

President Trump makes surprise visit to Iraq

Wed, 2018-12-26 22:22

AL-ASAD AIRBASE, Iraq: President Donald Trump made an unannounced visit to Iraq on Wednesday, leaving behind a partially shuttered US government to greet American troops helping hold off extremists in a country where thousands of Americans died during the recent war.

It comes a week after Trump stunned his national security advisers by announcing that he would withdraw US troops from neighboring Syria where they have been fighting Daesh militants. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis abruptly resigned following the announcement, and Trump's decision rattled allies around the world, including in Iraq.

Trump's trip was shrouded in secrecy. Air Force One flew overnight from Washington, landing at an airbase west of Baghdad under the cover of darkness Wednesday evening. It is his first visit with troops stationed in a troubled region.

Fifteen years after the 2003 invasion, the US still has more than 5,000 troops in Iraq supporting the government as it continues the fight against remaining pockets of resistance by Daesh. The group has lost a significant amount of territory in Iraq and Syria but is still seen as a threat.

Trump, who speaks often about his support for the US military, had faced criticism for not yet visiting US troops stationed in harm's way as he comes up on his two-year mark in office. He told The Associated Press in an interview in October that he "will do that at some point, but I don't think it's overly necessary." He later began to signal that such a troop visit was in the offing.

Trump had planned to spend Christmas at his private club in Florida, but stayed behind in Washington due to the shutdown. It's unclear whether his trip to Iraq was added after it became apparent that the government would be shut down indefinitely due to a stalemate between Trump and congressional Democrats over the president's demand for a wall along the US-Mexico border. Adding to the tumult, the stock market has been experiencing heavy losses over concerns about a slowing global economy, Trump's trade war with China and the president's public slamming of the Federal Reserve and its chairman over interest rate hikes by the independent agency.

Trump's visit comes at a time when his Middle East policy is in flux. He went against the views of his top national security advisers in announcing the Syria withdrawal, a decision that risks creating a vacuum for extremists to thrive.

There are dire implications in particular for neighboring Iraq. The Iraqi government now has control of all the country's cities, towns and villages after fighting its last urban battles against Daesh in December 2017. But its political, military and economic situation remains uncertain, and the country continues to experience sporadic bombings, kidnappings and assassinations, which most people attribute to Daesh.

Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi recently said Iraqi troops could deploy into Syria to protect Iraq from threats across its borders. Iraq keeps

reinforcements along its frontier to guard against infiltration by Daesh militants, who hold a pocket of territory along the Euphrates River. Trump campaigned for office on a platform of ending US involvement in foreign trouble spots, such as Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq. The Syria decision will ultimately affect all of the approximately 2,000 troops deployed in the war-torn country. The Pentagon is also said to be developing plans to withdraw up to half of the 14,000 American troops still serving in Afghanistan.

During the presidential campaign, Trump blamed Democrat Hillary Clinton for the rise of Daesh, due to the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq at the end of 2011 during her tenure as secretary of state.

President George W. Bush is the one who set the 2011 withdrawal date as part of an agreement with the Iraqi government to gradually shrink the US footprint and slowly hand off security responsibilities to the government and Iraqi security forces.

His successor, President Barack Obama, wanted to leave a residual force in Iraq to help the government manage ongoing security challenges. But he ultimately went ahead with the scheduled pullout in 2011 after Iraqi's political leaders rejected terms the US sought for legal protections for the US troops that would have remained.

Two of Trump's recent predecessors visited Iraq early in their terms. Bush visited Iraq in November 2003, about eight months after that conflict began. Due to security concerns, Bush waited until 2006 to make his first visit to Afghanistan.

Obama visited Iraq in April 2009, the first year of his eight years in office, as part of an overseas tour. He visited Afghanistan in 2010.

Vice President Mike Pence visited Afghanistan in December 2017, not long after Trump outlined a strategy to break the stalemate in America's longest war. Pence met with Afghan leaders and visited with US troops stationed in the country. Trump has not visited Afghanistan.







