

Wounded and alone, children emerge from last Daesh enclave

Author:

Sat, 2019-03-02 22:52

DEIR EZZOR, Syria: Hareth Najem fled Daesh's last enclave in eastern Syria wounded and alone. The Iraqi orphan's family had died two years earlier in airstrikes across the border in Al-Qaim region.

"I had two brothers and a sister. They all died, and then I was by myself," Hareth told Reuters, tears filling his eyes. "My little sister, I loved her a lot. I used to take her with me to the market."

Lying in a cattle truck beside another injured boy at a desert transit point for US-backed forces, he huddled under a blanket. His face was covered in dirt and the side of his head wrapped with bandages covering wounds incurred days earlier.

Hareth was 11 years old when Daesh carved out its proto-state in Iraq and Syria, killing thousands of civilians and attracting an array of enemies that have fought from the air and on the ground to uproot the militants.

Now 16, he was among the children swept up this week in the civilian evacuation of Baghouz, the last shred of land under the militants' control where they are on the brink of defeat at the hands of the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

Some of the children are foreigners whose parents brought them to be raised under Daesh rule, or child fighters conscripted into what the group dubbed "cubs of the caliphate." Others, including members of the Yazidi minority, were enslaved by the militants.

Many have seen their parents die in the fighting or be detained by rival forces. As Daesh faces territorial defeat, their fate remains uncertain. The SDF investigates all men and teenage boys arriving from Baghouz to determine possible Daesh links.

'These kids have nobody'

Around 20 children crossed the frontline on their own this week, including Iraqis, Syrians, Turks and Indonesians, said SDF commander Adnan Afrin. The fathers of some were identified as Daesh militants and arrested immediately.

"These kids have nobody. They need somebody to take care of them, to provide mental health support," said Afrin, adding that some had gone hungry for a long time. The SDF plans to hand over the children to aid groups, he said.

Hareth said his family had been running a market stall when Daesh overran

their town and they had no links to the group.

After his family was killed in an aerial bombardment, he crossed into Syria with other Iraqis who feared Shiite militias advancing against Daesh would take revenge on them – a fear that other Iraqis have cited as their reason for entering Daesh-held Syria.

Hareth said he tried to avoid the militants and denies attending their schools or receiving military training. Their morality police would sometimes arrest and whip him.

“They gave speeches at the mosques, jihad and whatnot,” he said. “I was scared of them. My whole family died because of them.”

When he reached Baghouz, he worked in a field in return for a room to sleep in. He tried saving enough money to go home, but said the militants stopped him.

Hareth was wounded last week when a shell fell near where he was standing along the Euphrates River, injuring his ear, hand and stomach. He wants to get medical care and return to relatives still in Iraq.

“I want to go look for them ... When I get better and my body recovers, when I can walk,” he said. “I want to go back, to become a young man again, to build a future again.”





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Kurdish forces battle into last Daesh pocketDaesh faces final territorial defeat in eastern Syria battle

[Kurdish forces battle into last Daesh pocket](#)

Sat, 2019-03-02 22:47

NEAR BAGHOUZ, Syria: Kurdish-led forces battled militants defending their last village on Saturday as the operation to flush out Daesh from eastern Syria resumed after days of humanitarian evacuations.

The US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) pushed into Baghouz, a tiny hamlet near the Iraqi border where Daesh militants are making a desperate

last stand.

As the sun rose above the palm trees lining the Euphrates River, the crackle and thud of gunfire and shelling echoed across the farmland while SDF artillery units could be seen taking up positions, AFP journalists near the front line reported. An SDF officer said he saw fighters moving between empty buildings and a makeshift camp on the edge of the village where it is feared civilians might still be hunkered down.

“The fighting is intense at the moment,” the officer said. “Our forces are advancing from two directions.”

The SDF announced the launch of an assault on Daesh’s last redoubt late on Friday after a week-long exodus that saw thousands of people flee the enclave dried up.

While Daesh militants, who have been besieged for weeks in an ever-shrinking pocket, are vastly outgunned, their use of tunnels, booby traps and suicide bombers is hampering the SDF advance.

“We can’t put a time frame on this battle – two weeks, three weeks or a week – it will depend on the surprises we get along the way,” SDF spokesman Adnan Afrin said.

“Those who have not surrendered by now will meet their fate there,” he said.

Most of the more than 50,000 people who left the very last rump of the Daesh proto-state in recent weeks were women and children.

Some of the evacuees however were suspected fighters either surrendering to the SDF or attempting to slip back into civilian life.

The militants are cornered in a bend of the Euphrates, with Syrian regime forces and their allies on the west bank of the Euphrates blocking any escape across the river and Iraqi government forces blocking any move downstream.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitoring group said seven Daesh militants were shot dead by Syrian forces.

Only a few dozen people were evacuated by the SDF on Friday in the smallest convoy in days, prompting the Kurdish-led force to close the humanitarian window and resume their offensive.

The assault will deal a final death blow to Daesh supremo Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi’s caliphate, which was proclaimed in mid-2014 and once covered territory larger than Britain. At its peak, the militants’ proto-state covered large parts of Iraq and Syria, administered millions of people, minted its own currency, levied taxes and produced its own textbooks.

It effectively collapsed in 2017 when Daesh lost major cities such as Mosul and Raqqa following massive offensives by government armies and their respective international allies in both countries.

