

Syrian Kurds ready for dialogue with Turkey, says SDF chief

Author:

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JEDDAH: Mazloun Kobani, commander of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), expressed the group's readiness for dialogue with Turkey.

"We have tried our best to fix our problems with Turkey. As the SDF, as the YPG, we have had direct talks with Turkey in the past and are ready to do so again. We want peace," he told Al-Monitor on Thursday.

"Turkey should never mistake our goodwill for weakness and should be prepared to reciprocate our goodwill."

Ankara conducted an operation in northern Syria in early October against the People's Protection Units (YPG), the dominant group in the SDF.

The YPG and the SDF have been among Washington's main allies in the fight against Daesh. As such, Ankara's operation created another point of contention between Turkey and the US.

On Oct. 22, 2019, Ankara and Moscow reached a deal under which the YPG would pull back 30 km south of Turkey's border with Syria, to open an area for Turkish-Russian security patrols.

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Mazloun Kobani, DF commander

Amberin Zaman, an expert on Kurdish affairs who conducted the interview with Kobani, said dialogue presents clear benefits for both sides.

"Dialogue could pre-empt further attacks by Turkey," she told Arab News, adding that Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan "has threatened to expand operations, so that's the first big advantage."

Dialogue also gives the SDF some leverage vis-a-vis the Syrian regime and Russia, and makes it easier for the US to remain in northeast Syria as its protector, she said. "For Turkey, it would expand its influence in Syria immediately and directly," she added.

Ankara considers the YPG a terrorist group and the Syrian offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a separatist group that has been fighting the Turkish state for more than 35 years and is designated a terrorist organization by Turkey, the US and the EU.

Zaman said dialogue between the SDF and Turkey offers opportunities for trade, and for an easing of tensions between Ankara and Washington, at least over Syria.

"Most critically, it will set the stage for re-engagement between Ankara and its own Kurds if and when Erdogan feels ready and in need of doing this. It's by now well-established that a military solution is no solution to the Kurdish problem," she added.

FASTFACT

Ankara's operation in Syria created another point of dispute between Turkey and the US.

The tomb of Suleiman Shah, the grandfather of the founder of the Ottoman Empire, was moved by Turkish troops from the Syrian city of Kobani to the village of Esme when Kobani was besieged by Daesh militants.

"We know that Turkey wants to return Suleiman Shah's remains to Kobani and to rebuild his tomb there. Provided that Turkey does not mistake our goodwill for weakness we would be happy to help Turkey ... conduct such an operation in a spirit of peace and based on the understanding that this spirit of peace will be reciprocal," Kobani said, underlying the importance of "confidence-building and goodwill gestures."

Residents of the rebel-held Syrian province of Idlib "are welcome to seek shelter in the areas under our control," he added.

"We know that Turkey, which already has a huge burden with nearly 4 million Syrians living there, is deeply concerned by a fresh influx of up to a million Syrian refugees from Idlib because of escalating regime attacks on Idlib. Our call to the people of Idlib helps relieve Turkey's burden," he said.

"Again, in the spirit of goodwill and above all on humanitarian grounds we are ready to work with Turkey if and when the need arises to help move civilians out of harm's way in Idlib and bring them here."

He said US President Donald Trump gave him his word to help broker peace between the SDF and Ankara. "We do want to end our differences with Turkey," Kobani added.



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Protesters in Iraq defy top cleric, return to the streets
Fighting rages as Libya force pushes toward key western city

[Protesters in Iraq defy top cleric, return to the streets](#)

Author:

Mon, 2020-01-27 02:09

BAGHDAD: Hundreds of anti-government protesters flooded the streets of Iraq's capital and southern provinces on Sunday, defying a powerful Iraqi religious leader who recently withdrew his support from the popular movement.

Security forces fired tear gas and live rounds to disperse the crowds from the capital's Khilani Square, medical and security officials said. The officials spoke on condition of anonymity in line with regulations.

At least 22 demonstrators were reported wounded by Iraqi security forces, as the street rallies continued to grow in size.

The mass protests started in October over widespread government corruption and a lack of public services and jobs. They quickly grew into calls for sweeping changes to Iraq's political system that was imposed after the 2003 US invasion. Iraqi security forces have responded harshly. At least 500 protesters have been killed since the unrest began.

Iraq also has been roiled by US-Iran tensions that threatened a regional war after an American drone strike this month killed top Iranian Gen. Qassem Soleimani near Baghdad.

The US attack pushed the Shiite cleric and political leader, Muqtada Al-Sadr, to turn his influence toward demanding an American troop withdrawal. He also dropped his support for the anti-government movement on Friday.

Hundreds of protesters, mostly students, marched Sunday through key squares in the capital and southern Iraq to show their continued support for the anti-government movement, despite Al-Sadr's reversal of position.

"The demonstrations have become stronger now because of what happened," said Zaidoun, 26, a protest organizer in Baghdad.