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Two dead, 11 wounded in car bomb in northern Iraqi city Tal Afar
German industry views Brexit, Trump as biggest risks to economy

[Sudan Islamist party urges probe into killing of protesters](#)

Author:

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Wed, 2018-12-26 15:20

KHARTOUM: Sudan's top Islamist party, a member of President Omar Al-Bashir's government, called Wednesday for a probe into the killings of protesters in demonstrations that have rocked the economically troubled country.

Angry crowds have taken to the streets in Khartoum and several other cities

since December 19 when the government tripled the price of bread. Sudanese authorities say eight protesters have been killed in clashes, but Amnesty International has put the death toll at 37.

At a press conference in Khartoum, Popular Congress Party senior official Idris Suleman said his party's own reports indicated that 17 people "were martyred" and 88 wounded in the demonstrations.

Condemning the killings, the party, founded by late Islamist leader Hassan Turabi, urged the authorities to find those responsible.

"We call on the government to launch an investigation into the killings," Suleman said.

"Those who committed these killings must be held accountable."

Popular Congress Party is part of Bashir's government and has two ministers of state in the cabinet and seven lawmakers in parliament.

Turabi, who died in March 2016, was a leading force behind the 1989 coup that brought Bashir to power, ushering in an Islamist regime that hosted Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden from 1992 to 1996 in Sudan.

Turabi founded Popular Congress Party after he was dismissed from Bashir's National Congress Party amid a power struggle a decade after the coup.

Police and security officers remained deployed in several parts of the Sudanese capital on Wednesday, but no new demonstration had been staged so far.

Bashir has sought to tamp down the discontent by vowing to "take real reforms" to solve Sudan's economic woes.

But his statements appear to have done little to appease protesters angered by financial hardships.

Sudan is mired in economic difficulties including an acute foreign currency shortage and soaring inflation.

The crisis has worsened despite the lifting of an economic embargo by the United States in October 2017.

Inflation is running at close to 70 percent and the Sudanese pound has plunged in value, while shortages in bread and fuel have been reported across several cities including Khartoum.

Since the start of the protest movement, Sudanese authorities had arrested several anti-government figures with liberal and communist backgrounds.

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[Morocco announces new arrests in Nordic tourists' killings](#)

Author:

Associated Press

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Wed, 2018-12-26 (All day)

RABAT: Moroccan authorities say a total of 19 people have been arrested in connection with the murders of two Nordic tourists in the Atlas Mountains. Boubker Sabik, a spokesman for Morocco's national security agency, says 10 new suspects were arrested over the last two days for their links with the alleged killers of 24-year-old Louisa Vesterager Jespersen from Denmark, and 28-year-old Maren Ueland from Norway.

Their bodies were found last week in their camping tent in a remote area in the Atlas Mountains. Authorities believe the hikers were killed by men affiliated with Daesh.

Sabik told national television 2M on Sunday that the suspects targeted the two girls randomly and that Daesh didn't coordinate the killings.



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Nine more arrested in Morocco over murder of Scandinavian tourists
Morocco arrests suspect after two Scandinavian tourists murdered

[Assad deploys forces to north of Manbij](#)

Author:

Tue, 2018-12-25 23:50

The deployment of Syrian President Bashar Assad's forces to the north of Syria's Manbij province on Tuesday, according to Turkish media reports, sparked a new debate about how regional powers, especially Turkey, would react to this abrupt attempt to fill the vacuum being left by the withdrawal

of US forces.

The move by Assad forces in the Kurdish-held region is seen as complementing their deal with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a former US ally led by the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG).

The SDF and representatives of the Assad regime recently held a meeting to coordinate the move.

Before the US withdrawal, American and Turkish forces were jointly conducting patrols in Manbij region and the June deal between Ankara and Washington presumed the withdrawal of the YPG militia from the region, but the deal was not fully implemented.

