

US envoy: Fight against Daesh in last Syria stronghold may end soon

Thu, 2018-11-15 22:03

WASHINGTON: The administration of US President Donald Trump hopes that the US-backed fight against Daesh in its last foothold in northeastern Syria will end within months but American forces will remain to ensure the “enduring defeat” of the militant group, a top US diplomat said on Wednesday.

Ambassador James Jeffrey, the US special representative for Syrian engagement, said the US believes the way forward in Syria includes defeating Daesh, reinvigorating the political process and winding down the long-running civil war.

Toward that end, he said, the US hopes to see the formation of a committee before the end of the year to work on a new constitution for Syria as agreed by the leaders of Russia, Germany, France and Turkey during their meeting in Istanbul in October.

He said US forces would remain in place after the coalition forces prevail over Daesh military units to ensure the group does not “regenerate itself.”

“The enduring defeat means not simply smashing the last of Daesh’s (Daesh) conventional military units holding terrain, but ensuring that Daesh doesn’t immediately come back in sleeper cells, come back as an insurgent movement,” Jeffrey said.

Washington also wants the withdrawal of Iranian military forces from Syria once the underlying causes of the conflict have been resolved, he said, noting that Iran’s continued military presence would represent a threat to US partners in the region.

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Russia’s Foreign Ministry said the process of separating radical militants from moderate opposition groups in the demilitarised zone in Idlib region had not yet been successfully achieved.

Jeffrey said the final ground combat is along the Euphrates River and is

being led by Syrian Democratic Forces assisted by US military personnel.

“The fight is continuing and we hope that it will be over in a few months and that will be the last of Daesh’s terrain that it holds in a quasi-conventional way,” he said.

Jeffrey said convening a committee under UN auspices to begin work on a new Syrian constitution was a “critical step” toward advancing the political process.

He said the US would hold Russia to account to use its influence to bring the regime of its ally, Syrian President Bashar Assad, to the negotiating table.

“Our goal, which again was supported by Russia, France, Germany and Turkey and agreed in the Oct. 27 Istanbul communique, is to establish this constitutional committee by the end of the year,” he said.

Jeffrey said getting Iranian forces out of Syria, where they back Assad’s rule, was not a US military goal but should be an outcome of the process to end the civil war and the only way to achieve lasting peace.

He said newly reinstated US sanctions against Iran would encourage Tehran to scale back its presence in Syria.



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Netanyahu faces snap election calls after defense minister quits

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Thu, 2018-11-15 16:36

JERUSALEM: Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu faced calls on Thursday from his coalition partners to hold an early election, a day after the defense minister's resignation left the government with a razor-thin majority.

Avigdor Lieberman quit on Wednesday over what he described as the government's too-soft policy on cross-border violence with Palestinian militants in the Gaza Strip.

The loss of the five seats of Lieberman's Israel Beitenu faction leaves Netanyahu with control of just 61 of the 120 seats in parliament, raising the prospect that a scheduled November 2019 election would be brought forward. Lieberman's resignation takes effect 48 hours after being handed in, which he did early on Thursday. Each coalition partner will then have the power to bring down the government.

To avert a crisis, Netanyahu has been holding talks with ministers in an effort to stabilize the government.

Israel's Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon, who heads the centrist Kulanu party, said he told Netanyahu in their meeting that the responsible step to take would be to establish a new and stable government.

"The best thing for Israel's citizens and economy is to hold an election as soon as possible," Kahlon said in a statement. His call was echoed by Interior Minister Aryeh Deri who heads the ultra-Orthodox Shas faction. Adding to the pressure, Israel's Education Minister Naftali Bennett, who heads the far-right Jewish Home party, has demanded the defense brief be given to him.

Both Lieberman and Bennett, who compete with Netanyahu's Likud for right-wing voters, have spoken in favor of harsh Israeli military action against Gaza's dominant Hamas Islamists.

Israel has fought three wars in Gaza since Hamas took over the enclave in 2007.

"I asked the prime minister yesterday to appoint me defense minister to fulfil one goal only – that Israel start winning again," Bennett said at a conference near Tel Aviv.

Jewish Home said on Wednesday that without the defense brief, there would be no point in keeping the government together.

However Bennett did not repeat this in his remarks on Thursday nor did he render an explicit ultimatum to Netanyahu, with whom he is due to meet on Friday.

It was unclear whether Netanyahu would opt for an early election.

Netanyahu is under investigation for corruption, and speculation has been rife that he may bring the ballot forward in order to win a renewed mandate before Israel's attorney-general decides whether to indict him. A poll published on Wednesday by Israel's Hadashot television news showed Likud falling by one seat from 30 to 29 after months of surveys that have shown it gaining power. Only 17 percent of respondents were happy with Netanyahu's Gaza policy.



