

# Clashes in Idlib as opposition groups vie for control

Wed, 2018-12-05 23:49

ANKARA, Turkey: Attacks by Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS) militants in Syria's northwestern Idlib province were an attempt by the Daesh-backed alliance to strengthen its grip on the region and frighten other factions into submission, analysts said.

HTS fighters targeted the Ankara-backed National Liberation Front (NLF) in two towns in Idlib in a series of attacks since Monday, provoking intense clashes.

The Syrian Observatory of Human Rights, a UK-based war monitor, reported shelling and rocket exchanges around the areas of Latamna and Al-Sarmani, north of the city of Homs.

Areas around Aleppo were also targeted. An NLF military vehicle was badly damaged by shellfire in Al-Atarib, in western Aleppo.

Schools in the opposition-controlled enclave were closed because of the fighting.

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## FASTFACTS

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The HTS alliance is the dominant force in Idlib, Syria's last opposition stronghold, which is covered by a deal backed by Turkey and Russia to prevent a regime assault. NLF is made up of 11 rebel groups and fighters from the Free Syrian Army.

In the latest clashes, rebels surrounded five villages, all close to the main Aleppo-Latakia highway.

Control of the M4 and M5 highways between Aleppo and Latakia offers HTS militants a financial lifeline, observers said.

According to an agreement brokered on Sept. 17 by Moscow and Ankara, the highways will be open to free trade by the end of 2018.

Experts said that with the standoff over Idlib far from resolved, HTS militants were also seeking to increase their bargaining power with Russia and Turkey as the fragile truce crumbles.

Two deadlines for implementation of the Idlib demilitarization deal in early October passed without the withdrawal of an estimated 10,000 militants in the region.

The withdrawal was designed to allow the creation of a demilitarized zone to be jointly patrolled by Russian and Turkish forces.

"HTS presents a headache for Turkey primarily because the Turkish government took responsibility for clearing the demilitarized zone in Idlib," Timur Akhmetov, a researcher at the Russian International Affairs Council, told Arab News.

According to Akhmetov, Russia has acknowledged that Turkey is "doing its best," but has made it clear the present situation cannot be maintained forever.

"Clashes between HTS and the Ankara-backed NLF can be viewed by Russia as a part of Turkish efforts to change the balance of power in Idlib. For Russia it is a positive trend since HTS, the most powerful faction in the region, is increasingly challenged by Turkey," he said.

Russian President Vladimir Putin recently held talks with his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan on the setting up of a new quadrilateral summit on Syria, with Germany and France brought into the settlement process.

Navvar Saban, a military analyst at the Omran Center for Strategic Studies in Istanbul, told Arab News that the latest clashes were also related to a power struggle between HTS and NLF over a local council.

According to Saban, HTS gained popularity by not only being the strongest but also the most brutal faction in Idlib.

"A significant part of the latest clashes is related to maintaining control over the infrastructure, because most of the factions depend on this for income and lack external channels to ensure survival," he said.

Local income sources include people smuggling with fees of up to \$500 per person.

"HTS has several checkpoints on the smuggling zones, which are a major income source for them. They have links with the smuggling networks," Saban said.



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[Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham \(HTS\)](#)

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Syria talks on fragile Idlib truce begin in Kazakhstan  
Ankara urged to clear Idlib of extremists to uphold truce

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## [Lebanon says Israel offered no proof of border tunnels](#)

Author:

By SARAH EL DEEB | AP

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1544042921739626000

Wed, 2018-12-05 (All day)

BEIRUT: Lebanon's Parliament speaker said Wednesday that Israel has presented no evidence to prove its claims that a network of attack tunnels has been built by Hezbollah across the countries' shared borders, as Israel's prime minister pressed for international condemnation of the militant group. The UN peacekeeping mission meanwhile said Wednesday it will send a team to Israel to "ascertain facts," calling for full access to all locations along

the border.

The Israeli military Tuesday launched an open-ended operation to destroy what it said was a network of tunnels built by Hezbollah aimed at infiltrating northern Israel.

Israeli forces did not enter Lebanese territory. They were seen operating in what looked like a construction site, with trucks bringing in equipment and drills and bulldozers digging in the open territory and farmlands inside northern Israel. Hezbollah had no immediate comment on the claims or the Israeli activities across the border.