HIGHLIGHT

The mass protests started in October over widespread government corruption and a lack of public services and jobs.

Many demonstrators chanted slogans against the populist preacher. The movement opposes Iraq's sectarian system and both US and Iranian influence in Iraqi affairs.

Some protesters were worried, however, that the departure of Al-Sadr's supporters and his militia members from Baghdad's Tahrir Square, the hub of the protest movement, could spark a renewed security crackdown.

On Saturday, hours after Al-Sadr's supporters left protest sites in Baghdad and some southern cities, including Basra, security forces swooped in to clear areas of demonstrators and torch their sit-in tents. At least four protesters were killed in the crackdown.

With Al-Sadr out of the picture, protesters said the only top leader on their side was Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani, Iraq's most revered Shiite cleric. Many said they were hoping his weekly Friday sermon would boost morale ahead of a major planned protest for Jan. 31.

In a statement posted online, Al-Sadr called on the protesters to return their movement to its "initial course," in what many anti-government activists interpreted as a veiled threat.

The statement added that Al-Sadr could boost his support for the "heroic" security forces if protesters didn't heed his calls.

Al-Sadr had called on his followers to stage a rival protest targeting the US embassy on Sunday, before rescinding the order shortly after.

In a statement from his office, Al-Sadr asked Iraqis "who reject the American occupation" to gather at key assembly points later that evening. A spokesperson from his office later said the decision had been reversed.



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Iraq protesters keep up rallies despite pressure from riot police Pope backs Iraqi call for its sovereignty to be respected

'Sesame Street' comforts children displaced by Syrian war

Author:

Mon, 2020-01-27 02:02

NEW YORK: Sesame Workshop, the nonprofit, educational organization behind "Sesame Street," has launched a new, locally produced Arabic TV program for the hundreds of thousands of children dealing with displacement in Syria, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon.

"The thing that became very apparent in our work on the ground is how critical the need was for the children of this region and children who have been affected by traumatic events to have the social and emotional skills they need," said Sherrie Westin, president of Social Impact & Philanthropy at Sesame Workshop.

Called "Ahlan Simsim," which means "Welcome Sesame" in Arabic, the show will feature Elmo, Cookie Monster and Grover, as well as two brand new Muppets – the boy monster Jad, who had to leave his home, and Basma, a purple girl monster who befriends the young stranger. An adorable goat named Ma'zooza adds comic relief.

Each 26-minute show will explore emotions experienced by all kids but particularly relevant to those dealing with trauma and will offer coping skills for feelings like anger, fear, frustration, nervousness and loneliness. In one episode, Basma shares her toys with Jad, since he left his behind. Some of the strategies include belly breathing and expression through art.

SPEEDREAD

The show will feature Elmo, Cookie Monster and Grover, as well as two brand new Muppets – the boy monster Jad, who had to leave his home, and Basma, a purple girl monster who befriends the young stranger. An adorable goat named Ma'zooza adds comic relief.

A variety show in the second half of each episode offers creators the chance to bring in local celebrities and attract an adult audience to hammer home the message. "The humor has to be there always, which is the 'Sesame' spirit," said Khaled Haddad, an executive producer.

"Ahlan Simsim" will premiere Feb. 2 on MBC3, a pan-Arab satellite network that reaches 20 countries in North Africa, the Gulf and the Levant, as well as YouTube and national broadcasters across the region.

Production is based in the Jordanian capital Amman, with input from writers and performers from across the region. Dialects will be diversified, from Jordanian to Saudi.

“We know a lot about children and children’s development and what’s needed. But we always want to learn from people on the ground,” said Westin.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Sesame Street](#)

New show 'Ahlan Simsim' set to introduce kids to two new Arab muppets

[Fighting rages as Libya force pushes toward key western city](#)

Author:

Mon, 2020-01-27 01:36

CAIRO: Officials from Libya's two rival governments said fighting erupted Sunday as the country's east-based forces advanced toward the strategic western city of Misrata, further eroding a crumbling cease-fire agreement brokered earlier this month.

The clashes came just hours after the UN decried "continued blatant violations" of an arms embargo on Libya by several unspecified countries. The violations fly in the face of recent pledges to respect the embargo made by world powers at an international conference in Berlin last week.

Libya sits on Africa's Mediterranean coast, and is divided between rival governments, each supported by various armed militias and foreign backers. It has the ninth largest known oil reserves in the world and the biggest oil reserves in Africa.

Turkey has backed the Tripoli-based GNA, while Haftar, who backs a rival administration in the country's east, has had support from Russia and some Middle Eastern countries.

Haftar's forces were advancing some 120 km east of Misrata, near the town of Abugrain, according to the media office of militias allied with the Tripoli administration. It said clashes were still taking place in the outskirts of Abugrein.

An official with Haftar's forces said they have wrested control of two towns, Qaddaheya and Wadi Zamzam, on their way to Abugrein. The official spoke on condition of anonymity.