While the last remains of Daesh's statehood experiment are about to disappear, the group remains a potent force in both Syria and Iraq, where it carries out deadly attacks.

Its brutal legacy is still raw and the scope of the atrocities committed under its rule continues to emerge, even in areas where its fighters were defeated long ago.

The SDF this week announced that yet another mass grave was discovered, this time near Baghouz, and that the severed heads of women were found in it.

While the victims were not immediately identified, local fighters believe the executed women are likely to be members of the Yazidi community.

The mostly Iraq-based religious minority are considered heretics by Daesh, which tried to exterminate them in 2014 with massacres that were among the reasons the United States intervened militarily.

Many of the thousands of women abducted and enslaved by Daesh then are still missing today and it is feared some may still be held captive in Baghouz.

Nadia Murad, the current laureate of the Nobel Peace Prize and herself an Iraqi Yazidi who was kidnapped and raped, urged the US-led coalition backing the SDF to help secure their safe return.

"The Global Coalition to Defeat Daesh must have a plan to help rescue Yazidis that are still missing," she said in a statement Friday.

Some of them managed to slip out with the thousands of civilians who were evacuated over the past 10 days.





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Daesh teenager Shamima Begum moved from Syria camp after death threats

[Israel launches air strike on Hamas location in the Gaza Strip](#)

Sat, 2019-03-02 21:07

GAZA STRIP: Israeli military officials said on Saturday that they had struck a Hamas target in southern Gaza Strip, after balloons carrying explosive devices drifted into its airspace.

Thousands of Palestinians had been demonstrating in recent weeks on the border lines, and on Friday three people were injured, including a medic and a journalist.

More to follow.



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Hundreds protest against child marriage in Lebanon

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Sat, 2019-03-02 17:29

BEIRUT: Hundreds protested on Saturday in Lebanon against child marriage, demanding lawmakers forbid unions below the age of 18, in a country where some faiths allow girls to be wed at 14.

Organized by civil society groups, the rally attracted women of all ages – and some lawmakers – who marched on parliament in the capital Beirut, an AFP photographer said.

Some carried placards with slogans reading “Not before 18” and “Stop early marriage.”

Abir Abdel Razeq, a 22-year-old who carried her young daughter in her arms, said that she married at 14.

“I hope that my daughter does not get married early, and that she finishes school – I hope that she will not marry before she is 22,” Razeq said.

The protest came as a bill designating 18 as the minimum age for marriage awaits parliament’s consideration.

Lebanon does not have nationwide laws on marriage and divorce, since these areas are governed by the country’s 18 religious communities.

Elements of both the Muslim and Christian communities allow girls to be married at 14.





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Lebanon's Hezbollah suspends official over Parliament spat
Lebanon censors caricature of Khamenei in French weekly

[Algeria's Bouteflika names director for his campaign to seek a fifth presidential term](#)

Author:

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Sat, 2019-03-02 15:46

CAIRO: Algeria's president Abdelaziz Bouteflika named Abdelghani Zaalane as the new director of his campaign for a fifth term, state press agency APS said on Saturday.

The decision comes a day after tens of thousands of Algerians protested against another term in office for Bouteflika, 81, who is in Switzerland for "periodic medical checks."

A total of 183 people were injured during protests across Algeria on Friday against President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's bid for election to a fifth term, the state news agency APS said on Saturday, citing the health ministry.

One person died of a heart attack, officials said earlier.

Tens of thousands of protesters called on the ailing, 82-year-old Bouteflika to abandon plans to seek re-election in an April presidential vote – Algeria's biggest anti-government rallies since the Arab Spring eight years ago.

He has not formally confirmed he will stand, although representatives have indicated he will do so. APS reported on Saturday that Bouteflika had named Abdelghani Zaalane as his campaign director.

Friday's protests were mostly peaceful but scuffles between police and protesters broke out in the evening near the presidential place in the capital Algiers.

Algiers was quiet on Saturday.

Large-scale demonstrations – rarely seen in Algeria with its ubiquitous security services – against Bouteflika's re-election move began a week ago, but Friday saw the biggest turnout yet.

Bouteflika suffered a stroke in 2013 and has been seen in public only a few times since. His re-election bid stoked resentment among Algerians who believe he is not fit to run the major oil- and gas-producing country.

Bouteflika's campaign manager had said on Tuesday he would submit his official application on Sunday, the deadline for candidates. Bouteflika, who

turned 82 on Saturday, has not directly addressed the protests. Authorities said last week he would travel to Geneva for unspecified medical checks. Swiss television said on Friday Bouteflika was at Geneva University Hospital. There was no official confirmation that Bouteflika was in the Swiss city.

Many Algerians for years avoided politics in public, fearing trouble from the security services or disillusioned as the country has been run by the same group of veterans since the 1954-1962 independence war with France. Bouteflika has ruled since 1999 and stamped out a decade-long Islamist insurgency early in his rule. Algerians have long tolerated a political system with little space for dissent as a price to pay for peace and stability.

A weak and divided opposition faces high hurdles in mounting an electoral challenge. Since the FLN party again picked Bouteflika as its presidential candidate, several parties, trade unions and business groups have endorsed him.



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Tens of thousands of Algerians call on Bouteflika to step down 'Ballot box' to decide if ailing Algeria president gets 5th term: PM