On Wednesday, Nabih Berri, Lebanon's parliament speaker and ally of Hezbollah, said Israel offered no "coordinates or information" about the tunnels during the regular weekly meeting held at the UN position in southern Lebanon. His comments were carried by the National News Agency.

In a statement, the Lebanese army called Israeli reports of tunnels across the border "allegations." It called on Israel to present specific coordinates and information about the location of such tunnels. The army urged Israel not to carry out any work inside Lebanese territory.

The Israeli army released photographs, video footage and an illustrative map Tuesday of what it says is the first of several tunnels snaking into Israeli territory that it soon plans to destroy.

The UN mission, known as UNIFIL, said its regular weekly meeting with the Lebanese and Israeli armies discussed Israel's "activities" searching for suspected tunnels. The Israeli army said it used the meeting to express its objection to "the severe violation of Israeli sovereignty."

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, meanwhile, said he spoke with UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres by phone Wednesday, telling him that he expects the UN to condemn the violation of Israeli sovereignty. Netanyahu also said he hopes the international community imposes increased sanctions on Hezbollah in response to Israel's exposure of the tunnels.

Ali Bazzi, a lawmaker from Berri's parliamentary bloc, said Israel had no evidence to its claims, calling them a "distraction" and an attempt by Netanyahu to "evade" possible new indictment at home for corruption charges. This week, Israeli police recommended filing charges against the prime minister. A final decision will be made by the attorney general in the coming months.

Under the UN resolution that ended the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah, Hezbollah is barred from operating in southern Lebanon. Israel has long accused it of violating the resolution. Lebanon says Israel, too, regularly violated its air, sea and land spaces.

"I emphasize the critical role of our liaison and coordination mechanisms in mitigating tensions through continuous communication, at the heart of which is the Tripartite forum," said head of UNIFIL mission Maj. Gen. Stefano Del Col.

He appealed to both sides in using the mechanisms to "avoid misunderstandings and ensure that security and stability" along the border is maintained and reinforced.

The Israeli operation is expected to last for weeks, or even months. The Israeli military said it had protectively increased forces along the border and warned Hezbollah to keep its distance from the tunnels.



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## [Renewed push for peace as Western Sahara talks open in Geneva](#)

Wed, 2018-12-05 22:15

GENEVA: The first UN-backed discussions on the disputed Western Sahara region since 2012 opened in Geneva on Wednesday, but expectations remained low, with the meeting seen as just a first step towards resuming dialogue.

Six years after direct talks broke down, Morocco and the Polisario Front, which fought a war over the region until a 1991 ceasefire, are taking part in two days of roundtable discussions along with Algeria and Mauritania.

UN envoy Horst Koehler, a former German president, is hosting the talks, which kicked off at the UN headquarters in Geneva on Wednesday afternoon.

In his October invitation letter to the talks, Koehler insisted it was “time to open a new chapter in the political process”.

The UN meanwhile has described the talks as “a first step towards a renewed negotiations process with the aim of reaching a just, lasting and mutually acceptable solution, which will provide for the self-determination of the

people of Western Sahara.”

A former Spanish colony, phosphate-rich Western Sahara sits on the western edge of the vast eponymous desert, stretching around 1,000 kilometres (600 miles) along the Atlantic coastline, a prime fishing region.

When Spain withdrew from the North African territory in 1975, Rabat sent thousands of people across the border and claimed it was an integral part of Morocco.

The following year the Polisario Front declared Western Sahara the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), with support from Algeria and Libya, and demanded a referendum on self-determination.

Since then 84 UN member states have recognised the SADR.

But a stalemate ensued, and Morocco built razor-wire-topped concentric sand walls in the desert that still ring 80 percent of the territory it controls. Under a 1991 ceasefire, the United Nations deployed a peacekeeping mission which has perpetuated the line of control, but the international community has long intended for a referendum to be held to decide the territory's status.

Rabat currently rejects any vote in which independence is an option, arguing that only granting autonomy is on the table and that this is necessary for regional security.

Awaiting a settlement, between 100,000 and 200,000 refugees live precariously in camps near the town of Tindouf in western Algeria, not far from the Moroccan and Western Sahara borders.

The last direct talks were launched by the UN in 2007 but collapsed five years later over the territory's status and the proposed referendum.

