

Anti-Daesh Syria force boosted as extremist holdout shrinks

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SOUA, Syria: US-backed forces consolidated their positions around Daesh's last redoubt in eastern Syria Friday as the country's devastating conflict entered its ninth year with more than 370,000 dead.

All that remains of a once sprawling proto-state that the Daesh extremists declared in 2014 is a battered riverside camp in the village of Baghouz near the Iraqi border.

The Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and warplanes of a US-led coalition backing them, have rained fire on the enclave since Sunday, blitzing thousands of Daesh members into surrender.

The Kurdish-led force said "1,300 terrorists and their families" gave themselves up on Thursday alone as its fighters slowed their advance to allow them to exit the enclave.

AFP correspondents on the ground said Thursday night was relatively calm apart from limited air strikes, as the SDF said its fighters were consolidating their positions after extremist counter-attacks and foiled suicide bombings.

The force was "consolidating and rotating its troops," an SDF spokesman told AFP.

"There are still women and children who want to surrender, so we are obliged to slow down operations," Jiaker Amed said in the neighboring village of Sousa.

"Operations risk being slowed again today to allow more departures of jihadists and their families," Amed said, but he was unable to give an estimate for the number of people left inside Baghouz.

"Those left are strongly attached to the (extremists') ideology," he said.

"There are a lot of suicide bombers but there are also families and children."

Since the months-old SDF offensive resumed on March 10, 3,000 IS suspected members have surrendered, according to the SDF.

A total of about 60,000 people have streamed out of Daesh-held territory since December, the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights says, a tenth of them suspected extremists.

The exodus has sparked a humanitarian crisis in Kurdish-held camps for the displaced, where women and children have arrived exhausted after weeks of siege.

These include the wives and children of alleged foreign extremists, hundreds of whom are being held by the Kurdish forces.

The International Rescue Committee says 120 people – mainly young children – have died on their way to the camp or after arrival.

Eight years of war in Syria have left more than 370,000 people dead including

112,000 civilians, the Syrian Observatory said, raising its last toll of over 360,000 issued in September.

The Britain-based monitoring group, which has a network of sources across Syria, said that more than 21,000 children and 13,000 women were among the dead.

The conflict flared after unprecedented anti-government protests in the southern city of Daraa on March 15, 2011.

Demonstrations spread across Syria and were brutally suppressed by the regime, triggering a multi-front armed conflict that has drawn in foreign powers and militant groups.

Over 125,000 Syrian government soldiers and pro-regime fighters figure in the latest death toll, the Observatory said.

It said other fighters, including rebels and Kurds, accounted for 67,000 of those killed.

Almost 66,000 were extremists, mainly from Daesh and Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS), dominated by Al-Qaeda's former affiliate in Syria.

The devastating conflict has displaced or sent into exile around 13 million Syrians, and cost almost \$400 billion in damages, according to the United Nations.

With the support of powerful allies Russia and Iran, President Bashar Assad has won his war for political survival but his country is fractured and cash-strapped.

Having reversed rebel gains with a massive Russian intervention, Assad now controls almost two-thirds of Syria's territory.

But key areas remain beyond regime control, including a swathe of the oil-rich northeast held by the SDF.

Idlib in northwestern Syria, held by HTS, is protected by a cease-fire deal between Ankara and Moscow which has seen Turkish troops deployed to the area. Syria's conflict is estimated to have set its economy back three decades, destroying infrastructure and paralysing the production of electricity and oil.

Assad, however, has regained control of key commercial arteries and started a tentative comeback on the Arab diplomatic scene.

Several countries have called for Syria to be reintegrated into the Arab League, from which it was suspended as the death toll from the uprising mounted in 2011.



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[Algeria ruling party turns its back on Bouteflika: he is 'history now'](#)

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Fri, 2019-03-15 07:34

ALGIERS: Algeria's ruling FLN party showed more signs of turning its back on President Abdelaziz Bouteflika on Friday, with one senior party figure saying in an interview overnight that the long-serving leader was "history now." Bouteflika has reversed a decision to stand for another term after mass protests against his rule. He has been losing allies rapidly in recent days

since returning from medical treatment in Switzerland.

The remarks by Hocine Kheldoun to Ennahar television late on Thursday were another major setback Bouteflika, who hoped to pacify Algerians by promising to take steps to change the political landscape dominated by the president and the ruling elite for decades.

