
TURKMEN LEADER CALLS FOR SUPPORT AGAINST TERROR ORGANIZATIONS IN IRAQ

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Ershad Salihi, Iraqi Turkmen Front (ITF) chairman and Kirkuk deputy, urged yesterday that the Turkmen defense front be strengthened against terrorist attacks on Iraq's northern Kirkuk province, pointing at the escalation of threats in the region.

Salihi's statement was a response to the fact that even though Daesh was ousted to a large extent in 2017, attacks continue not only by Daesh but also the PKK, especially in the provinces of Kirkuk, Diyala, Mosul, Saladin and Anbar with Turkmen being one of the main targets.

On Sunday, the Iraqi Defense Ministry announced that members of Daesh killed six people and injured 11 others in Kirkuk. The attack occurred late Saturday in the village of Daquq as people were exercising on a football field. Salihi pointed out that forces operating under the Iraqi central government are insufficient in protecting Turkmen provinces and towns. Saying that the Kirkuk defense force was established with the help of the ITF, Salihi voiced that support is needed in order to hold the capacity to protect their region.

"The PKK used mostly the Tavuk district of the province for its headquarters before joint forces of the Iraqi central government carried out an operation on Kirkuk on Oct. 16, 2017," Salihi stated adding that the district has turned into a target of Daesh today after being cleared from the PKK. The area of the attack, southeast of the city of Kirkuk, is controlled by Iran-supported militias known as the Popular Mobilization Forces (Hashd al-Shaabi). Kirkuk is located in a disputed area of Iraq that runs from Sinjar on the Syrian border southeast to Khanaqin and Mandali on the Iranian border. Kirkuk has been a disputed territory for around 80 years. Kurds have wanted Kirkuk to become part of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), which has been opposed by Arabs and Turkmen in the region. Iraqi Turkmen, also known as Iraqi Turks, are a Turkic-speaking minority whose total population is estimated at some 3 million. The oil-rich province has been a battleground for competing forces since the U.S.-led ouster of President Saddam Hussein in 2003.

One month after the KRG held a controversial referendum on regional independence in September 2017, Iraqi forces backed by Shiite militias dislodged Kurdish Peshmerga fighters who had taken control of the city of Kirkuk in 2014, preventing its capture by Daesh terrorists. Daesh, on the other side, had taken control of one-third of Iraq in June 2014. As a result of the operations of the Iraqi forces and the support of Turkey, the military presence of Daesh was substantially eradicated in December 2017. Last year, a top Peshmerga major, Miran Irac, was arrested. He was seen as responsible for the kidnapping and deaths of dozens of Turkmen while the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) administered the city. He admitted that he committed many crimes against the

Turkmens population between 2014 and 2017 for ransom.

The fight against terrorism, supporting the establishment of stability and security, has been also one of the prominent issues in relations between Turkey and Iraq. Turkey has repeatedly been calling on its neighbor to increase cooperation to prevent terror threats posed against the country. Exercising its right of self-defense, Turkey has been regularly conducting airstrikes that target PKK terrorists in northern Iraq. Furthermore, in order to contribute to the recovery of former Daesh-controlled areas, Turkey has promised support of \$50 million and credit of \$5 billion for strategic projects at the International Conference for Reconstruction of Iraq which was held in Kuwait in February 2018.

Although there is little concern that Daesh will reclaim its former physical territory, a caliphate that controlled the lives of up to 12 million people, the terrorist group has still mobilized as many as 18,000 remaining fighters in Iraq and Syria. These sleeper cells and strike teams have carried out sniper attacks, ambushes, kidnappings and assassinations against security forces and community leaders. The collapse of Daesh carried dire implications for Iraq. The Iraqi army, with international help, drove the jihadists out of Mosul and other cities in 2017. But they could again regroup and gain power in the region according to the inspector general's report, which was prepared for the Pentagon, the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development. "Daesh is likely exploiting the lack of security to enlist new members and re-engage members who have left the battlefield," said the report.

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