



Boeing design flaw a factor in Lion Air crash: Indonesian probe

Firefighters battling fierce wildfires across California

Page 8

Page 9



QAMISHLI: A US military vehicle drives near a checkpoint controlled by the Syrian government forces in Syria's northeastern city of Qamishli yesterday. —AFP

Protecting Syria oil? US' new goal

Trump's Syria strategy under question

WASHINGTON: After abruptly pulling US troops who protected Kurdish fighters, President Donald Trump has identified protecting oil as the new goal in Syria. But experts question if the new strategy is realistic, or even legal. Defense Secretary Mark Esper said Friday that US troops were reinforcing their positions, including with mechanized forces, in Deir Ezzor in northern Syria. Their mission will be to prevent the Islamic State group from gaining access to oil fields and securing "resources that may allow them to strike within the region, to strike Europe, to strike the United States," Esper told reporters on a visit to Brussels.

Trump on October 6 said that some 1,000 US troops were leaving northeast Syria where they had kept an uneasy peace between neighboring Turkey and Kurdish fighters, who had lost thousands as they led the Western-backed operation that crushed the Islamic State group. Trump vowed to get the United States out of "endless" wars - with Russia filling the void - and said that US troops were not there to protect the Kurdish fighters, whom Turkey links to separatists at home.

But Trump said Wednesday that a "small number" of US troops would stay to secure the oil. "We want to keep the oil, and we'll work something out with the Kurds," Trump said. The Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces - who

withdrew from a border area after a Turkish offensive made possible by Trump's pullout - still control the Deir Ezzor oil fields east of the Euphrates River near the Iraqi border. But in guarding the oil, the United States has sharply changed its rationale for why it remains in Syria against the will of President Bashar al-Assad, who has largely won a brutal eight-year civil war.

"This move would be a radical shift from the United States' longstanding focus on defeating ISIS's territorial caliphate and preventing ISIS from re-emerging in Syria and it would instead signal that the Trump team has a larger, geopolitical objective in Syria," said Nicholas Heras, a fellow at the Center for a New American Security. The United States would effectively be holding Syria's oil resources hostage as it pushes Assad and his Russian backers to accept US ideas for a post-war settlement, he said. "America's mission in Syria is morphing from a noble battle against the most reviled terrorist organization in the world into a quixotic gambit to force changes in Assad's behavior by taking Syria's oil," Heras said.

Dubious legality

Trump, who has mused in the past that the United States should have seized Iraq's oil after the 2003 invasion, said

Monday that Washington wanted to keep Syria's fields. "Maybe we'll have one of our big oil companies to go in and do it properly," Trump said. Brett McGurk, the US envoy who built the coalition to fight the Islamic State group until he resigned in protest in December, said that seizing Syrian oil would be illegal.

"Like it or not but it's owned by the Syrian SYP," McGurk said, referring to the state-owned Syrian Petroleum Company. The former diplomat said that the United States had discussed with Russia the idea of exploiting the oil and putting proceeds into a trust to be used for post-war reconstruction. "The Russians were not really hopping into that, I think they would be even less so now," he told a conference.

An estimated 200 US troops are deployed with the Syrian Democratic Forces in Deir Ezzor. But the number could prove insufficient if Russia tries to seize the zone, as it attempted in early 2018. Some 200 pro-Russian mercenaries were believed to have been killed in a coalition strike as the fighters tried to seize a post of the Syrian Democratic Forces where US troops were present. This time around, the operation could end quite differently. Abandoned by the United States, the Kurdish fighters have allied with Moscow. —AFP

Pentagon awards \$10 billion cloud deal to Microsoft, snubbing Amazon

SAN FRANCISCO: The Pentagon said it is awarding a \$10 billion cloud computing contract to Microsoft, following a highly scrutinized bidding process which Amazon had been favored to win. The 10-year contract for the Joint Enterprise Defense Infrastructure program, better known as JEDI, ultimately will see all military branches sharing information in a system boosted by artificial intelligence.