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[Morocco inaugurates Africa's fastest train](#)

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Thu, 2018-11-15 15:53

RABAT: Morocco inaugurated on Thursday Africa's fastest train which will halve traveling time between the commercial and industrial hubs of Casablanca and Tangier.

After seven years of work on the high-speed railway line, King Mohammed VI and French President Emmanuel Macron boarded the train for the inaugural trip from Tangier to the capital Rabat.

The train, which was tested at a speed of 357 km (222 miles) per hour and is planned to run at 320 km (198 miles) per hour, will more than halve the 200 km (124 miles) Casablanca-Tangier journey to around two hours. It is about twice as fast as South Africa's high-speed Gautrain linking Johannesburg's international airport to the city's financial district Sandton.

Alstom at the heart of the Tangier-Casablanca high-speed line's inauguration in #Morocco <https://t.co/gaTGeCiuIZ>
pic.twitter.com/NpkTn8zyHH

– Alstom (@Alstom) [November 15, 2018](#)

The high-speed line was completed at a total cost of 22.9 billion dirhams (\$2.4 billion), according to state news agency MAP. Transport officials were not immediately available for comment. 51 percent of the project was financed by France, Morocco contributed 28 percent and the remaining 21 percent was provided by Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates.

Morocco bought 12 double-decker high-speed-trains from French group Alstom that will be operated by state-owned railway ONCF which expects six million passengers on the new train service annually.

The king named the first line Al Boraq after a mythical winged creature that transported the prophets to the heavens. While the Moroccan government and businesses praised the project as a key achievement in developing the country's infrastructure, the line has sparked controversy for its high cost. Critics say that Morocco should be investing in education and health instead.

Officials have said the project will boost growth in Tangier and help attract more investments to northern Morocco where one of Africa's largest ports is located.

But critics perceive the project as symbolising a two-speed Morocco further accentuating disparities between territories as vast regions in the south and key cities such as Agadir remain without a basic train service.

A train derailment last month near Kenitra 15 km (10 miles) north of Rabat, which killed seven people and injured 125 others, triggered calls for a better allocation of resources by giving priority to improving safety and infrastructure as well as punctuality of basic railway services.







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[UN Palestinian agency says overcoming Trump funding cuts](#)

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Thu, 2018-11-15 15:24

GENEVA: The United Nations agency for Palestinian refugees has nearly overcome a crippling funding crisis caused by President Donald Trump canceling the US aid contribution, agency chief Pierre Kraehenbuehl said Thursday.

The organization, known as UNRWA, had counted on a budget of \$1.2 billion (1 billion euros) for 2018 but faced a gap of \$446 million when the Trump administration announced it was cutting support.

UNRWA responded to its "unprecedented" financial pressures by seeking support across UN member-states and raised an additional \$382 million, bringing the shortfall for the year down to just \$64 million, Kraehenbuehl told reporters in Geneva.

He said he hoped the gap could still be trimmed further in the coming weeks. "I'll be very honest in saying, I don't think many people believed that we would be able to overcome a \$446 million shortfall at the beginning of the year," said Kraehenbuehl, who took charge of UNRWA in 2014.

He credited the European Union and especially four Gulf countries with increasing support.

Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates upped their support to \$50 million each to offset Trump's cuts, the UNRWA chief said.

The agency's 2019 budget has not been finalized, but Kraehenbuehl stressed it was important "to preserve those new levels of funding."

The United States had previously been UNRWA's largest contributor.

But the Trump administration as well as Israel say they oppose the way the organization operates and how it calculates the number of Palestinian refugees.

UNRWA was set up in 1950 to help Palestinian refugees who lost their homes because of the 1948 Middle East conflict. Its assistance includes schools, health care centers and food distribution.

More than 750,000 Palestinians fled or were expelled during the 1948 war surrounding Israel's creation. They and all their descendants are deemed by the UN agency to be refugees who fall under its remit.



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UNRWA concerned over plan to shut its East Jerusalem operation UNRWA seeking more funds from Gulf, Europe after US cuts

[Egypt, 5 Arab nations in live ammunition military drills](#)

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Thu, 2018-11-15 (All day)

MARSA MATROUH, EGYPT: Military units from Egypt and five other Arab nations have conducted war drills with live ammunition in the Egyptian desert west of Cairo.

Thursday's drills were held in the western desert around the "Mohammed Naguib" military base near the coastal Mediterranean city of Marsa Matrouh. The drills, codenamed "Arab Shield," bring together ground, naval and air units from Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Jordan and Kuwait. They are scheduled to end Friday.

Thursday's drills involved target practice by rocket launchers, tanks and fighter-jets.

Egypt has been holding separate drills with each of these five Arab nations in recent years, but Arab Shield marked the first time that all six allies simultaneously participated in war games.





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Jordan aims to import a third of its gas from EgyptSaudi forces to take part in 'Arab Shield-1' drill