptian pounds, for destroying, deliberately damaging, mutilating or changing an artifact's original features, and deliberately separating parts of a transferred or permanently placed monument.



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Famed Egyptian actress Nadia Lutfi dies at 83 Egypt awaits its 100 millionth baby

Russian denials of Syria chemical attack undermined by inquiry

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Sat, 2020-02-08 20:04

LONDON: Russian claims that the UN weapons watchdog manipulated evidence of a Syrian government chemical weapons attack have been undermined by an official inquiry showing that two former UN employees hailed as whistleblowers had little direct access to the evidence and exaggerated their roles.

The independent inquiry commissioned by the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) shows that one of the two employees had never been on the team investigating the April 2018 attack in Douma and the other was only on the team for a brief period, according to report in The Guardian newspaper.

More than 40 people were killed in Douma on Apr. 7, 2018. The town, on the outskirts of Damascus, was held by rebels and besieged by pro-government forces at the time. Civilians claimed they were the victims of a chemical weapon attack.

A week after the alleged attack, US President Donald Trump responded with overnight air strikes on Syria backed by the UK and France.

Russia immediately launched a campaign to discredit the allegations, flying witnesses from Syria to the OPCW headquarters in the Hague to challenge the claim that chemical weapons had been used.

Following the US strikes, the OPCW opened an inquiry into whether chemical weapons had been used, but without attributing responsibility. It ruled in March 2019 that a banned toxic chemical containing chlorine was likely to have been used in Douma. The fact that chemical weapons were delivered through air strikes effectively meant the OPCW believed the Syrian air force was responsible.

Internal OPCW reports questioning whether chemical weapons had been used were leaked last May, raising questions about manipulation of the OPCW by the West.

However, an OPCW inquiry into the leaks published last week found the authors of the internal reports had only a minor supporting role in the Douma team. Fernando Arias, the OPCW chief, told the organization's member states on Thursday that the two individuals were "not whistleblowers," but rather "individuals who could not accept that their views were not backed by evidence."

He said that the two men, referred to in the report as Inspector A and B, had breached their commitments to the organization, adding that their behavior was even more deplorable since they had incomplete information on the investigation.

The official inquiry said: "Inspector A did not have access to all the documents, witness interviews, laboratory tests and analyzes by independent experts."

It also said he never compiled an official OPCW report, and only wrote a personal document created with incomplete information.

“Inspector B was by contrast on the fact-finding mission and did travel to Damascus in April, but never left the command post because he had not completed the necessary training required to be deployed on-site in Douma,” the inquiry added. “He left the OPCW in August, but continued to approach staff members in an effort to have continued access to and influence over the Douma incident. The majority of the fact-finding team’s work was carried out after he left the organization.”

The two men declined to take part in the investigation, which instead met with 29 witnesses between July 2019 and February 2020.

Both individuals may face legal action.



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British Daesh militants to be put on trial in Syria
Israel ‘nearly shot down passenger jet in Syria’

New 'mercy flight' leaves Houthi-held Yemen capital: WHO

Sat, 2020-02-08 16:07

SANAA: A second medical evacuation flight carrying 24 critically ill Yemenis left the Houthi-held capital Sanaa on Saturday, the World Health Organization said.

"The flight just took off from Sanaa headed to Amman," a WHO spokesperson told AFP.

The plane was carrying men, women and children in need of medical treatment, along with their companions, the spokesperson added.

The flight had been due to leave Sanaa on Friday but was rescheduled for "technical reasons," according to the WHO.

A first "mercy flight" evacuated seven children from Sanaa on Monday for medical treatment in Jordan.

The United Nations is eager to build the necessary confidence between the warring parties in Yemen to enable more such evacuations.

The WHO said Friday it was "committed and working very hard to ensure these Yemeni patients receive the treatment they need."

An Arab coalition that has been fighting in support of the Yemeni government has kept Sanaa airport closed to commercial flights since 2016.

But in November, the coalition announced that it was prepared to allow medical evacuations from the airport as a confidence-building measure to support UN peace efforts.

"This is the first of what we hope will be a number of flights in the medical air bridge," the UN resident coordinator for Yemen, Lise Grande, told AFP after Monday's flight.

The reopening of Sanaa airport is a key demand of the Houthi militia fighting the government and one of the issues being pursued by UN mediators as they seek to relaunch peace talks.



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Global shortage of anti-virus masks: WHO chief
War-torn Yemen braces for China virus