Since Dec. 23, Turkey, along with Ankara-backed Syrian opposition forces, has amassed troops and sent reinforcements, including a commando unit, to the Manbij frontline in an attempt to encircle the area and avert Syrian regime troops from altering the status quo on the ground.

According to experts interviewed by Arab News, the YPG has been searching for a buffer since the US withdrawal and is expected to lean toward the Assad regime as a protective shield.

"However, reaching consensus with the regime bears with it some political and military costs to the YPG," said Oytun Orhan, coordinator of Syria studies at ORSAM, an Ankara-based think-tank.

"It will have to give up its maximalist federalism claims entirely, while its security shield should be integrated within the Syrian army at some point."

Orhan said that any potential conflict between YPG and Turkey in Manbij would incur huge losses for the Syrian Kurdish militia, which currently controls about 25 percent of Syrian territory and approximately 65 percent of the border with Turkey.

"The YPG is, therefore, focused on reaching a settlement with the regime," he said. "However, the presence of regime forces in Manbij would not prevent Turkey from launching a currently pending military offensive within the region because it will not eliminate Turkey's domestic security concerns."

Ankara considers the YPG a Syrian extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party.

The threat posed by the Iran-backed militia in Syria is another parameter to take into consideration while evaluating checks and balances in Manbij.

"The Trump administration said it would ensure that Iranian-backed militias don't fill the power vacuum," Orhan said.

"In the same vein, Moscow would prefer the presence of regime forces rather than the dominance of the Iranian militia."

According to Orhan, regime forces are now focusing all their military clout in the eastern bank of Euphrates river, while pledging to ease the situation

in Syrian city of Idlib.

Yesterday, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov announced that the Assad regime consented to Turkey's presence in Idlib as a military entity rather than an occupying force.

"Coordination between the YPG and the regime has existed since before the US announced the withdrawal of its forces from Syria," Navvar Saban, a military analyst at the Omran Center for Strategic Studies in Istanbul, told Arab News.

"They tried several times to re-open the negotiation channels. The clashes that broke out between them on different fronts were random acts and were not part of an organized campaign."

Saban underlines that the regime forces were part of the Manbij military operation under the SDF.

"They decided to integrate some of their forces and dispatched them in the eastern and western sides of Al-Arimah village," he said. "It is obvious that they do not feel the need to cover their cooperation with the YPG any longer."

According to Saban, it is likely to see even a bigger advance in Manbij area, but the regime said it would "exercise restraint" on the southern part of Manbij and intervene in the cities as an institution and not as a security force.

The regime is testing the reactions of regional players, Saban said.

"The Kurds are not capable of handling such an area alone without the Americans and that is why they needed the regime, but the Russians will not allow the regime to do anything that would provoke the Turks," he added.

From this point of view, Saban doesn't think that the regime would think twice about advancing in areas that Ankara deems important, such as Tal Abyad.

The consensus between Moscow and Ankara will be crucial for the region, according to experts.

Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan told reporters on Tuesday that he may meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin to discuss the US withdrawal from Syria and to increase coordination. A date for the meeting has yet to be set. Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu will also visit Russia over the same agenda.



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Syrian state media report missile attack near Damascus

[Syrian state media report missile attack near Damascus](#)

Tue, 2018-12-25 23:21

DAMASCUS: Syrian state media are reporting that air defenses are repelling a missile attack near the capital of Damascus.

State TV gave no further details Tuesday and did not say who was behind the barrage. The attack is the first since a missile assault on the southern outskirts of Damascus on Nov. 29.

In the past, Israel is widely believed to have been behind a series of airstrikes that mainly targeted Iranian and Hezbollah forces fighting alongside the government in Syria.

Russia announced it had delivered the S-300 air defense system to Syria in October. That came after the Sept. 17 downing of a Russian reconnaissance plane by Syrian forces responding to an Israeli airstrike, a friendly fire incident that stoked regional tensions.



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