

US bolsters Middle East force with 1,500 troops as Pentagon blames Iran for tanker attacks

Fri, 2019-05-24 18:50

WASHINGTON: The US will strengthen its force in the Middle East with 1,500 extra troops, Donald Trump said Friday as the Pentagon blamed Iran for an attack on oil tankers off the coast of the UAE.

"We want to have protection in the Middle East," Trump said as he left the White House for a trip to Japan. "We're going to be sending a relatively small number of troops, mostly protective.

"Some very talented people are going to the Middle East right now. And we'll see what happens."

Shortly after his comments, the Pentagon accused Iran's Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) of being directly responsible for attacks on tankers off the UAE earlier this month, describing it as part of a "campaign" by Tehran driving new US deployments.

"The attack against the shipping in Fujairah we attribute it to the IRGC," said Rear Admiral Michael Gilday, the director of the Joint Staff, adding the Pentagon attributed limpet mines used in the attack to the IRGC. He declined to describe "the means of delivery" of the mines.

The 1,500 extra troops will be made up of a deployment of 900 more forces, including engineers, and the extension of a tour by some 600 personnel manning Patriot missiles.

Officials said earlier that members of Congress were notified following a White House meeting Thursday to discuss Pentagon proposals to bolster the force in the region.

Earlier this week, officials said that Pentagon planners had outlined plans that could have sent up to 10,000 military reinforcements to the region. Acting Defense Secretary Patrick Shanahan later said planners had not settled on a figure.

The US began reinforcing its presence in the Arabian Gulf region this month in response to what it said was a threat from Iran.

*With AP and Reuters



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Pentagon plans to send more troops to Middle East amid Iran threat
Pentagon mulling request for 5,000 more US troops to Middle East -Reuters

[Lebanese cabinet approves draft state budget](#)

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Fri, 2019-05-24 14:21

BEIRUT: The heavily indebted Lebanese government approved a draft budget to cut its large deficit on Friday, aiming to ward off a financial crisis which top leaders have warned is bearing down on the country unless it carries out reforms.

The draft 2019 budget, which will cut the deficit to 7.5% of GDP from 11.5% in 2018, is seen as a critical test of the government's will to launch reforms that have been put off for years by a state riddled with corruption and waste.

Lebanon's bloated public sector is its biggest expense, followed by the cost of servicing a public debt equal to some 150% of GDP, one of the world's heaviest debt burdens.

The budget could help unlock some \$11 billion in financing pledged at a Paris donors' conference last year for infrastructure investment, if it wins the approval of donor countries and institutions.

"Now, praise God, we are done. The budget is complete," Information Minister Jamal Jarrah said after a cabinet session.

One more meeting to seal the process will be held at the presidential palace before the draft is referred to parliament for approval. Ministers did not say when the next session would take place.

Fears the budget would lead to cuts to state salaries, pensions or benefits triggered weeks of strikes and protests by public sector workers and military veterans.

Measures to rein in the public sector wage bill include a three-year freeze in all types of state hiring and a cap on extra-salary bonuses. State pension will also be taxed.

However a temporary public sector salary cut mooted by some early in the process was not included.

A big chunk of the deficit cut stems from tax increases including a 2% import tax and a hike in tax on interest payments. The government also plans to cut some \$660 million from the debt servicing bill by issuing treasury bonds at

1% interest rate to the Lebanese banking sector.

The final cabinet approval had been obstructed by a dispute over whether more needed to be done to bring the deficit lower.

But Finance Minister Ali Hassan Khalil, speaking to local media, said "all the clauses and articles" had been agreed. Nobody had raised any objections when Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri said "we are done" at the end of the session, he added.

There was no immediate comment from Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil, who had been demanding further debate.

Deputy Prime Minister Ghassan Hasbani, speaking to Reuters on Thursday, said the draft budget would stabilise the financial situation and avoid "catastrophe" but it fell short of the major structural reforms Lebanon needs.

Economists in Lebanon say it will give a "positive shock" to market confidence against a backdrop of years of low economic growth, concern over a slowdown in the growth of bank deposits and falling central bank net foreign assets.

Aberdeen Standard Investments emerging markets fund manager Kevin Daly said: "We are still sceptical because they still have very little room in the budget." Wages and subsidies made up a large proportion of the deficit, he noted.

"I think the market will come back after the weekend and take a closer look ... the jury is still out on these guys".

Nassib Ghobril, chief economist at Lebanon's Byblos Bank, said the draft budget had stopped increases in government spending but had not reduced them. "They might reduce the deficit to an acceptable level. But it is not a reform budget or an austerity budget, it is a budget based heavily on taxes," he said.

"This is the easy way out for the government to reduce the deficit. If we believe the figure, it is a significant reduction in the deficit, but it is not the way to do it in a stagnating economy, in an economy in need of liquidity."

Jason Tuvey, senior emerging markets economist at Capital Economics, said: "Markets might react positively initially in as far as they've actually managed to agree on a budget after several weeks of deliberations.

"But over longer horizon, we still think that markets in Lebanon will come under pressure again."