Misrata, in western Libya, is the country's second largest city and is home to militias who oppose Haftar and have been extremely important in the government's defense of Tripoli. Haftar's forces have laid siege to the capital since last April. The nationwide truce, brokered by Russia and Turkey, marked the first break in fighting in months, but there have been repeated violations.

SPEEDREAD

Haftar's forces were advancing some 120 km east of Misrata, near the town of Abugrain, according to the media office of militias allied with the Tripoli administration.

Jalel Harchaoui, a Libya expert at The Netherlands Institute of International Relations, said Haftar's swing toward Misrata was a tactic calculated to draw away the Misratan militias defending the capital toward their hometown. He said it had a "good chance of succeeding" and weakening the UN-government's defenses in Tripoli as a result.

Haftar's forces captured Sirte earlier this month, a major below to Tripoli-based administration. Sirte is located about 370 km east of Tripoli.

Late Saturday, the UN support mission in Libya released a statement saying "several (countries) who participated in the Berlin Conference" have been violating the arms embargo.

"Over the last ten days, numerous cargo and other flights have been observed landing at Libyan airports in the western and eastern parts of the country providing the parties with advanced weapons, armored vehicles, advisers and

fighters,” the UN statement said.

Among those who attended the Berlin conference were Russian President Vladimir Putin, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, French President Emmanuel Macron, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, Italian Premier Giuseppe Conte, and US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.

The peace push followed a surge in Haftar’s offensive against Tripoli, which threatened to plunge Libya into chaos rivaling the 2011 conflict that ousted and killed longtime ruler Muammar Qaddafi.

Earlier this month, powerful tribal groups loyal to Haftar also seized several large oil export terminals along the eastern coast as well as southern oil fields. The closure of Libya’s major oil fields and production facilities has resulted in losses of more than \$255 million in the six-day period ending Jan. 23, the country’s national oil company said on Saturday.



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Assad’s grip tightens on strategic Idlib townErdogan faces snub in bid to drag Algeria into Libya war

[Egypt football club chases record](#)

after signing 75-year-old to pro contract

Author:

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CAIRO: A 75-year-old Egyptian footballer has his sights set on becoming the world's oldest professional player following his signing by a third-division club.

Ezz El-Din Bahader was registered with the Egyptian Football Association by the 6th October Football Club, which now wants him to enter the Guinness Book of World Records as the world's oldest pro player. Bahader is far from unfazed by his newfound fame, even comparing himself to Egypt and Liverpool superstar Mohamed Salah.

"He is the top Egyptian professional player and I am the oldest Egyptian player. Age does not matter," Bahader said.

Under the title "Egyptian Premier League Professional at the age of 75," the Football Association issued a statement on its official Facebook page.

"Today, the Egyptian Football Association has registered the oldest professional player in the world during the current winter transfer period. He is 75-year-old Ezz El-Din Bahader, who signed for 6th October in the third division," it said.

Bahader had his first practice with his new club on Friday. Before the warmup, club coach Ahmed Abdel-Ghani had an extended meeting with Bahader, discussing the player's physical readiness, especially since he hopes to score a goal that would make him the oldest player to score.

"I chose shirt number 23," Bahader said. "I will play in two games, one against Egy-Telecom which may go up to the second division. That would be the most challenging game for the team, so I will do my best to win.

"The forward position is tough because the player encounters rough play. However, I believe I play well as a forward and I want to make my dream come true, so I have to face the challenges."

Hossam Bernasos, 6th October vice president, said Bahader was determined to claim the Guinness record.

"We want the honor for Egypt, but he must play in two games according to conditions set by Guinness."

The current record for the world's oldest player is held by an Israeli, Isaak Hiyak, who played as a goalkeeper at the age of 73. "Bahader is a top professional with high physical skills. He is a distinguished player," Bernasos said.

FASTFACT

Ezz El-Din Bahader was registered with the Egyptian Football Association by the 6th October Club, which now wants him to enter the Guinness Book of World Records as the world's oldest pro player.

Ahmed Rabie El-Haddad, a 6th October club board member, told Arab News: "We would do anything that is in the best interests of our country. So we began the process of signing Bahader. We wanted to make his dream come true. Decision-makers should help those who deserve to have their dreams come true."

El-Haddad said that club officials watched a video of Bahader before signing him.

"We are proud that the player who is close to getting into Guinness carries the name of our club," El-Haddad said. "This is good promotion for Egypt and for our club."

El-Haddad believes Bahader can continue to play with the club even after he claims the Guinness record.

"Football is a right for everyone. If he thinks he can continue to play, we welcome him. That will be his decision as well as the decision of the club's coach."

Ahmed Hussein, the club's director of sports activities, said he expected Bahader's first game with the club to take place next month at home.

If Guinness officially names Bahader as the world's oldest player, he will be honored by Egypt's Youth and Sports Minister Ashraf Sobhy.



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Shock and grief: Tributes pour in for Kobe Bryant
The famous Egyptian city square that shaped a nation's history