

# New Palestinian party wants to 'unify resistance to occupation'

Sat, 2019-01-05 22:21

AMMAN: A new Palestinian political party wants to unify factions to increase resistance to the occupation, one of its members has told Arab News.

The Palestinian Democratic Group is the latest arrival on the territory's political scene, which is dominated by the rivalry between Hamas and Fatah.

It was formally launched on Jan. 3 in Gaza and Ramallah and comprises political parties and civil society organizations.

Qais Abu Layla said one of the group's most important goals was to unify Palestinian factions to increase resistance to the occupation, and to oppose policies designed to weaken Palestinian democracy and increase fragmentation.

A split between Hamas and Fatah, which has sometimes spilled over into deadly violence, has seen rival administrations run by Hamas in Gaza and by President Mahmoud Abbas' Palestinian Authority in the West Bank. Attempts to reconcile the two have failed.

"Our position is not only opposed to the PLO (Palestine Liberation Organization) leadership but also to Hamas. We feel both are responsible for the split and the negative results that it has produced," Abu Layla told Arab News.

"While we oppose the dissolving of the PLC (Palestinian Legislative Council) we believe that the idea of elections within six months can be a way out of the impasse for the reconciliation."

The elections must include Gaza and Jerusalem and they should be based on proportional representation, he added.

But the party's motives have been called into question by some.

Suheir Ismael, founding director of women's media NGO TAM, said the group's scope was too narrow.

"The group was created after people lost their salaries as members of the Palestinian Legislative Council. To be honest, most people are very skeptical of any political move that is largely on paper, " she told Arab News.

"If they want to make a difference they need to address people's daily needs, such as the issue of the new social security law that has invigorated Palestinians more than any political position."

Najeeb Qaddoumi, a member of the Palestinian National Council and a senior Fatah leader in Jordan, said unity was an admirable goal but that the new

party must be honest and take a stand if needed.

“Many of its policies are identical to those of Fatah and we call on this new coalition to denounce the undemocratic actions of Hamas especially their latest violent actions in Gaza and their destruction to the studios of the Palestinian Broadcasting corporation,” he told Arab News.

Abu Layla said he was aware of apathy among Palestinians when it came to politics – and even hinted at the party’s potential to flop.

“To be honest there is no guarantee that this group will succeed, but we have assembled a comprehensive group... we are realistic in our view and know that we have differences between us. But we need to find common ground that is based on the minimum policies that we all agree to,” he said.



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[\*\*Idlib clashes stir debate over de-\*\*](#)

# escalation deal

Author:

Sat, 2019-01-05 22:01

ANKARA: Escalating clashes between Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and Ankara-backed National Front for Liberation (NFL) in Syria's northwestern Idlib province have raised concerns about a deal to set up de-escalation zones in the region.

The deal was brokered between Turkey, Russia and Iran in September 2017.

The Al-Qaeda linked HTS, trying to control key roads in the province, has increased its activity in southern Idlib and the city of Hama and captured some villages from Turkish-backed militant groups.

The clashes led to the death of more than a 100 civilians and fighters, the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported.

A separate deal, signed last September in the Black Sea resort of Sochi, said the areas where the clashes took place were due to be cleared of heavy weaponry. The deal also required Russia to ensure the status quo in Idlib and avoid military attacks in the region.

But this deal is not yet fully implemented as Russia launched an airstrike in southern Idlib, resulting in significant damage.

In a joint declaration published Friday, local councils in Syria called for the establishment of a humanitarian corridor as a precaution in case the clashes spread to urban areas. The province is home to about 3 million people.

Turkey has 12 observation posts in the region and has raised the alert level as some of the posts, manned by Turkish troops, are close to areas where there has been fighting.

HTS, which dominates more than half the region, remains the most powerful rebel alliance in Idlib and is considered a terrorist group by Ankara.

Sinan Hatahet, an Istanbul-based expert on Syria, said clashes were expected because HTS has been trying to consolidate its power over Idlib.

"This is a major point of disagreement between Russia, Iran on the one hand, and Turkey on the other. Moscow and Tehran want Turkey to be more assertive to counter HTS in Idlib, but Turkey is not willing to spend any finances and resources for such a fight that is very complicated," he told Arab News.

Ankara had it made it clear that its strategic interest lay in northern Aleppo and some areas in northern Idlib, he added, but that the de-escalation deal was not currently under threat.

"The Syrian regime might exploit the chaos to attack certain areas to grab

land around the demilitarized zone. But the de-escalation zone will remain even if the regime attacks, because the agreement is between Turkey and Russia and Turkey hasn't really intervened.

"It is an infighting spiral that will always keep on going unless Turkey gets guarantees that it stays definitely in Idlib. But even then Turkey's engagement in Idlib is only to prevent major refugee spillover," he added.

Dr. Kerim Has, a Russia analyst, said Moscow was sticking to its position of eliminating armed groups in the region with the help of the Turkish army and its proxies.

"I think it's not the end of the de-escalation agreement yet. But it demonstrates on what the last Turkish-Russian negotiations with high level officials were principally locked in Moscow, and what Russia prioritizes in Syria for now, namely the Idlib dossier, on the background of US withdrawal from Syria," he told Arab News.

"Besides, the Russian side is becoming more inclined to functionalize the Idlib deadlock as a Damocles' sword on Turkey's own security during the bargaining process with Ankara on the east of the Euphrates."