Kheldoun, a former spokesman for the ruling party, became one of the most senior FLN officials to break with Bouteflika publicly. He said the party had to look forward and support the aims of demonstrators protesting against Bouteflika.

The FLN holds the majority in all elected assemblies, including parliament and local city councils.

Tens of thousands of Algerians have staged protests for weeks demanding a new era with younger leaders who would offer greater social freedoms and prosperity.

Bouteflika, 82, has rarely been seen in public since suffering a stroke in 2013, and the protesters say he is no longer in a fit state to rule. They took to the streets after Bouteflika, in office for 20 years, announced he would stand again, forcing him to reverse that decision this week.

"Game over"

A former minister who is familiar with Bouteflika's inner circle told Reuters that the president could not survive given the pressure building against him from Algerians of all social classes.

"Game over. Bouteflika has no choice but to quit now," the former minister said on condition of anonymity.

More mass protests are expected on Friday in the early afternoon after prayers.

Many Algerians say that the ailing president and other veterans of the 1954-1962 war of independence against France should hand over power to young technocrats who can focus on unemployment, poor services and stamping out corruption.

Although Bouteflika will not stand again and named a new prime minister, he stopped short of immediately stepping down. He intends to remain in power pending a national conference on political change and a new constitution. But his position is becoming more tenuous as he has lost one ally after another, including prominent members of the FLN, which has dominated since France's defeat in 1962.

The military, which has traditionally played a behind-the-scenes power broker role, has distanced itself from Bouteflika and stayed in its barracks throughout the crisis. It is expected to retain influence under all scenarios.

Algeria was relatively untouched when the 2011 "Arab Spring" uprisings swept away veteran autocrats in the Arab world. Bouteflika and his allies, effective manipulators of the opposition, managed to avoid major unrest by spending oil money on the population.

Bouteflika was credited with ending a civil war against Islamist insurgents in which tens of thousands of people were killed in the 1990s, and many Algerians long accepted heavy-handed rule as the price of stability.

But the public has turned out onto the streets angry at deteriorating economic conditions and the ruling party's failure to make the transition to a new generation of leaders despite the president's failing health.



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New premier urges Algerians to accept dialogue
Veteran diplomat set to guide Algeria's transition after protests

[Idlib bombing raises doubts over future of Astana agreement](#)

Thu, 2019-03-14 23:14

ANKARA: An escalation of heavy air and artillery strikes on Idlib in northwestern Syria on Wednesday night has raised doubts over the future of the Astana deal between Turkey, Russia and Iran.

Moscow claimed the bombing of Syria's last rebel stronghold had been coordinated with Turkey, but this was denied by Ankara.

Under the deal, Turkey was expected to persuade rebel groups to remove heavy weaponry from a designated buffer zone, and convince hard-line groups,

including Al-Qaeda affiliated Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS), to withdraw completely from major highways as part of a “de-escalation” process.

But HTS fighters remain in place, controlling 80 percent of the region, and criticism of Ankara for failing to honor its part of the agreement is becoming more acute.

Some experts see the bombing as a sign that Moscow is turning the screw on Turkey’s President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, either to assume more responsibility or renegotiate the terms of the deal.

Turkey had already been discussing extending patrols to Tal Rifaat, in northern Aleppo, with the Russians after Defense Minister Hulusi Akar announced similar cooperation would happen in Idlib.

“Perhaps Moscow is trying to raise the stakes to get constructive talks with Ankara on Idlib and find a solution to the future of HTS,” Anton Mardasov, military affairs expert and head of the Department of Middle Eastern Conflicts at the Moscow-based Institute for Innovative Development, told Arab News.

“It’s not profitable for Ankara to confirm the coordination of strikes with Moscow, though the strikes can be used by Turkey to increase pressure on HTS to accept their terms.

“Negotiations will be beneficial for Russia, to demonstrate a successful Syrian strategy. For Turkey, it is also an opportunity to advance its agenda, although Ankara has long been thinking about balancing its position by intensifying negotiations with its European partners in NATO.”

Turkey is also discussing establishing a joint coordination center in Idlib to manage operations at the behest of the Kremlin, which has criticized Ankara’s lack of engagement in recent months.

