

Arab League chief: No consensus yet for Syria return

Author:

Mon, 2019-02-11 22:14

BEIRUT: The Arab League said on Monday there was no consensus yet among member states that may allow the reinstatement of Syria's membership which was suspended in 2011 over its crackdown on protesters at the start of the civil war.

In a big diplomatic boost for Assad, the UAE reopened its embassy in Damascus in December, saying it aimed to normalize ties and curb risks of regional interference in "Arab, Syrian affairs" – an apparent reference to Iran and Turkey.

But Arab League Secretary-General and former Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit, speaking during a visit to Beirut, said there was no consensus yet on Syria being allowed back into the League.

"I follow this subject very closely and I do not yet observe conclusions that lead to the consensus that we are talking about and that may lead to an (Arab) foreign ministers meeting in which they announce the end of the difference and therefore call for Syria to return to occupy the seat," he said.

The Arab League is due to hold a summit meeting at the end of March in Tunisia.

Asked about the prospects for Syria's readmission, Aboul Gheit noted that Arab League foreign ministers were due to hold two meetings before the summit.

"But the matter is not time, the matter is will. The matter is consensus among the states," he said.

"For Syria to return, there must be consensus."



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[Syrian state media says Israel artillery strikes Quneitra province](#)

Mon, 2019-02-11 21:38

AMMAN: Israeli tank artillery hit a demolished hospital and an observation post in Syria's southern Quneitra province near the border with Israel, Syrian state media said on Monday, adding there had been only material damage.

The two sites were hit by several tank artillery rounds, state media reported.

Asked about the reported Quneitra strikes, an Israeli military spokeswoman declined comment.

Israel has mounted attacks in Syria as part of its effort to counter the influence carved out there by Iran, which has supported Syrian President

Bashar Assad in the war that erupted in 2011.

A senior Israeli official said in September Israel had carried out more than 200 attacks against Iranian targets in Syria in the last two years. Iranian and Iran-backed groups including Lebanon's Hezbollah have deployed into Syria in support of President Bashar Assad's rule during the war.



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[Young Egyptians trudge through mud to clean up Nile](#)

Author:

Reuters

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1549908899604991200

Mon, 2019-02-11 17:50

CAIRO: Hundreds of young Egyptians, including actress Mai El Gheity, trudged through the mud on the banks of the River Nile to collect tons of old plastic bags, bottles and other rubbish.

The teens and twenty-somethings also climbed into boats to reach trash floating through the center of Cairo during the “Youth for the Nile” clean-up – a program backed by the government and other groups to raise awareness of pollution.

Volunteer Dai Soliman worked on as people watched from a bridge.

“Those people above looking at us must have thought that they threw something in, and now there are some people who are collecting their garbage. So this is awareness, it is direct awareness in action,” she said.

The teams, most wearing the scheme’s white boots and blue and yellow gloves, collected three to four tons of waste on Saturday, the environment ministry said.

A report issued last year by government’s Egyptian Environmental Affairs Agency said 150 million tons of industrial waste end up in the Nile every year.

Similar clean-ups are scheduled in Luxor, Aswan, Assiut and other provinces through the rest of the year.





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[Russia, Turkey agree on need for decisive measures in Idlib](#)

Author:

Mon, 2019-02-11 21:22

MOSCOW: Russia and Turkey's defense ministers agreed on the need to take what they called decisive measures to stabilize the situation in Syria's Idlib province during talks on Monday, Russia's RIA news agency cited a joint statement as saying.

Russia, an important Syrian regime ally, and Turkey brokered a deal in September to create a demilitarized zone in the northwest Idlib region that would be evacuated of all heavy weapons and radical fighters.

However, the area has been the site of continued hostilities with Russia saying that militants who used to belong to the Nusra Front group are in control of large swaths of territory.

A joint statement published after the talks between the two defense ministers in Ankara spoke of "the need in particular to take decisive measures to ensure security in the Idlib demilitarized zone," RIA reported. A UN report seen by Reuters last week estimated there are up to 18,000 Daesh militants in Iraq and Syria, including up to 3,000 foreign fighters.

It warned the group was interested in attacking aviation and using chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear materials.

