

Daesh extremists blow themselves up in north Iraq: army

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1553431396518426200

Sun, 2019-03-24 12:41

BAGHDAD: Three suspected Daesh group suicide bombers blew themselves up Sunday in northern Iraq, the army said, a day after the extremists' "caliphate" was wiped out in neighbouring Syria.

Army spokesman Yahya Rassoul said the incident took place in a region near the Syrian border, where extremists sleeper cells are believed to be present. He said the suspects died as troops surrounded them but there were no casualties among government forces.

Local officials said the suspects were killed as they were trying to attack troops in the village of Qayrawan, south of the mountainous region of Sinjar which borders Syria.

Fighters of the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces on Saturday pronounced the death of the nearly five-year-old Daesh "caliphate" which once stretched across a vast swathe of Syria and Iraq.

Their victory was hailed as a major landmark in the battle against the extremists but there have also been numerous calls for "vigilance" with many saying the fight is far from over.

Top SDF commander Mazloum Kobani on Saturday warned that a new phase had begun in anti-Daesh operations and appealed for sustained assistance from the US-led coalition to help smash "sleeper cells."

Diehard extremists continue to have a presence in mountainous or desert regions between Syria and Iraq, which had declared victory over Daesh in December 2017.

In Iraq some of these regions remain inaccessible to security forces.



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Flag of freedom flies over vanquished Daesh 'caliphate' Iraqi parliament sacks local governor after Mosul boat capsizing

[Security tops agenda as Iraqi PM visits Egypt in first foreign trip](#)

Author:

Reuters

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1553349659880712600

Sat, 2019-03-23 13:37

CAIRO: Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi sought Egypt's support for efforts to tackle extremist militants in the region during a visit to Cairo on Saturday, his first trip abroad since taking office in October. After meeting Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, Abdul Mahdi highlighted "the importance of drying up the sources of terrorism" and said

“cooperation between Egypt and Iraq will be essential for this matter,” according to an official statement.

His comments came as US-backed forces said they had captured Daesh’s last shred of territory in eastern Syria at Baghouz, ending its territorial rule over a self-proclaimed caliphate straddling Syria and Iraq after years of fighting.

