

Daesh clings on in face of Kurd-led assault in Syria

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BAGHOUZ, Syria: US-backed forces battled Daesh group fighters overnight as the extremists Saturday clung onto their crumbling bastion in eastern Syria. "Clashes broke out again last night and have continued since," said Adnane Afrine, spokesman for the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). "There have so far been no surrenders (today) and there's no sign they are giving up," he told AFP.

AFP journalists at an SDF post inside Baghouz village, the last Daesh redoubt, heard sporadic rounds of mortar fire and US-led coalition planes overhead.

Daesh launched three suicide attacks Friday outside Baghouz, killing six people among those fleeing the crumbling extremist bastion near the Iraqi border.

They were the latest casualties in Syria's devastating civil war as it entered its ninth year with 370,000 dead.

All that remains of a once-sprawling proto-state that the Daesh militants declared in 2014 is a battered riverside camp in Baghouz.

The SDF and coalition warplanes have rained fire on the enclave since last Sunday, blitzing more than 4,000 Daesh fighter and family members into surrender.

Their on-off assault has been mostly fought at night, suspending major operations dayside to allow more surrenders, especially of civilians.

In total, over 61,000 people have streamed out of Daesh-held territory since December, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights says.



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Anti-Daesh Syria force boosted as extremist holdout shrinks
Father of Daesh teenager Shamima Begum asks UK to let her return

[For Syrians, 8 years of war leaves stories of loss and hope](#)

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By SARAH EL DEEB | AP

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Sat, 2019-03-16 06:26

BAGHOUZ, Syria: War is personal. And in Syria, after eight years of a grinding conflict, there are as many stories of loss, dispossession and desperate hope as there are people.

What started as peaceful protests in 2011 asking for government change turned into one of the cruelest modern wars and left a trail of broken lives among

the country's pre-war population of 23 million. Now half are displaced, nearly half a million dead and many live with permanent scars or have joined militias.

The years of war have left their mark on Dia Hassakeh's 45-year old face. The Arab fighter in the Kurdish-led U.S-backed Syrian Democratic Forces has seen his family suffer on the conflict's many fronts.

In the early days of the conflict, two of his brothers were wounded fighting in the government military against the armed opposition. In November, another brother was killed by the Daesh group. Now Dia is battling the militants at Daesh' last holdout, a speck of territory along the Euphrates River near the Iraqi border called Baghouz.

"As Syrians, every citizen has paid the price," he said, speaking just outside Baghouz. He took the name of his hometown Hassakeh as a nom de guerre when he joined the SDF.

While the Daesh group's territorial defeat will close one bloody chapter, Syria is still wracked by conflict on the eighth anniversary of its long-running civil war.

Syrian President Bashar Assad's government appears to have won the war against the insurgency trying to topple him. But much of the country is out of Assad's hands. The northeast and east, wrested from Daesh, is largely held by the US-backed Kurdish-led forces. But their fate as well is uncertain. Though President Donald Trump announced he would withdraw American troops, the US is apparently keeping a small force, hoping to encourage the Europeans to strengthen their presence to protect its Kurdish allies from their nemesis Turkey, and counter Iran's expansion in the region.

Militants are still a potent force. The Daesh group has planted the seeds to wage an insurgency. The northwestern province of Idlib – an opposition stronghold throughout the war – is home to other jihadists as radical as Daesh. Nearly 3 million Syrians live in the province, most displaced from other parts of Syria that fell under government control. A Turkish-Russian truce that averted a government assault on Idlib and took pressure off Assad is fraying, threatening new bloodshed.

Assad remains hostage to his massive need for cash to rebuild and his reliance on his allies, Russia and Iran, which are pursuing their own interests. Moscow wants to keep access to the Mediterranean and a position to challenge the West; Tehran is keeping an array of militias in Syria to preserve its domain of influence stretching from Iraq to Lebanon.

And public opposition is not extinguished.

Like Groundhog Day, protesters in southern Syria took to the streets of Daraa, the city where the 2011 anti-government rallies first erupted and where the government only finally managed to re-establish control last year. Men and children this month held day and night protests chanting against Assad after authorities planned to erect a statute for his late father.

"The people want a new president," protesters chanted, a 2019 version of "the people want to bring down the regime."

Within this maze of conflicts, players and interests, Syrians try to find their way.

Dia never liked the anti-government protests. When they erupted in 2011, he left Hassakeh – in the northeast of Syria – to live in northern Iraq. There, while two of his brothers fought in the military against the rebels, he ran a home appliances business and sat out the war – until the war caught up with

him unexpectedly. The Daesh group, feeding off Syria's chaos, swept over much of Syria and northern Iraq. Dia returned to Hassakeh and found the militants closing in on his home province.

He volunteered to fight against them to "protect our family, land and country," he said.

He blames outsiders—militants and superpowers—for breaking up his country. Having fought in the SDF and served in his own government's army before the revolts, he still believes the country will be put back together and heal.

