

Foreign troops in Iraq cut by a quarter in 2018, says PM

Author:

Thu, 2019-01-17 00:18

BAGHDAD: Foreign troop numbers in Iraq fell by a quarter during 2018, Prime Minister Adel Abdel Mahdi said, as the fallout fizzled from Washington's announcement it was withdrawing from neighboring Syria.

"In January 2018 there had been almost 11,000 foreign fighters, about 70 percent of them are American, the others are from other countries," Abdel Mahdi told a weekly press briefing on Tuesday evening.

"In December, the numbers have been reduced to almost 8,000, and the American troops are around 6,000... maybe I am wrong by some hundreds."

Abdel Mahdi said that more than 12 months after the government declared victory over Daesh in Iraq, the drawdown was accelerating.

"In recent months, the decrease has sped up and in the last two months there was a drop of 1,000 forces," he said.

US President Donald Trump has said that US troops will remain in Iraq after the withdrawal of all troops from Syria and will be available to take action against Daesh on the other side of the border if necessary.

US troop numbers in Iraq peaked at some 170,000 during the battle against Al-Qaeda and other insurgents that followed the US-led invasion of 2003.

Trump's predecessor Barack Obama ordered a withdrawal that was completed in 2011, but in 2014 ordered a new deployment as part of a US-led coalition battling Daesh, which had proclaimed a "caliphate" in large swathes of Iraq and Syria under its control.

Daesh is now confined to a shrinking enclave of just 15 sq. km in eastern Syria not far from the border where Kurdish-led forces have been engaged in a major offensive with coalition support since May last year.

In Iraq, the militants maintain sleeper cells in the cities and hideouts in sparsely populated desert and mountain areas from which they carry out periodic hit-and-run attacks, some of them deadly.



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[Arab delegations arrive in Beirut for economic summit](#)

Wed, 2019-01-16 23:54

BEIRUT: Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri expressed deep regret for the absence of a Libyan delegation at an Arab Economic Summit taking place in Lebanon later this week.

Hariri was speaking at the Union of Arab Chambers (UAC) headquarters in Beirut on Wednesday.

“Good ties with brothers must prevail,” he said. “We are hoping for this summit to result in practical recommendations for promoting and raising living standards among all Arabs. What makes the summit on Sunday very important is that it will be the first to be held after the launch of the UN

Sustainable Development Goals in 2015.”

Libya boycotted the summit after it said members of the Amal militia had disrespected the Libyan flag.

Addressing representatives from several Arab countries, Hariri called for updating decades-old local laws and enabling citizens to travel freely between Arab countries.

He also shed light on the importance of women taking part in politics and national economic development, “as they are capable of mitigating political conflicts.”

Lebanon has reportedly invested \$10 million into the event even as it grapples with dire economic woes.

Among the talking points of this year’s summit was poverty.

“The summit is being held amid an atmosphere of change, shifting alliances, a worrying global economic scene and tough local economic conditions,” said Mohammed Choucair, president of the Federation of Chambers of Commerce, Industry and Agriculture.

He called for “immunizing the Arab economy through implementing signed projects, facilitating trade and investment among Arab countries and encouraging creative initiatives.” Many, however, feel the country is not in any position to be funding nor hosting such an event.

“It has been eight months almost and still we have no government,” said Omar Itani, a small corner shop owner feeling the pinch as a result of the economic downturn plaguing the country.

“They spend all this money on hosting a summit, while our homes are getting flooded and roads being pulled apart by these storms. Wouldn’t it be better to use the money to help us citizens?”

Economy and Trade Minister Raed Khoury called on enhancing private sector participation and growth rates.

“The public sector must involve companies from the private sector, as well as banks and funds, in the financing process to help raise growth rates, which slowed considerably in the wake of the Syrian refugee influx,” he said.

Kamal Hassan Ali, assistant secretary-general at the Arab League, and Mohammed Abdo, UAC president, also spoke at the event.

Delegations of Arab ambassadors and delegates had begun arriving into the capital ahead of the weekend summit, including a Saudi delegation headed by Hussein Al-Shawish, economic adviser at the Finance Ministry, a Kuwaiti delegation and a Moroccan delegation, headed by the Moroccan Ambassador to Egypt Ahmed Al-Tazi, who said that Morocco would be represented by Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita.

Lebanon hosted two Arab League summits in 1956 and 2002. Economic and social development summits previously took place in Kuwait in 2009, Sharm El-Sheikh in 2011 and Riyadh in 2013. The 2015 summit, which was scheduled to take place in Tunis, was canceled amid security concerns.

Early in the third quarter of 2018, there were reports that Lebanon was teetering on the brink of economic collapse. Economists said the catalyst was the failure to form a government.

Lebanon's Central Bank Governor Riad Salameh said the country would launch an electronic platform to enhance share and goods trading, "thus promoting the market to attract liquidity from Lebanon and abroad."

He said: "We will continue supporting the digital economy, for it is an important sector with a bright future and it highly benefits Lebanon. In 2018, our studies showed that the economic growth was between 1 and 1.5 percent, while in the region, it was at 2 percent. We would have been able to reach the 2-percent rate if the government had been formed on time."



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Lebanon's Berri urges postponement of Arab Economic Summit, MPs say
Riyadh traffic diverted for Arab economic summit

France condemns failed Iran satellite launch, urges halt to missile tests

Author:

Wed, 2019-01-16 23:36

PARIS, LONDON: France on Wednesday condemned a failed Iranian satellite launch that it said used technology applicable to long-range missiles and urged Tehran to stop all ballistic tests which are not in line with UN resolutions.

It was the latest in a string of French comments expressing irritation at Iran's ongoing ballistic missile program despite attempts over the last two years by France and other European powers to open talks on the subject with Iranian authorities.