“If there is no political progress, Russia always resorts to hard power moves to motivate their partners. That’s how they will push Turkey to do more,” Yury Barmin, Middle East and North Africa director at the Moscow Policy Group, told Arab News.

“These attacks are happening against the background of the EU Conference on Syria in Brussels. The Russians are trying to put Syria on the radar of the Europeans to intervene,” he added.

According to Joe Macaron, a resident fellow at the Arab Center in Washington, Ankara may have approved Russian operations against HTS, but would be reluctant to let its allies believe it was complicit in them.

“With the current tensions in US-Turkish relations, Ankara has no option but to manage its marriage of convenience with Moscow,” he said.



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Turkey, Russia eye closer coordination on Syria
Russia, Turkey agree on need for decisive measures in Idlib

[New Palestinian PM faces myriad challenges, say analysts](#)

Thu, 2019-03-14 22:56

GAZA CITY: Mohammed Ishtayeh, the man charged with forming a new Palestinian government, faces many challenges.

Carrying the “heavy legacy” of predecessor Rami Hamdallah, who headed the national reconciliation government that emerged between Fatah and Hamas in 2014, he knows he cannot count on the support of Gaza’s ruling faction.

It is not just Hamas he must win round. The majority of Palestinian political factions wasted little time rejecting his appointment, calling it a move by President Mahmoud Abbas that “violated the national consensus.” Moreover, the

new prime minister must also contend with a growing financial crisis, partially as a result of Israeli tax policies, which has not been made easier by increased tensions between Israel and Hamas in recent months along the border with Gaza.

Abbas Zaki, a member of Fatah's central committee, told Arab News that Ishtiyah possessed leadership qualities that would enable him to succeed, despite his mandate coming in "very difficult circumstances."

He stressed, though, that unless it had a "very clear" long-term vision, any government he formed would probably fail.

Ahmad Bahar, the first deputy speaker of the Palestinian Legislative Council, claimed any government of Ishtayeh would be "unconstitutional and illegal."

Bahar, also a senior Hamas figure, called the coming government a "separatist" entity, seeking to "split the West Bank from the Gaza Strip ... and strengthen internal divisions and eliminate any glimmer of hope in achieving national unity."

BACKGROUND

- **Mohammed Ishtayeh, born in 1958, is a long-term ally of President Mahmoud Abbas and member of the Fatah central committee.**
- **An academic and economics professor, Mohammed Ishtayeh has been part of a number of Palestinian negotiating teams in US-brokered talks with Israel.**
- **Abbas Zaki, a member of Fatah's central committee, told Arab News that Mohammed Ishtayeh possessed leadership qualities that would enable him to succeed, despite his mandate coming in 'very difficult circumstances.'**

Talal Abu Zarifa, a senior member of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, justified his faction's refusal to support Ishtayeh, saying his government would "widen the circle of difference and division in Palestine."

The political analyst Hossam Al-Dajani, though, told Arab News that Ishtayeh would look for ways to break through the challenges facing his government, both in terms of the relationship with Hamas and the other factions in Gaza, but that his success would depend on the extent of freedom granted to him by Abbas to make decisions, and less on opposition from Hamas.



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Palestinian president plans anti-Hamas measures as split widens
Palestinian PM willing to quit if president Abbas wishes

[Two rockets fired from Gaza at Tel Aviv area: army](#)

Thu, 2019-03-14 22:20

JERUSALEM: Two rockets were fired from the Gaza Strip at the Tel Aviv area on Thursday, setting off sirens, and several explosions were heard, the Israeli military and witnesses said.

There were no immediate reports of damage or casualties. Video broadcast on Israeli TV showed two Israeli interceptor missiles streaking into the sky above Tel Aviv, Israel's commercial capital, and detonating.

Reuters journalists heard explosions, but it was unclear whether they were caused by the rockets or the interceptor missiles fired by Israel's Iron Dome system.

The military said two rockets were launched from the Gaza Strip and it would provide further details later. There was no immediate claim of responsibility in the territory, where its dominant Hamas group has been engaged in talks

with Egypt on a long-term ceasefire with Israel. Tensions have been high for the past year along the Israel-Gaza frontier since Palestinians began violent protests near Israel's border fence that have often drawn a lethal response from the Israeli military.



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Iran warns of firm response if Israel acts against its oil sales