Koehler, who has led the diplomatic efforts since 2017, is hosting the foreign ministers of Morocco, Algeria and Mauritania on Wednesday, as well as a Polisario delegation headed by Khatri Addouh, the speaker of the Sahrawi parliament.

But the agenda for the meetings remains vague and the format has not been unanimously agreed.

Algeria wants to participate only as an “observer country”, but Rabat considers it a “stakeholder” in the discussions, since Algiers is the Polisario's main backer.

In a statement issued Wednesday, Algiers said Foreign Minister Abdelkader Messahel has met with Koehler and reiterated his country's support for the process “in its capacity as a neighbouring country”.

And while all sides signalled goodwill ahead of Wednesday's meeting, they did not budge from their positions.

King Mohammed VI has said he supports a “durable” political solution marked by a “spirit of compromise”, but in a recent speech he insisted that Morocco would not yield on its “territorial integrity”, including control over Western Sahara.

And key Polisario official Mhamed Khadad told AFP ahead of the talks that “everything can be negotiated except the inalienable and imprescriptible right of our people to self-determination.”

Diplomats and others with insight into the process have meanwhile played down the prospect of any real breakthrough.

One diplomat stressed that the roundtable was “not a negotiation” but rather a meeting “that will make it possible to test the real will of the parties, and to determine if they should move forward” or not.

Observers meanwhile point to increased pressure on the sides to find a solution, after the UN Security Council recently adopted a US-drafted resolution to renew a small peacekeeping mission at the ceasefire line, but cut its mandate from 12 to six months.

Nour Bakr, with the non-profit Independent Diplomat which advises the Polisario Front, meanwhile called for more EU support for the process, lamenting that the bloc is negotiating major trade deals with Morocco that involve Western Sahara.

The Europeans “try to make a separation between having these trade deals and claiming to support the political process,” he told AFP.

But “they are de facto recognising Morocco’s sovereignty.”



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UN welcomes moves to restart negotiations on Western Sahara  
Morocco pushes development in disputed Western Sahara

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# Yemen peace talks to start on Thursday in Sweden, say UN

Author:

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1544029495578435500

Wed, 2018-12-05 16:53

RIMBO, Sweden: STOCKHOLM: Peace talks between Yemeni government representatives and a rebel delegation will begin on Thursday in Sweden, the UN announced.

"The (UN special envoy) would like to announce the restart of the intra-Yemeni political process in Sweden on 6 December 2018," UN envoy Martin Griffiths' office tweeted.

The SE would like to announce the restart of the intra-Yemeni political process in Sweden on 6 December 2018 [#Yemen](#)

– OSE\_Yemen (@OSE\_Yemen) [December 5, 2018](#)

A 12-member government delegation, led by Yemeni Foreign Minister Khaled Al-Yamani, arrived in Stockholm Wednesday evening, one day after a Houthi delegation flew in from Sanaa – accompanied by the UN envoy.

The talks mark the first meeting between Yemen's legitimate government and Houthi militants, backed by Iran, since 2016, when 106 days of negotiations yielded no breakthrough in a war that has pushed 14 million people to the brink of famine.

The Sweden meeting follows two major confidence-boosting gestures between the warring parties – a prisoner swap deal and the evacuation of 50 wounded insurgents from the Houthi-held capital for treatment in neutral Oman.

The government delegation was carrying the "hopes of the Yemeni people to achieve sustainable peace," said Abdullah Al-Alimi, the head of exiled President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi's office.

The delegation had delayed its departure until the Houthis had arrived in Stockholm after they failed to show up for the last UN bid to convene peace talks in September, sources close to the government told AFP.

The Houthis flew in to Stockholm on a Kuwaiti plane from Sanaa on Tuesday, accompanied by UN envoy Martin Griffiths, who had promised to travel with

them to allay their concerns.

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## FASTFACTS

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**The first Yemen talks since 2016 are widely seen as the best chance yet for peace, as the international community throws its weight behind efforts to resolve the conflict.**

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On Wednesday, a half-dozen members of the Houthi delegation could be seen on the grounds of the venue for the talks, the Johannesbergs Castle – a large estate with a golf course in the countryside 20 km northeast of Stockholm's Arlanda Airport.

Bundled up against the wintry cold, Houthi delegates could be seen chatting and walking on the grounds, which were cordoned off by police.