Turkey was determined to carry out a new large-scale military operation in northeast Syria, he said, and Russia was reminding it of the responsibility its leaders had taken for the "gigantic powder keg" Idlib in the Sochi deal.

Has said Moscow would deploy this tactic for a while, at least until negotiations between Russia and the US and talks between Damascus and the People's Democratic Party (PYD) and its armed wing, the People's Protection Unit (YPG).

"Russia's possible 'green light' to the Turkish side for a new military operation in northeast Syria is directly and substantially related to the results of these negotiations," Has added.

The increasing clashes in Idlib were weakening Turkey's position in terms of its negotiations with Russia, and also undermining its ambitious military offensive plans ahead of a high-level US visit to Ankara next week, he added.

Big hitters John Bolton, Gen. Joseph F. Dunford Jr., and James Jeffrey are due to meet their Turkish counterparts to discuss the latest developments in Syria.

"According to official statements, the Trump administration is aiming to keep the US' Kurdish allies, including YPG forces, which are the number one enemy of Ankara, in a 'safe basin' in Syria," Has said.

It would be harder for Turkey to realize its claims, he added, as requests would increasingly reflect US plans in Syria.



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## [Hamas arrests 5 over Palestinian government media raid](#)

Author:

AFP

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Sat, 2019-01-05 17:01

GAZA CITY: Hamas authorities in the Gaza Strip arrested five men Saturday over a raid at the Palestinian Authority's media headquarters, in which valuable equipment was destroyed.

Five armed men attacked the offices of the Palestinian Broadcasting Corporation in Gaza City on Friday, trashing equipment worth thousands of dollars.

The media centre is funded by the West Bank-based Palestinian government and houses Palestine TV and the Voice of Palestine radio station.

Staff and a PA official initially blamed the raid on Hamas, which runs the Gaza Strip, but the movement said disgruntled PA employees were responsible. All five arrested are “employees of the Palestinian Authority whose salaries have been cut recently,” the Hamas-run interior ministry in Gaza said. “It turned out that one of them was a Palestine TV employee whose salary was cut last month.”

Hamas seized control of Gaza from the PA in 2007, a year after winning parliamentary elections that were rejected by much of the international community.

Despite losing power in the enclave, the PA continues to pay tens of thousands of civil servants there.

But it has reduced salaries in recent years due to financial shortfalls, causing much ire among its employees.



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First Gaza rocket in six weeks draws Israeli response

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# US warns Syria over chemical weapons ahead of troops withdrawal

Author:

Reuters

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Sat, 2019-01-05 13:56

TEL AVIV: US National Security Adviser John Bolton has warned the Syrian government it should not see the impending US military withdrawal from the country as an invitation to use chemical weapons.

US President Donald Trump said in December that US troops had succeeded in their mission to defeat Daesh militants and were no longer needed in the country.

The announcement, which took officials in Washington and allies abroad by surprise, contributed to Jim Mattis' decision to resign as US defense secretary and prompted concern that Daesh could stage a comeback.

"There is absolutely no change in the US position against the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime and absolutely no change in our position that any use of chemical weapons would be met by a very strong response, as we've done twice before," Bolton told reporters on his plane shortly before landing in Tel Aviv, Israel.

"So the regime, the Assad regime, should be under no illusions on that question," said Bolton, who is on a four-day trip to Israel and Turkey. Trump has twice bombed Syria over the government's alleged use of chemical weapons, in April 2017 and April 2018. In September a senior US official said there was evidence showing chemical weapons were being prepared by Syrian government forces in Idlib, the last major rebel stronghold in the country. More than half a million people have died during the Syrian war and 11 million have been forced to flee their homes.

During his trip Bolton is set to meet with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan. He said he was not suggesting Syria appeared ready to use chemical weapons.

"As we elaborate how the (US troop) withdrawal is going to occur and the circumstances, we don't want the Assad regime to see what we do as representing any diminution in our opposition to the use of weapons of mass destruction," he said.

If chemical weapons were to be used, "a lot of options would be on the table ... if they don't heed the lessons of those two strikes the next one will be more telling," Bolton said.



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## [UN envoy arrives in Yemen to push Hodeidah truce](#)

Sat, 2019-01-05 16:43

SANAA: The UN envoy for Yemen arrived in the capital Sanaa on Saturday for talks to shore up a ceasefire in the country's lifeline port city of Hodeidah, an AFP photographer said.

Martin Griffiths is scheduled to hold talks in Sanaa with Houthi leaders and will later travel to the Saudi capital Riyadh to meet Yemeni government officials.

He will also meet in the Houthi-held capital with retired Dutch general Patrick Cammaert, who has been appointed by the UN to head the truce monitoring team.

Griffiths' visit comes as the ceasefire in Hodeidah was generally holding, although there have been intermittent clashes with both sides blaming each other.

Yemen's government has written to the UN Security Council to accuse the Houthi militia of failing to comply with the ceasefire, while the rebels have accused the Arab coalition of carrying out low-altitude flights over the city.

The United Nations is hoping to bring the warring sides together later this month, possibly in Kuwait, to follow up on the progress made at December's talks in Stockholm, diplomats have said.

The UN Security Council is expected to hear a report from Griffiths next week, but no date has been set for that meeting.

The war between the Houthis and troops loyal to the internationally-recognised government escalated in March 2015, when President Abedrabbo Mansour Hadi fled into Saudi exile and the Arab coalition intervened. The conflict has unleashed the world's worst humanitarian crisis according to the UN, which says 14 million Yemenis are on the brink of famine.



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