"Any country that goes through this needs time."

The irony is he is fighting in a force backed by a foreign power—the US—and led by Kurds determined to stay as separate as possible.

Sefqan, a 29-year-old Kurd who commands an SDF unit of more than 200 special forces fighters, has no issues with his country breaking up and the central government losing authority.

"The Baath regime is no good for us Kurds," he said, referring to Assad's ruling party. "Our rights were lost in Syria ... Our war is to get out from under of this injustice." Sefqan fought against Daesh and prior to that other jihadist groups who threatened his hometown, Amuda, in Hassakeh province.

Kurds, who made up 10 percent of Syria's pre-war population, have long complained of discrimination and oppression by Damascus. Sefqan belongs to an even more disenfranchised community—he's one of thousands of Kurds who are stateless, because in the past they either failed to convince authorities they were Syrian residents or didn't take part in censuses in the 1960s and 1970s. Referred to as the "foreigners of Hassakeh," "the muted" or "the concealed," they were long deprived of basic rights like education and health services and were barred even from moving from province to province.

"Any group has a state. Why do we the Kurds not have one? To go to schools. To speak our language. To have an airport and travel. I can't even go to Damascus," said Sefqan, who spoke on condition he be identified only by his first name in accordance with SDF rules for its commanders.

Now Sefqan and many of his people enjoy new found confidence and clout, with the Kurdish-led administration controlling northeastern Syria and bolstered by natural resources and good relations with the U.S.-led coalition.

Sefqan and other Kurds dream of emulating the extensive autonomy enjoyed by Iraq's northern Kurdistan. He said the Kurdish-led administration has made strides in giving real representation to the community and praised its efforts to introduce democracy.

"If they continue this, it will be good," he said—though with a note of wariness. Rights groups blame the SDF and the administration for arbitrarily detaining critics, forcing military conscription and controlling what are meant to be representative political bodies.

The SDF has emerged as the most organized non-state actor from the war. It and its political arm have successfully established facts on the ground that will likely be hard to reverse—such as teaching the Kurdish language in schools and setting up parallel governing institutions and their own economic infrastructure.

Ali Ahmed Al-Hassan, a 29-year-old Arab, works trucking crude oil from one of the richest oil fields controlled by the SDF. It is a profitable, but highly risky business, because remnants of Daesh have threatened those helping the "Kurdish economy."

Al-Hassan lived for four years under Daesh rule after the militants took over

his home province of Deir Ezzor. Two of his brothers died, one as a bystander when airstrikes hit an Daesh position and another when he was caught in a cross fire.

“No one has been spared. My two brothers. My two nephews. And about six cousins. All were killed in the war,” he said.

Deir Ezzor has been freed of Daesh, but it’s still insecure. He has to be home before dark because of IS sleeper cells lurking in the countryside.

“We need more than a year” to regain security, he said.

Daesh has left its mark. The locals “have become foreigners. Many of the (foreign militants) married locals. Our children have become Chinese,” he said – his term for the many Central Asian fighters who joined Daesh in Syria.

Dia believes the militants’ presence is a pretext for foreign powers to meddle in Syria.

“Everyone is responsible for the creation of Daesh,” he said. “It was created and put on a pedestal to ruin this country, like the Arab spring. “

“All my family has taken part in this war. Five of us. Two were injured – one lost a leg, and another carries a cane – and one was killed. There is only me and another left,” he said. “So long as we have life and our hearts are beating, we will fight to liberate this country.”



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Organization of Islamic Cooperation chief calls for urgent support to Syrian refugees
Syria slams ‘hypocrisy’ of donors

[US should not curb aid to Arab coalition in Yemen -Pompeo](#)

Author:

Fri, 2019-03-15 16:47

WASHINGTON: The Trump administration opposes curbs on US assistance for the Arab coalition fighting to support the legitimate government in Yemen, United States US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said on Friday.

“The way to alleviate the Yemeni people’s suffering isn’t to prolong the conflict by handicapping our partners in the fight, but by giving the Arab coalition the support needed to defeat Iranian-backed rebels and ensure just peace,” Pompeo said at a news conference.

Pompeo will travel to Israel, Lebanon and Kuwait next week, including talks with Cypriot and Greek leaders in Jerusalem on energy security in the Mediterranean, the State Department said.

In Kuwait City, Pompeo will seek to strengthen cooperation on defense, cybersecurity and trade, spokesman Robert Palladino said in a statement. In Israel, which is preparing for key elections next month, he will meet with Cypriot and Greek leaders to discuss exporting natural gas to Europe, Palladino added.



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White House opposes resolution to end US support for Yemen military campaign
Houthis committed 41 violations within 24 hours: Arab coalition

[Syria slams 'hypocrisy' of donors](#)

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Fri, 2019-03-15 12:21

DAMASCUS: Syria on Friday accused donors who pledged aid to help its citizens displaced by the country's eight-year war of "hypocrisy" as they continue to impose sanctions on the regime.