The arrival of the Houthis followed two major confidence-boosting gestures – a prisoner swap deal and the evacuation of 50 wounded insurgents from the Houthi-held capital for treatment in neutral Oman.

The US State Department hailed the peace talks in Sweden as a “necessary and vital first step” and called on all parties to “cease any ongoing hostilities.”

The United Arab Emirates, another key backer of the Yemeni government, said the planned talks offered a “critical opportunity” to bring peace to the country.

No date has been announced for the start of the negotiations, but Yemeni government sources said they could begin on Thursday.

The head of the 12-member Houthi delegation, Mohammed Abdelsalam, said it would “spare no effort to make a success of the talks to restore peace and end the aggression.”

At the same time, he called on Houthi insurgents to remain “vigilant against any attempt at a military escalation on the ground.”

The announcement of a deal on Tuesday to swap hundreds of detainees was hailed by the International Committee of the Red Cross as “one step in the right direction toward the building of mutual trust.”

The ICRC will oversee the exchange after the first round of talks in Sweden.

The agreement, struck by the UN envoy in weeks of shuttle diplomacy, came after the wounded Houthis were flown out for treatment on Monday, meeting a key Houthi precondition for joining the talks.

Yemeni government official Hadi Haig said between 1,500 and 2,000 pro-government personnel and between 1,000 and 1,500 Houthis would be released.

On the government side, they include former Defense Minister Mahmoud Al-Subaihi, who has been held by the Houthis since they overran the capital in late 2014, and President Hadi’s brother Nasser, a general and former senior intelligence official.

The Norwegian Refugee Council on Wednesday called for the two sides to put a halt to the fighting.

“Yemen needs an immediate cease-fire and concrete steps to restore public services,” it said in a statement.

“Parties to the conflict must agree ways to reopen all ports and stabilize the nation’s collapsing economy, while facilitating full and unfettered access for people in need of humanitarian aid.”

Nearly 10,000 people have been killed in the conflict, according to the World Health Organization, triggering what the UN calls the world’s worst humanitarian crisis.

Rights groups estimate the toll could be up to five times as high.



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UN opens additional offices in Yemen's Taiz in face of humanitarian crisis  
Yemen govt delegation departs for Sweden peace talks

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## [Egypt court hands Muslim Brotherhood leaders life sentences](#)

Author:

Reuters

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1544029485278433500

Wed, 2018-12-05 16:57

CAIRO: An Egyptian court on Wednesday sentenced Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohamed Badie and his deputy Khairat Al-Shater to life in prison, judicial sources said, in a retrial over violence during the overthrow of president Muhammad Mursi in 2013.

The sentence is one among several trials and retrials against Badie, Shater and other leaders of the party that ruled Egypt before the military ousted Mursi following mass protests against his rule.

Badie and Shater were sentenced to life in 2015 over violence between Brotherhood supporters and opponents near the group's headquarters.

Four others were also handed life sentences on Wednesday. The court acquitted Saad Al-Katatny, parliament speaker under Mursi, along with a former minister, two prominent Brotherhood figures and two others.

The defendants can appeal the ruling for the last time before the Court of Cassation, Egypt's highest civilian court.

The public prosecution may also appeal the acquittals or the life sentences that two defendants received instead of death sentences.

The defendants faced charges of inciting violence against the demonstrators in front of the Brotherhood headquarters, aggravated battery and the possession of firearms.

Authorities had referred 18 defendants to trial in the case. Five remain at large and one died before receiving a sentence.

The latest retrial began when the Court of Cassation accepted 13 defendants' appeals in January 2016.

Separately on Wednesday, two security sources and a judicial source said authorities arrested a justice minister under Mursi and are investigating him for belonging to an illegal group.

The security sources said National Security Agency officers arrested Ahmed

Suleiman at his home in Minya governorate on Tuesday and later transferred him to Cairo.

Suleiman had criticized the arrest and trial of Brotherhood leaders after Mursi was ousted.

After Mursi's ouster, Egypt cracked down on its oldest and most organized militant movement, killing hundreds of its supporters during the violent dispersal of a sit-in, throwing thousands of its supporters in jail and labelling the group a terrorist organization.

The Brotherhood says it is a peaceful movement and denies links to attacks by militants.



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Egyptian authorities detain daughter of senior Muslim Brotherhood leader  
Egyptian court orders retrial of Muslim Brotherhood leader