

Turkish, Syrian forces edge close to each other in Manbij

Fri, 2018-12-28 23:41

ANKARA: With Syrian regime forces' entry into the strategic northwestern city of Manbij on Friday amid Turkey's massing of troops along the countries' border, strategic cards are being redistributed.

Isolated by the US announcement of a full withdrawal from Syria, the Kurdish militia that controls the area recently asked the regime for help ahead of a potential Turkish offensive.

The Syrian national flag has reportedly been raised in the center of Manbij, which is located on the western bank of the Euphrates river and about 30 km south of the Turkish-Syrian border.

Ankara considers the Syrian-Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) an extension of the Turkish Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which is outlawed in Turkey and has waged a bloody insurgency for more than three decades. Moscow does not regard the YPG as a terrorist group.

Turkey's Defense Ministry said the YPG cannot make statements on behalf of the region's people or "invite other elements" to take control of it.

Ankara said regime forces' entry into Manbij is a "psychological act," but Moscow said it is a positive step for the region's stability.

A high-level Turkish delegation – comprising the defense minister, foreign minister, national intelligence chief and presidential adviser – will head to Moscow on Saturday.

Russia will also host the leaders of Iran and Turkey early next year to discuss the Syrian conflict.

Nihat Ali Ozcan, a security analyst at Ankara-based think tank TEPAV, said he does not anticipate a direct clash between Turkish and Syrian regime troops. "It's more likely that the Ankara-supported Free Syrian Army (FSA) and regime forces may fight," he told Arab News.

The FSA, which has moved to the outskirts of Manbij, is expected to be an essential part of a potential Turkish military offensive. Ozcan said Ankara will not react ahead of the meeting with Russian officials.

Ankara will ask Moscow to allow it to use Syrian airspace, the Turkish daily Hurriyet reported on Friday. But experts say if not managed properly, the crisis may deepen in the coming days.

"If the Syrian regime goes eastward to limit the movement of Turkey and the FSA, it may lead to a clash between Turkey and Syria, and subsequently between Turkey on the one hand, and Russia and Iran on the other," Ozcan

said.

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova on Wednesday said Moscow and Ankara are in close coordination over Syria, "including military counterterrorist operations."

Timur Akhmetov, a researcher at the Russian International Affairs Council, told Arab News that if Moscow encourages the Syrian regime to retake Manbij, it would be a sign of Russian mistrust of Turkey's intentions in northern Syria.

Soner Cagaptay, director of the Turkish Research Program at the Washington Institute, said a clash between Turkish and Syrian regime forces is very unlikely.

"The regime wants to take back all of Syria, and Turkey wants Rojava (a semi-autonomous Kurdish region in northeast Syria) to disappear. The regime is overwhelming Rojava as it takes the rest of the country. Ankara will just sit and watch this from the sidelines," he told Arab News.

Ankara has prioritized restraining Kurdish nationalist ambitions in regions bordering southeast Turkey.

Cagaptay said what happens in Manbij will be the blueprint for what happens elsewhere in Rojava.



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Civilian exodus from Daesh's last Syria bastion Syria army enters Manbij in

Yemen's Houthi militia continues to violate Hodeidah ceasefire: Arab coalition

Author:

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Wed, 2018-12-26 16:40

JEDDAH: The Arab coalition fighting in support of the legitimate Yemeni government on Friday said that the Houthi militia had violated the cease-fire agreement 16 times over the last 24 hours.

The coalition said that this brings the total number of breaches to 190 since the start of the cease-fire.

A truce in the rebel-held city of Hodeidah and its surroundings went into effect on Dec. 18 and is part of a peace push seen as the best chance yet of ending four years of devastating conflict.

Retired Dutch general Patrick Cammaert is heading the joint committee, which includes both government officials and Houthi rebels, and chaired its first face-to-face meetings on Wednesday.

"We support the Yemeni army's commitment to the cease-fire and the Sweden deal," the coalition said in a statement.

However, earlier on Friday, the Houthi militia prevented the Yemeni government's delegation from leaving the port city of Hodeidah, after concluding consultations with a UN team tasked with monitoring the cease-fire between the legitimate Yemeni government and the Iranian-backed Houthi militia.

Meanwhile, a number of civilians, including children, were wounded in a public square in the center of the city of Taiz in a bombardment launched by the Houthi militia, reported the Saudi Press Agency (SPA).

It cited local sources as saying the militia bombed the so-called Freedom Square while crowds of worshipers were preparing to perform Friday prayers.

Cammaert arrived in Hodeidah on Sunday from the rebel-held capital Sanaa, after meeting with government officials in Aden.

Yemen's warring sides agreed at peace talks in Sweden this month on the cease-fire to halt an offensive by government forces and the coalition against Hodeidah.

The UN Security Council unanimously approved a resolution authorizing the deployment of observers to oversee the truce.

The UN monitoring team aims to secure the functioning of Hodeidah's port and supervise the withdrawal of fighters from the city.

The text approved by the Security Council "insists on the full respect by all

parties of the cease-fire agreed” for Hodeidah.