International donors – led by the European Union – meeting on Thursday in Brussels pledged nearly \$7 billion in aid for 2019 for civilians caught up in the conflict.

But European powers stressed progress on a UN-led peace process must come before they release funds to rebuild Syria – though they no longer insist President Bashar Assad must go.

"The hypocrisy of the discourse of the officials of some countries taking part in the Brussels conference is both laughable and angering," a source at the foreign ministry said.

EU sanctions have deprived "the European Union of any credibility when it speaks about helping Syrians and alleviating their suffering," state news agency SANA quoted the source as saying.

The source criticized what it called the "deliberate and systematic politicization of the humanitarian issue and attempts to use it through conferences like these to continue to exert pressure on Syria and compound the crisis."

It slammed the conference for not inviting the Damascus government, calling it the "main concerned party" in the matter.

Since late 2011, the 28-member bloc has imposed sanctions on 277 Syrian officials including Damascus ministers over their role in the "violent repression" of civilians.

It has frozen the assets of some 72 entities and introduced an embargo on Syrian oil, investment restrictions and a freeze on Syrian central bank assets within the European Union.

The United States has also imposed a flurry of sanctions against Syrian officials, and had worked to hamper oil shipping to Syria.

Damascus says the sanctions have contributed to a fuel crisis in the country,

which on Friday marked the eighth anniversary of its civil war. Numerous rounds of US-backed peace talks have failed to stem the bloodshed, which has killed more than 370,000 people and pushed millions more from their homes.



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Anti-Daesh Syria force boosted as extremist holdout shrinks Syria death toll more than 370,000 in 8 years of war: monitor

[New Zealand terrorist attacks: One Jordanian dead, eight injured with two in critical condition](#)

Fri, 2019-03-15 14:38

DUBAI: One Jordanian was killed and eight others were injured – with two in critical condition – during the New Zealand terrorist attacks on the two

mosques on Friday.

Jordan's Foreign Ministry announced that Khaled Haj Musatafa was killed in the attacks, while Jordanian barber Wasseim Alsati and his daughter were among those critically injured. The foreign ministry said efforts are being made to provide all assistance and support needed by the victims and their families.

After the incident, Alsati shared a heartfelt video, via his official Facebook account, appealing for people to pray for his injured daughter and confirmed his condition was "hopefully" stable.

"Please pray for my son and my daughters, hopefully she will be so much better," he said.

[#VIDEO](#): Jordanian victim Wasseim Alsati, who was caught in the [#NewZealandShooting](#) massacre, shares heartfelt video from hospital bed asking people to pray for his injured daughter [#NewZealandTerroristAttack](#) [#ChristchurchTERRORISTattack](#) <https://t.co/NDdeyq6vj> [pic.twitter.com/Vh0qGCX707](https://t.co/Vh0qGCX707)

– Arab News (@arabnews) [March 15, 2019](#)

"I'm very sorry I have not been able to answer your calls and messages right now, I am really tired," Alsati added, saying "it has been a pleasure to know you all and thank you for the support and all the help that you have given me so far."

Alsati opened up a barber shop called Wass' Barbers in Christchurch, where he and his family have been living for many years.

Wasseim was hit with four bullets, two in his back, one in the stomach and another in his foot, while his daughter was hit with three bullets.

[Read more: At least 49 killed as gunman livestreams New Zealand mosque 'terrorist attacks'](#)

Jordanian Foreign ministry said in a statement in the aftermath of the shooting incident that it is believed that two Jordanians were among the victims of the terrorist attacks.

The ministry added that they are following up on the matter to ensure the victims are safe and are being treated accordingly. Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi said on his twitter account "We condemn the horrific barbaric attacks against innocent worshippers in [#NewZealandShooting](#) mosque. Our thoughts and prayers are with the victims and their families. Terrorism in all its forms and it's ideology of hate is a common enemy that we must fight together."

We condemn the horrific barbaric attacks against innocent worshippers in [#NewZealandShooting](#) mosque. Our thoughts and prayers are with the victims and their families. Terrorism in all its forms and its ideology of hate is a common enemy that we must fight together.

– Ayman Safadi (@AymanHsafadi) [March 15, 2019](#)

At least 49 people, including children, were killed, and 50 others critically injured when a gunman opened fire on Masjid Al Noor mosque and Linwood mosque in New Zealand.

[*Read more: Muslim world reacts at New Zealand terrorist attacks on mosque*](#)

New Zealand police detained three men and a woman, with one of them being charged with murder.

One of four people detained in New Zealand after mass shootings at two mosques in Christchurch is Australian, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison said.





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At least 49 killed as gunman livestreams New Zealand mosque 'terrorist attacks'
Saudi man killed in New Zealand mosque attack
World reacts at New Zealand terrorist attacks on mosque