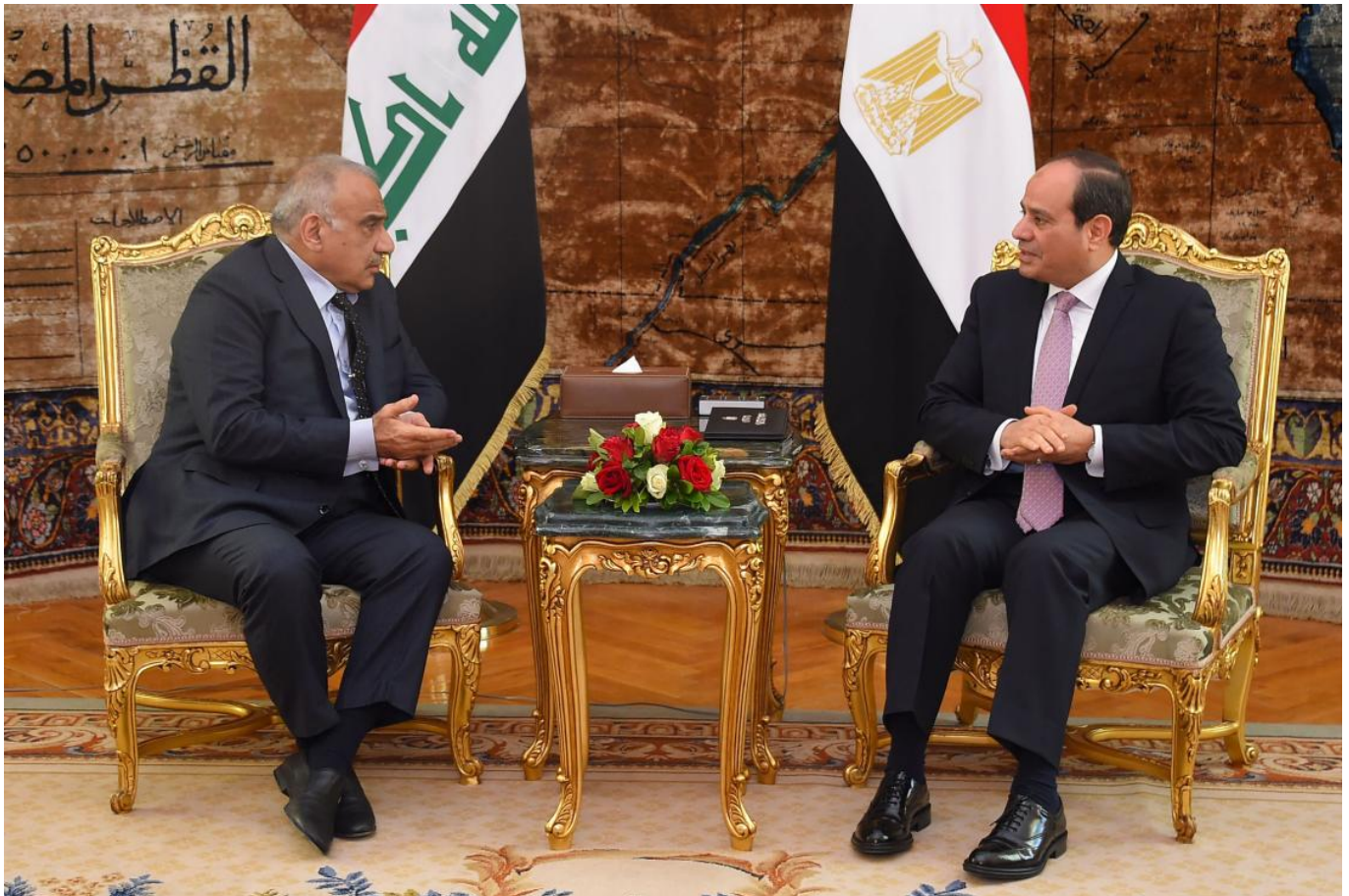
Though the defeat ends the group’s grip over the extremist quasi-state that it declared in 2014, it remains a threat.

Some Daesh fighters still hold out in Syria’s remote central desert and in Iraqi cities they have slipped into the shadows, staging sudden shootings or kidnappings and awaiting a chance to rise again.

The United States thinks the group’s leader, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, is in Iraq.

Defeating militants in Egypt’s Sinai Peninsula and restoring security after years of unrest has been a key promise of El-Sisi, the general-turned-president who came to power a year after the military overthrew Islamist President Mohammed Mursi in 2013.

Egypt has fought an insurgency waged by a Daesh affiliate in North Sinai since 2013. Hundreds of members of the security forces have been killed.





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Anger, grief sweep Iraq's Mosul as ferry disaster toll hits 100
Egypt races to reduce impact of \$5 billion Ethiopian dam

[Hundreds of Algerian lawyers protest against Bouteflika](#)

Author:

Reuters

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1553335889249625100

Sat, 2019-03-23 10:03

ALGIERS: Hundreds of Algerian lawyers protested again on Saturday in the capital to demand the immediate resignation of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika who has been for 20 years in power.

They gathered in Algiers' center, the scene of mass protests for one month, holding up slogans that read: "Respect the will of the people" and "Yes to a judiciary free from corrupt dignitaries."

Algerians first took to the streets a month ago to protest against Bouteflika's plan to seek a fifth mandate.

The 82-year old, who has rarely been seen in public since suffering a stroke in 2013, bowed to the protesters last week by reversing plans to seek re-election.

But he stopped short of quitting as head of state and said he would stay on until a new constitution is adopted. The move further enraged Algerians, and many of Bouteflika's allies have turned against him.

