

US calls on nations to repatriate militants as it leaves Syria

Author:

Tue, 2019-02-05 22:04

WASHINGTON: The US urged other countries Monday to bring home hundreds of Daesh fighters captured in Syria, a delicate issue for allies such as France and Britain as President Donald Trump withdraws troops.

Washington drew a line on the militants two days before foreign ministers from Europe and the Middle East gather in the US capital for talks on how to fight Daesh, once the US military presence ends.

US allies have been grappling for weeks with what to do with foreign fighters detained in the war-ravaged country by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), who have warned that they may not be able to guard their jails once US troops leave.

"The United States calls upon other nations to repatriate and prosecute their citizens detained by the SDF and commends the continued efforts of the SDF to return these foreign terrorist fighters to their countries of origin," State Department spokesman Robert Palladino said in a statement.

"Despite the liberation of Daesh-held territory in Iraq and Syria, Daesh remains a significant terrorist threat and collective action is imperative to address this shared international security challenge," Palladino said.

Another US official, speaking to reporters on condition of anonymity, acknowledged that northeastern Syria had become a "very fluid space."

"As events unfold, there are any number of scenarios under which positive control of some of the individuals currently in custody could change," the official said.

He voiced concern that militants could then leave Syria for "other, more permissive places around the world from which they could seek to carry forward the fight."

Trump stunned Western allies on Dec. 19 by announcing that the US would pull its 2,000 troops out of Syria, declaring that Daesh had been defeated.

One of the countries most concerned is France, which has been hit by a series of Daesh-inspired attacks including the grisly November 2015 siege of the Bataclan nightclub in Paris.

France – which along with Britain maintains a small deployment of special forces in Syria – last week opened the door to bringing back its citizens, after earlier insisting that the militants should be prosecuted locally and not step foot back in France.

The French Foreign Ministry said its goal was to “avoid the escape and scattering of these potentially dangerous individuals” and acknowledged that the situation on the ground was changing with the US withdrawal.

A French security source, speaking on condition of anonymity, earlier told AFP 130 people could be repatriated. A second French official said the group included 70 to 80 children held with their mothers.

Britain has, meanwhile, been grappling with what to do with the two surviving members of a quartet – nicknamed “The Beatles” for their accents – who were notorious for videotaped beheadings.

Britain has shown no interest in bringing home the Kurdish-jailed pair, Alexandra Amon Kotey and El Shafee El-Sheikh, amid reports they were stripped of their nationality.

A report last year said the US was willing to take them in its military prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba – an option that would be deeply controversial in Britain, partly due to the US practice of the death penalty.



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Daesh fighters pinned in tiny Syria enclave with families US troops to stay in Syria as long as Iran forces operate on foreign soil – Bolton

Lack of funding may prevent over half of Libya's local elections

Tue, 2019-02-05 21:17

TRIPOLI: At least 69 municipal councils out of 120 in Libya may not hold elections in March due to a lack of funding by the UN-backed government, the head of the elections committee said.

Libyan authorities allowed municipal elections in 2013 in a bid to end a decades-long legacy of centralization of administration and help communities manage their local affairs.

But the degradation of security conditions after the toppling of long-ruling Muammar Qaddafi and irregular funding hindered the process.

Holding elections to renew the municipal councils requires at least 50 million Libyan dinars (\$36 million), Salem Bentahia, head of the Central Committee for Municipal Councils Elections told Reuters in an interview. For now, the committee has only received 30 percent of that budget, he said.

FASTFACT

Constituency registration has been reopened with more than 800,000 voters on the list including 504,136 women, according to official figures.

Without government funds the committee is unable to launch awareness-raising programs on the importance of municipal elections, Bentahia said.

Officials at the internationally recognized government in Tripoli were not immediately available for comment.

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French air strikes 'repel incursion into Chad from Libya' Eastern Libya government delegation visits key southern city of Sabha

[New head of UN observer mission lands in Yemen](#)

Author:

Tue, 2019-02-05 21:09

SANAA: Retired Danish general Michael Lollesgaard arrived Tuesday in Sanaa to head the UN observer mission in war-racked Yemen and replace his predecessor whose ties with the rebels were reportedly strained.

Lollesgaard replaces Patrick Cammaert, the Dutch general who had been tapped a little over a month ago to lead the mission deployed in the lifeline Red Sea port city of Hodeida.

The new mission head made no comments upon his arrival in Sanaa, an AFP correspondent said, and it was not clear when exactly he would begin his mission in Hodeida.

He will oversee a team of 75 unarmed observers to monitor a fragile ceasefire deal for Hodeida agreed in December between the Huthis and the Yemeni government at UN-brokered talks in Sweden.