"The Iranian ballistic program is a source of concern for the international community and France," Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Agnes von der Muhll said.

Iran's bid to send a satellite into orbit failed on Tuesday as the space vehicle, named Payam, did not reach adequate speed in the third stage of the launch.

Ignoring US and European warnings to avoid such activity, President Hassan Rouhani said on Wednesday that the Islamic Republic would be ready for a new satellite launch in a few months. "We have achieved great success in building satellites and launching them. That means we are on the right track," Rouhani was quoted as saying by state media.

"The remaining problems are minor, will be resolved in a few months, and we will soon be ready for a new launch."

Iran, which considers its space program a matter of national pride, has said its space-vehicle launches and missile tests are not violations of UN resolutions and would continue.

Iran has repeatedly denied any intent to develop nuclear weapons and curbed its disputed uranium enrichment program under a 2015 deal with world powers.

But the pact is now at risk after President Donald Trump withdrew the US from it, in part because it did not cover Iran's ballistic missile program, and reimposed tough sanctions on Tehran.

Western concern

Western powers are concerned that the long-range ballistic technology used to put satellites into orbit could also be used to launch nuclear warheads.

"We call on Iran not to proceed with new ballistic missile tests designed to

be able to carry nuclear weapons, including space launchers, and urge Iran to respect its obligations under all UN Security Council resolutions,” von der Muhll said.

The US warned Iran this month against undertaking three planned rocket launches that it said would violate a UN Security Council resolution because they use ballistic missile technology.



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Iran satellite launch flops UN Security Council to meet on Iran missile test

[Yemen rivals start talks in Jordan on prisoner deal](#)

Author:

Wed, 2019-01-16 23:23

AMMAN: Yemen's warring sides started talks on Wednesday in the Jordanian capital Amman about a deal to free thousands of prisoners as part of UN-led peace efforts, two UN sources said.

Delegates from the Iran-backed Houthi militia and the Yemeni government had arrived in Amman earlier. They will discuss the implementation of a deal agreed in UN-led talks in Sweden in December that would allow thousands of families to be reunited.

“The meetings of the two sides with us began,” a UN source not authorized to speak publicly told Reuters.

Western nations, some of which supply arms and intelligence to an Arab military coalition backing the government, had pressed the two sides to agree on confidence-building steps to pave the way for a wider truce and a political process to end the war, which has killed tens of thousands of people.

The deal to free prisoners was part of confidence-building measures that included a plan to withdraw from the contested port city of Hodeidah, a lifeline for millions facing famine, and place it under the control of an interim entity.

The two sides exchanged lists of some 15,000 prisoners for a swap agreed at the start of the Sweden talks and delegates said it would be conducted via the militant-held Sanaa airport in north Yemen and the government-held Sayun airport in the south.

The process would be overseen by the UN and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). The operation will require the Arab coalition to guarantee that air space is secure for flights, the ICRC said.



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Jordan to host Yemen talks on prisoner exchange UN Security Council approves Hodeidah ceasefire monitoring force in Yemen

[Iraq-Iran football match prompts awkward silence from Tehran-backed politicians in Baghdad](#)

Author:

Wed, 2019-01-16 22:28

BAGHDAD: A much-anticipated football match between Iran and Iraq on Wednesday ended in an anticlimactic 0-0 draw. But in Baghdad, the Asian Cup clash proved fertile ground for Iraqi fans to poke fun at the crisis-ridden new government and express their rejection of Iranian influence in their country.

Many criticized Iran-backed political leaders in the build-up to the match for remaining silent and not encouraging the Iraqi national team against Iran.

Some even accused forces sponsored by Tehran of supporting the Iranian team instead of their own national players.

The game in Dubai was played against the backdrop of a tense political stand off in Iraq between pro and anti-Iran parties.

Iran has sought to deepen its influence in Iraq since the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003. It supports armed factions and political parties, and increased its military involvement during the Daesh occupation of large parts of the country.

Iran-backed parliamentary blocs have been at loggerheads with rival groups for control of key government positions since an election in May.

Government figures and many MPs remained silent about the match, despite racing to encourage and congratulate the national team during previous games.

One senior Iraqi official told Arab News that the failure of some politicians to get behind the Iraqi team was “embarrassing”.

“Most of our political leaders have been silent as they are all busy praying that the Iraqi team will not win,” the official said. “How can they

congratulate Iraqis on a victory against Iran?" he added sarcastically.

Fans were similarly bemused, posting scathing comments on social media.

"Today is the match between our team and the team of our lords," Jaafar Al-Kinani, wrote on his Facebook page. "We ask God to help us determine which team we have to support."

"I will support the referee. I cannot encourage any of the teams for fear of angering the other team," Mustafa Nassir, wrote on his page.

Other fans posted more sincere calls for Iraqis to get behind their team despite the politics.

"All Iraqis will encourage the Iraqi team, even those close to Iran," Ziyad Al-Dulaimaim, an activist from the Sunni-dominated western province of Anbar, wrote. "In 2007, our regions were under Al-Qaeda militants' control and when the Iraqi team won the championship, everyone took to the street to celebrate, including the gunmen."

Both Iraq and Iran had already qualified for the next round when they played on Wednesday. But a win against a strong team like Iran would have revived Iraqi hopes that they could reach the final.

In the build up to the match, many of the giant screens in Baghdad replayed previous Iraqi victories over Iran.

The last was in 2015 in the semifinal of the same tournament, when Iraq won in a penalty shootout.

Cafes and clubs prepared for the match by offering free entry for families and decorating their facades with Iraqi flags. Thousands of Iraqis watched the match outside on the streets.

Both Iraq and Iran have won the Asian Cup in recent years. Iraq famously won in 2007 just four years after the fall of Saddam Hussein in a victory that came as the country was wracked by violence.



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