Some members of the ruling National Liberation Front party, known by its French acronym FLN, have also sided with the demonstrators.

The powerful military has been watching the protests unfold.

The generals have intervened in the past at momentous times, including canceling an election which Islamists were poised to win in 1992, triggering a civil war in which an estimated 200,000 people were killed.

On Friday, hundreds of thousands protested across the North African country.



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Algeria tensions: Governing party chief backs protesters
Thousands of Algerian protesters gather in central Algiers: witnesses

Syria Kurd autonomy under threat after Daesh 'caliphate' falls

Author:

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Sat, 2019-03-23 07:28

BEIRUT: Now the Daesh group's "caliphate" has fallen, the hard-won limited autonomy of Syria's Kurds will be left in peril if their key US ally goes ahead with its announced pullout.

On Saturday, the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces announced the end of the proto-state that the Sunni Arab extremist group declared across large parts of Syria and neighboring Iraq in 2014.

The Kurds have largely stayed out of Syria's eight-year civil war, instead building their own institutions in a third of the country under their control.

But a planned US military pullout has left them exposed to an attack by Turkey and in need of protection from Damascus, in a massive blow to their dreams of self-rule.

"The Kurds have been caught between a Syrian rock and a Turkish hard place," Syria expert Fabrice Balanche said.

Kurdish fighters have spearheaded the fight against Daesh since late 2014, but neighboring Turkey views them as "terrorists".

The presence of American troops in areas held by Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) had acted as a shield against any Turkish offensive. But US President Donald Trump in December shocked Washington's allies by announcing a full withdrawal of all 2,000 US troops from Syria as Daesh had been "beaten".

"The Kurds are facing an uncertain future. The most urgent threat appears to be from Turkey," analyst Mutlu Civioglu said.

After his announcement, Trump attempted to ease tensions by speaking of a 30-kilometre "safe zone" on the Syrian side of the border.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has said his country would establish the "security zone" itself if it took too long to implement.

The Kurds have rejected any Turkish implementation, especially since any such buffer would include their major cities.

They are demanding instead the deployment of an international observer force. "Kobane, Tal Abyad, Darbasiya, Qamishli, Dehik, Derbassiye – most of the Kurdish cities are on the border line," Civioglu said.

Turkey and its Syrian rebel proxies have led two previous offensives inside Syria, most recently seizing the northwestern enclave of Afrin from the Kurds last year.

Syria's civil war has killed more than 370,000 people and displaced millions since it started in 2011 with the brutal repression of anti-government protests.

It has since spiraled into a complex conflict, with rebel backer Turkey and regime ally Russia emerging as key powerbrokers.

Beyond American approval, Civiroglu said Turkey would likely need a green light from Russia before any Turkish offensive in Syria.

"Russia's position is going to be very important, because Russia has a strong power over Turkey," he said.

President Bashar al-Assad's regime now controls two-thirds of Syria thanks to Russian military backing since 2015, and it seems determined to also return to oil-rich northeastern Syria.

To protect themselves, the Kurds have dispatched delegations to Washington and Moscow.

And in ongoing talks, they have scrambled to mend ties with Damascus.

After decades of marginalization, the Kurds have developed their own political system in northeast Syria – holding elections, collecting taxes and running schools teaching the Kurdish language.

"In a war-torn country, the Kurdish system is working fine," Civiroglu said. "The Kurds want this to be recognized."

They want "Kurdish education to be offered officially", he said, after decades of an effective ban on their mother tongue.

But talks so far have failed to bear fruit, and Balanche warns the Kurds are in a weak position.

"The regime is demanding an unconditional surrender. Damascus does not want to let them retain any autonomy," he said.

Syrian Defense Minister Ali Abdullah Ayoub said Monday that the government would recapture all areas held by the SDF "in one of two ways: a reconciliation agreement or... by force".

Although the end of the Daesh "caliphate" has been declared, Daesh is still present in eastern Syria's vast Badia desert.