Some military analysts say Daesh still has enough leaders, fighters, facilitators and financial resources to fuel a menacing insurgency in Syria and Iraq.

The top American commander overseeing American forces in the Middle East earlier said the US was likely just weeks away from starting the withdrawal of ground troops from Syria.

US Army General Joseph Votel, head of the US Central Command, cautioned that the exact timing would depend on the situation in Syria, where DSF troops have launched a final assault against Daesh enclaves near the Iraqi border.

The US military has already started withdrawing equipment from Syria. Asked whether the withdrawal of America's more than 2,000 troops would begin in days or weeks, Votel said: "Probably weeks. But again, it will all be driven by the situation on the ground."

"In terms of the withdrawal ... I think we're right on track with where we

wanted to be," Votel told reporters traveling with him during a trip to the Middle East.

"Moving people is easier than moving equipment and so what we're trying to do right now is again (to) kind of clear out those materials, that equipment, that we do not need."

Trump's surprise announcement in December that he was withdrawing American troops from Syria helped trigger the resignation of his defense secretary, Jim Mattis, and sent US military officials scrambling to construct a withdrawal plan that preserves as many gains as possible.

Hundreds of additional troops have been sent to Syria to facilitate the withdrawal.

US officials have long estimated that the Syria pullout could take until sometime in March or April to execute fully, but have been reluctant to set an exact timeline given hard-to-predict battlefield conditions.

Votel did not speculate about when the drawdown would be completed.

One big question has been whether some US forces in Syria might move to Iraq, where the US has more than 5,000 troops helping Baghdad fight Daesh and prevent the group's resurgence.

Votel said he did not believe the US would broadly increase overall troop numbers in Iraq.

He did leave open the possibility of changing the composition of forces to help the US keep pressure on the militant group.

Referring to future US troop levels in Iraq, Votel said: "I think it's going to remain more or less steady."

"This isn't just wholesale – 'Everybody in Syria move over to Iraq.' That doesn't make sense," Votel said.

Votel is one of many current and former US officials who have warned of the risk of a resurgence by Daesh unless the US and its allies can keep pressure on the group following the US withdrawal.

But a clear US plan on how to keep up the pressure has yet to be articulated. It is also unclear whether the United States will be able to satisfy the security concerns in Syria of its NATO ally Turkey without sacrificing the interests of US-backed Kurdish fighters there.

Ankara sees the Kurdish militia as terrorists.

Washington views the Kurdish militia as loyal partners in the fight against Islamic State, whose help will likely continue to be needed to prevent the group's resurgence.

The Pentagon's own internal watchdog released a report last week warning

about the risks still posed by Islamic State. It cautioned that, absent sustained pressure, the group would likely resurge in Syria within six to 12 months and retake some limited territory.



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Airstrikes kill 16 civilians as US-backed Syrian forces battle to take last Daesh pocket
Withdrawal of US forces in Syria likely to start in 'weeks' – US general

[Egypt arrests students for mocking Christianity online](#)

Author:

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1549908899574991100

Mon, 2019-02-11 17:40

CAIRO: Egyptian authorities have arrested four students for mocking Christian rituals in an online video and ordered them to be kept in custody for four

days, a judicial source said Monday.

The university students aged between 19 and 24 were accused of being in “contempt of the Christian religion,” the source said.

If tried and found guilty they could face up to five years in prison.

They were arrested last week and remanded in custody by the state prosecutor overnight Sunday.

At the end of January they posted a video on YouTube in which they were allegedly seen mocking Coptic hymns and prayers.

But they later removed the clip and posted an apology online.

Copts, a Christian minority which accounts for 10 percent of Egypt’s 98 million people, have repeatedly complained of marginalization in the mostly Muslim country.

In recent years they have been targeted by Daesh group extremists.

Trials for “contempt” of Christianity are rare in Egypt where more frequently charges are levelled for contempt of Islam usually against liberal Muslim intellectuals.

In 2016 four Coptic teenagers were found guilty of being in contempt of Islam and three of them were handed five-year sentences each after mocking Muslim prayer in a video.

Later that year they fled the country, traveling to Switzerland where they obtained political asylum.



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