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Lebanese budget protesters clash with security in Beirut
No need for more talks over draft budget: Lebanon finance minister

[Lebanon deports 16 Syrians](#)

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Fri, 2019-05-24 12:08

BEIRUT: Lebanon has “summarily deported” at least 16 Syrians, some of them registered refugees, by forcing them to sign “voluntary repatriation forms,” human rights groups said on Friday.

Lebanon hosts nearly one million Syrian refugees – a significant burden for a country of four million people – and there has been mounting pressure for them to go home even though the UN says many areas remain unsafe to return to.

The 16 were all removed to Syria on April 26 after they arrived at Beirut

airport, Human Rights Watch and four other groups said in a joint report. Most of them were sent back to Lebanon after they were barred from entering Cyprus via Turkey, quashing their plans to seek asylum, it said. At least five were registered with the United Nations refugee agency, it added.

"Lebanese authorities shouldn't deport anyone to Syria without first allowing them a fair opportunity to argue their case for protection," said HRW's acting Middle East director, Lama Fakih.

The report said around 30 Syrians have been deported from Beirut airport this year by Lebanon's General Security agency.

The latest deportees said they were "pressured" by General Security officers at the airport into signing documents stating that they were "voluntarily" returning to Syria.

"My biggest fears returning to Syria are that I would be conscripted and have to fight, or that I would be arrested because the regime has me on a wanted list or because of a case of mistaken identity," the report quoted one of the deportees as saying.

"If I wasn't scared of arrest, I wouldn't have left Syria in the first place."

General Security estimates that over 170,000 Syrian refugees returned home from Lebanon between December 2017 and March 2019.



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Northwest Syria fighting damages schools, health facilitiesIndebted Lebanon may struggle to refinance as austerity budget stalls

Pentagon plans to send more troops to Middle East amid Iran threat

Thu, 2019-05-23 01:21

WASHINGTON: The United States is considering deploying more troops to the Middle East as it looks for ways to enhance the protection of its forces in the turbulent region, acting US Defense Secretary Patrick Shanahan said Thursday.

Shanahan denied news reports that plans call for the deployment of as many as 10,000 more troops to the region, where tensions between the US and Iran are on the rise.

“What we’re looking at, are there things that we can do to enhance force protection in the Middle East?” he said, speaking to reporters at the Pentagon. “It may involve sending additional troops.”

Earlier, two US officials told Reuters that the US Department of Defense is considering a US military request to send about 5,000 additional troops to the Middle East amid increasing tensions with Iran.

Tehran and Washington have this month been escalating rhetoric against each other, following US President Donald Trump’s decision to try to cut Iran’s oil exports to zero and beef up the US military presence in the Gulf in response to what he said were Iranian threats.

The officials, speaking on the condition of anonymity, said the request had been made by US Central Command, but added that it was not clear whether the Pentagon would approve the request.

Opinion

This section contains relevant reference points, placed in (Opinion field)

The Pentagon regularly receives – and declines – requests for additional resources from US combatant commands throughout the world.

One of the officials said the requested troops would be defensive in nature. This appeared to be the latest request for additional resources in the face of what US officials have said are credible threats from Iran against US forces and American interests in the Middle East.

The Pentagon declined to comment on future plans.

"As a matter of longstanding policy, we are not going to discuss or speculate on potential future plans and requests for forces," Commander Rebecca Rebarich, a Pentagon spokeswoman, said on Wednesday.

Shanahan said on Tuesday that while threats from Iran in the Middle East remained high, deterrence measures taken by the Pentagon had "put on hold" the potential for attacks on Americans.

The US military deployed a carrier strike group, bombers and Patriot missiles to the Middle East earlier this month in response to what Washington said were troubling indications of possible preparations for an attack by Iran. Trump had warned on Monday that Iran would be met with "great force" if it attacked US interests in the Middle East.

Meanwhile, President Hassan Rouhani said Thursday, that Iran will not surrender to US pressure and will not abandon its goals even if it is bombed. Earlier in the day, Iran's top military chief said the standoff between Tehran and Washington was a "clash of wills", warning that any enemy "adventurism" would meet a crushing response, the semi-official Fars news agency reported.



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IRGC commander warns US battleships in Strait of Hormuz under 'complete Iranian control' Pompeo says 'quite possible' Iran behind Gulf attacks

Two killed in Iraq after vehicle explodes in car wash

Author:

Thu, 2019-05-23 21:45

FALLUJAH: A parked vehicle exploded in Iraq's western province of Anbar, killing two people and wounding two others, a district mayor said on Thursday, the latest attack inside what was once Daesh's last stronghold in the country.

The explosion occurred in Anbar's Qaim district, 300 kilometers west of Baghdad. Iraqi forces retook the area, which lies on the border with Syria, in December 2017, after which they declared final victory over the group. The vehicle was parked inside a car wash, said Qaim Mayor Ahmed Mahallawi. The attack targeted members of the Popular Mobilisation Forces, a group of Iran-backed Shi'ite armed factions who helped defeat the Sunni militants, and successfully killed one, wounding two others. A car wash worker was also killed.



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Daesh revival in Iraq must be prevented, says UN envoy
Iraq aims to ease US-Iran tensions