"The National Defense Strategy dictates that we must improve the speed and effectiveness with which we develop and deploy modernized technical capabilities to our women and men in uniform," Defense Department Chief Information Officer Dana Deasy said in a release. "This award is an important step in execution of the Digital Modernization Strategy." Amazon was considered the lead contender to provide technology for JEDI, with its Amazon Web Services dominating the cloud computing arena and the company already providing classified servers for other government outfits including the CIA. But the Pentagon earlier this year delayed awarding the hefty contract, saying the process would be reviewed by newly appointed Defense Secretary Mark Esper. Esper was selected by US President Donald Trump, who has lashed out at Amazon and company founder Jeff Bezos, who owns The Washington Post. In July, Trump said he had heard "complaining from different companies like Microsoft and Oracle and IBM" over the JEDI bidding process.

"We're going to take a look at it. We'll take a very strong look at it," he said, raising concerns among observers that the process would be improperly influenced. Amazon said late Friday it was "surprised about this conclusion." "AWS is the clear leader in cloud computing, and a detailed assessment purely on the comparative offerings clearly lead to a different conclusion," the company said in a statement. Microsoft did not immediately respond to a request for comment from AFP.

The contract has caused controversy over whether internet giants who say they want to make the world better should be involved in the defense industry. JEDI critics have likened it to the nefarious "Skynet" computing overlord in "Terminator" films. Microsoft was Amazon's only rival in the final bidding for the winner-take-all contract, despite employees urging it to drop out. "Many Microsoft employees don't believe that what we build should be used for waging war," company staffers wrote in an anonymous op-ed posted a year ago on Medium, which said it had verified the authenticity of the piece. —AFP

Online platforms' relationship with news media: It's complicated

SAN FRANCISCO: Major online platforms have a complicated relationship with news organizations: the two sides are both friends and enemies, depending on the viewpoint. Big internet firms such as Google and Facebook can help news organizations by driving traffic to news sites, but many media groups complain they miss out on the bulk of digital ad revenues, making it harder to support journalism. Some tech firms have begun efforts to support professional journalism as they strive to weed out viral hoaxes and misinformation. Here is a glance at what some big internet firms are doing.

Facebook News

Facebook's news "tab" unveiled Friday for the US market will pay a portion of the 200 partner media groups, with some reportedly getting millions of dollars. The News tab will be edited in part by seasoned journalists, but algorithms will also be used to "personalize" the section dedicated to professional news. Facebook earlier this year said it would spend some \$300 million to support journalism, particularly local news organizations. It has also funded fact-checking projects around the world,

including one in partnership with AFP. Facebook said separately Friday it would not pay French media groups to display photos or video and text excerpts alongside links to articles shared by its users. This follows a similar move by Google last month which critics say defies an EU copyright directive.

Google News

Google scours the internet for news as well as other information, compiling stories at a News site that provides links to publishers along with snapshots of what they hold. The leading search engine does not pay for news content, saying that it drives a lot of traffic to publishers who can make money from those readers. But as part of the "Google News Initiative" unveiled last year, the tech giant committed \$300 million to help news publishers get more paid subscribers while stemming the flow of misinformation. This did not involve direct payments from Google but better support in helping drive subscriptions with fewer clicks.

The initiative was developed with some 60 media partners including the Washington Post, Financial Times, French-based Le Figaro, Brazil's Grupo Globo and Italy's La Repubblica. But Google remains locked in a battle with European publishers seeking payment for display of their content in search results. Google says articles, pictures and videos will be shown in search results only if media firms consent to let the tech giant use them for free.

Apple News

Apple offers a free news service featuring stories



CALIFORNIA: A giant digital sign is seen at Facebook's corporate headquarters campus in Menlo Park, California. —AFP

selected by editors, which also seeks to help drive paid subscriptions. The iPhone maker also offers an Apple News+ premium service available for \$10 monthly adds access to hundreds of magazines and newspapers. While Apple News has driven traffic to publishers, some have expressed disappointment when it comes to generating revenue, particularly when it comes to ads. Apple has reportedly made deals with publishers to split revenue generated by subscriptions to its news service.

Yahoo News

Pioneering internet firm Yahoo, now owned by Verizon, has long aggregated stories from around the internet and delivered them at its popular news site. Yahoo makes deals to pay outlets such as AFP for content. —AFP