The US Defense Department has warned that without sustained pressure on the extremists, they could resurge in Syria within months.

In the end, the future of the Kurds mainly depends on the United States, says analyst Nicholas Heras of the Center for a New American Security.

"Every other actor in Syria cannot make a move until there is greater clarity on what the United States ultimately decides to do," he said.

And after any troop pullout, the United States could still stay on with a paramilitary force, he added.

"The best hope for the SDF is for the Americans and the coalition to stick it out in Syria for the long haul."

The White House has said that around 200 American "peace-keeping" soldiers would remain in northern Syria indefinitely.

Acting Pentagon chief Patrick Shanahan said he would be discussing with NATO partners the potential to establish an "observer force" in the area.



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Daesh defeated, 'caliphate' eliminated: US-backed SDF
Post-Daesh, north Iraq's minority mosaic blown apart by trauma

[Daesh defeated, 'caliphate' eliminated: US-backed SDF](#)

Author:

Reuters

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1553321488429230500

Sat, 2019-03-23 06:09

BEIRUT: US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) formally announced the destruction of Daesh's control of land in eastern Syria on Saturday but said it would continue its military and security campaigns against the group's sleeper cells.

At a televised ceremony, its general command called on the Syrian government, which has sworn to retake the whole country, to recognize the autonomous administration that runs areas the SDF controls in northeast Syria.

It also called on Turkey, which regards the SDF as a terrorist organization and has staged incursions into Syria against it, to leave Syrian territory, especially the mostly Kurdish region of Afrin.

The SDF has been battling to capture Baghouz at the Iraqi border for weeks.

Though the defeat of Daesh at Baghouz ends the group's grip over the extremist quasi-state straddling Syria and Iraq that it declared in 2014, it remains a threat.

Some of its fighters still hold out in Syria's remote central desert and in Iraqi cities they have slipped into the shadows, staging sudden shootings or kidnappings and awaiting a chance to rise again.

The US believes the group's leader, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, is in Iraq. He stood at the pulpit of the great medieval mosque in Mosul in 2014 to declare himself caliph, sovereign over all Muslims.

A senior US diplomat said the territorial defeat of Daesh is a "critical milestone" that delivers a crushing and strategic blow to the extremist group.

William Roebuck, the State Department's official in charge of Syria, added, however, that the campaign against Daesh is not over, saying the group remains a significant threat in the region.

"We still have much work to do to achieve an enduring defeat of IS," Roebuck said Saturday at a ceremony in eastern Syria's Al-Omar oil field base, celebrating victory over the group in Baghouz, Daesh's last stronghold in Syria.

Roebuck promised continued support to America's local partners in Syria to continue fighting the terrorist group.

British Prime Minister Theresa May said Saturday the fall of the last bastion held by Daesh terrorist in Syria marked "a historic milestone" as she paid tribute to British forces and coalition partners.

"The liberation of the last (IS)-held territory is a historic milestone that would not have been possible without their commitment, professionalism and courage," she said in a statement.

French President Emmanuel Macron paid tribute to the international coalition and its allies after US-backed forces declared military victory over Daesh in Syria.

Macron tweeted that "a major danger to our country is now eliminated, yet the threat remains and the fight against terrorist groups must continue."

He expressed condolences for the victims of Daesh.

France has been a member of the coalition fighting Daesh since 2014. The group claimed responsibility for several attacks in France, including assaults in Paris in 2015 that killed more than 130 people.

President Donald Trump hailed the end of the of Daesh's "caliphate" Saturday, vowing that the United States would remain "vigilant" against the diehard terrorists.

"We will remain vigilant... until it is finally defeated wherever it operates," Trump said in a statement.

"The United States will defend American interests whenever and wherever necessary." He added that the US will continue to work with its partners and allies to totally crush radical terrorists.





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Renewed US-led airstrikes pound Daesh holdouts Trump declares all Daesh-held territory eliminated in Syria but SDF continue fighting