It authorizes the United Nations to “establish and deploy, for an initial period of 30 days from the adoption of this resolution, an advance team to begin monitoring” the cease-fire, under Cammaert’s leadership.

(With AFP)□



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Yemen govt to pay civil servants in militia-held Hodeidah
Yemeni army opens new front in Houthi stronghold of Saada

[3 die as roadside bomb targets tourist bus near Pyramids in Egypt](#)

Fri, 2018-12-28 20:46

CAIRO: A roadside bomb hit a tourist bus on Friday in an area near the Giza Pyramids, killing two Vietnamese tourists and wounding 12 others, Egypt’s Interior Ministry said in a statement.

It said the bus was traveling in the Marioutiyah area near the pyramids when the crude roadside bomb, concealed by a wall, went off. The wounded included 10 Vietnamese tourists. The other two wounded were the Egyptian bus driver and the guide.

Regional broadcaster Al-Arabiya reported that the death toll rose to 3.

The bus was carrying a total of 14 Vietnamese tourists, it added, saying only

two of them escaped unharmed.

Egypt has battled Islamic militants for years in the Sinai Peninsula in an insurgency that has occasionally spilled over to the mainland, hitting minority Christians or tourists. However, this is the first attack to target foreign tourists in almost two years.

(With AP)







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Eminent Egyptologist leads team to discovery of 'vital ramp system' at Great Pyramids
48 hours in Cairo: To experience the Egyptian city's old-world vibe or simply to see the pyramids requires just two days

[Israeli gunfire kills a Gazan during border protests](#)

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Fri, 2018-12-28 16:50

GAZA: Israeli forces shot and killed a Palestinian man during the latest of weekly protests along the border with Israel on Friday, Palestinian health officials said.

They said Karam Fayyad, 26, was killed and six other people were wounded with live Israeli fire during Friday's protests that went ahead despite stormy weather.

"Troops resorted to live fire after confronting 5,000 rioters, some of who threw rocks and grenades," said an Israeli military spokeswoman.

She added that two Palestinian protesters briefly crossed the fence before returning into Gaza.

Health officials in Gaza, which is run by the Islamist Hamas movement, say more than 220 Palestinians have been killed since they began weekly border protests on March 30 to demand the easing of Israel's blockade on the territory and the right to return to land lost in the 1948 war of Israel's founding.

Israel has ruled out any such right, concerned that the country would lose its Jewish majority.

Alarmed at the bloodshed, Egypt, the United Nations and Qatar have sought ways to improve conditions in the enclave.

Israel withdrew settlers and soldiers from Gaza in 2005 but maintains tight control of its land, air and sea borders. The wider Israeli-Palestinian peace process has been stalled for several years.



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Palestinians bury 4 killed in Gaza protests Israeli gunfire kills three Gazans during border protest

Vatican official urges Iraq's Christians to forgive, rebuild

Author:

By NICOLE WINFIELD | AP

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Fri, 2018-12-28 (All day)

VATICAN CITY: The Vatican secretary of state urged Iraqi Christians who have endured years of extremist persecution to forgive, reconcile and rebuild their broken communities as he celebrated Mass Friday in Iraq's largest Christian town.

Cardinal Pietro Parolin has spent the Christmas holidays in Iraq in a show of Pope Francis' solidarity with the region's Christian minorities, many of whom were forced to flee their homes during the years of extremist violence. Parolin celebrated Mass in the Al-tahera Syro-Catholic Cathedral in Qaraqosh, which was overtaken by Daesh group in 2014. In his homily, Parolin praised those who had refused to renounce their faith and instead resisted and went into exile.

"In God's saving plan, your sacrifices will not be without fruit, as fruitful as the witness of so many martyrs who, from the first centuries of Christianity, bathed this land with their blood and lived their faith heroically to the end," he said.

He urged those families who are now returning not to dwell on revenge but to instead forgive those who wronged them, reconcile and rebuild. Many of the Christian communities of northern Iraq are some of the oldest of the faith, where dialects of Aramaic – the language of Jesus – are still spoken.

"May the pain and violence you have endured never turn into bitterness, and may the heavy yoke of hatred never fall on your shoulders," Parolin told the Iraqi religious leaders and faithful in the cathedral. "Forgiveness is the basis of reconciliation."

In the two years that Daesh held Qaraqosh, militants burned down its churches, destroyed its religious altars and statues, and forced residents to convert or flee. By the time Iraqi forces retook it in 2016, Qaraqosh was practically deserted. Hundreds of families have since returned, and the global Christian community has donated generously to rebuild the churches. There aren't reliable census figures to go by, but by all accounts Qaraqosh was once Iraq's largest Christian town with a population of around 50,000 inhabitants.

But Iraq's Christian numbers have been dwindling since the 2003 US invasion, after which Christians of northern Iraq endured attacks by fundamentalist extremist groups – foremost among them Al-Qaeda.



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Iraqi Christians celebrate Christmas one year after Daesh defeat
Iraqis demand US troop pullout