Diplomats say relations have been strained between Cammaert and the Iran-linked Huthi rebels battling the Saudi-backed government, and with the UN envoy to Yemen, Martin Griffiths.

Some Huthis have accused him of running his own agenda, a claim disputed by the United Nations which said his only mission was to improve the lives of the embattled Yemeni people.

On January 17, his convoy came under fire in the flashpoint city of Hodeida but he and his team escaped unhurt and the UN said the source of the shooting was unknown.

Hodeida port is the entry point for the bulk of Yemen's supplies of imported goods and humanitarian aid, providing a lifeline to millions on the brink of starvation.

Lollesgaard, born in 1960, commanded the UN peacekeeping force in Mali (MINUSMA) from 2015 to 2016, and he then became Denmark's military representative to NATO and the European Union in 2017.

He was also military adviser to Denmark's UN mission in New York and served in peace support operations in Iraq and Bosnia

His new appointment was endorsed at the end of January by the UN Security Council.

Yemen's rebels have been mired in a war with government forces backed since 2015 by a Saudi-led military coalition.

The conflict has triggered what the UN calls the world's worst humanitarian crisis, with millions of people at risk of starvation.

The World Health Organization has put the death toll since 2015 at about 10,000 people but rights groups say that figure could be five times higher.



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UN-backed talks start in Jordan to discuss stalled Yemen prisoner exchange
Jordan to host new talks on Yemen prisoner swap

[Sudan minister appeals to youth as protests continue](#)

Tue, 2019-02-05 20:57

KHARTOUM: Sudan's defense minister said on Monday that young people caught up in recent turmoil had "reasonable ambition," the second apparently conciliatory gesture in three days from a senior government figure.

Students, activists and other protesters frustrated with economic hardships have held almost daily demonstrations across Sudan since Dec. 19, mounting the most sustained challenge to President Omar Al-Bashir's three decades in power.

Defense Minister Awad Mohamed Ahmed Ibn Auf did not directly address the protesters' concerns, but said the situation in the country showed a schism between young and old.

That, he added, "requires intergenerational communication and fair solutions to youth problems and realizing their reasonable ambition."

Recent events "showed the need to reshape political entities, parties and armed movements of the political scene with a different mindset than before," he said during a briefing with military officers, according to a ministry statement.

The minister did not spell out what kind of reshaping should take place and there was no immediate response from opposition parties, which have backed the demonstrations.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Rights groups say at least 45 people have been killed during clashes with security services.
- People have taken to the streets across Sudan, frustrated with price hikes and shortages in cash, bread, petrol and other essentials.

Police dispersed dozens of protesters in the Shambat neighborhood of Khartoum on Monday and dozens more across the Nile in Omdurman, the capital's twin

city, witnesses said.

People have taken to the streets across Sudan, frustrated with price hikes and shortages in cash, bread, petrol and other essentials, calling for Al-Bashir to go. Many have echoed slogans used in the Muslim world's "Arab Spring" uprisings.

Rights groups say at least 45 people have been killed during clashes with security services, while the government puts the death toll at 30, including two security personnel.

Al-Bashir has shown no sign of being prepared to concede any power and has blamed the protests on foreign agents, challenging his rivals to seek power through the ballot box.

But Prime Minister Moataz Moussa on Saturday appeared to soften the official stance on the protests, describing demonstrators' calls for better living conditions as "legitimate."



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Sudan's Bashir vows rural development as new protests loom Sudan police fire tear gas on protest after prayers

Beirut ministry barriers removed after snarling traffic for years

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Tue, 2019-02-05 13:17

BEIRUT: Lebanon's Interior Ministry removed concrete security barriers in central Beirut on Tuesday that had for years choked a major road nearby, days after the long-delayed formation of a new government.

The office of the outgoing minister, Nohad Machnouk, said he had ordered the barriers removed "owing to the end of security reasons," due in part to his five-year "fight against terrorism."

But the office of the new minister, Raya Al-Hassan, told local TV that she had taken the decision in order to remove a daily encumbrance and improve transport.

Cranes were brought in to lift the concrete panels, each painted with the Lebanese flag.

Cab driver Ibrahim Sauli, 65, said he was no fan of Hassan's politics but added: "I raise my hat to this minister. She's not scared and she wants to work properly."

Hassan is one of a record four women ministers in the new cabinet. Machnouk will pass the baton at a ceremony on Wednesday.

In recent years, Lebanon has suffered from a spillover of tension and sometimes violence from neighboring Syria, where the Lebanese Shiite Hezbollah movement has fought in support of President Bashar Assad.

The last deadly militant operation in Lebanon took place in 2016, when suicide attackers carried out a string of bombings in a village in the north.



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