

US-backed forces evacuate families before final assault on militants

Author:

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NEAR BAGHOUZ, SYRIA: US-backed forces in eastern Syria scrambled on Wednesday to extract more families from the last sliver of Daesh's proto-state before delivering a final blow to holdout militants.

Several thousand people – fighters and their relatives – are believed to be holed up in the last pocket of territory controlled by Daesh, barely half-a-square kilometer near the Iraqi border.

The so-called Daesh is only days away from dying in a tiny village few Syrians had ever heard of until recently.

Thousands of its last denizens, many of them women and children, have been pouring out of the riverside hamlet of Baghouz in recent days, posing a huge humanitarian challenge for the Kurdish fighters leading the operation.

Survivors of the months-old siege spilling out of the double-trailer trucks that transported them out of Baghouz tell harrowing tales of starvation and many of the evacuees require immediate medical attention. Lines of black-veiled women holding scruffy children and carrying their scant belongings in bags can be seen walking across the plain.

Save the Children said many of the surviving children have witnessed devastating events in recent months and are “showing signs of psychological distress.”

The men are carefully screened by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), who have spearheaded the battle against Daesh in Syria, with support from a US-led coalition.

According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, about 10 percent of the estimated 50,000 people who fled the last militant bastions since December were Daesh members trying to slip back into civilian life.

The diehard militants, among them many foreigners, still clinging to the last patch of the proto-state in Baghouz have also been using civilians as human shields.

Footage captured by the BBC from positions held by Iraqi paramilitary forces across the Euphrates River shows an improvised camp, where what appears to be a militant can be seen running among makeshift tents.

As warplanes fly overhead, a woman is seen collecting water from the river in a plastic jerry can while black men move stealthily among the jumble of minivans and civilian shelters that make any direct airstrike impossible.

The SDF launched its final offensive against Daesh territorial control in September 2018.

The operation has been deadly and slow, with one top French officer even publishing stinging criticism of the coalition's reluctance to fully involve its ground forces.

US President Donald Trump announced late last year he was ordering a complete troop pullout from Syria, leading the SDF exposed to Turkish military threats.

A security vacuum could also see a quick resurgence of Daesh, which has lost all its bastions in Syria and Iraq but remains a potent guerrilla force.

Even the US military warned that Daesh could potentially re-establish territorial control in some areas with six months "absent sustained counterterrorism pressure."

Almost eight years into a conflict that has killed more than 360,000 people, the humanitarian emergency showed no sign of relenting.

With aid agencies struggling to provide basic relief to famished civilians evacuated from the remote Baghouz area, Save the Children highlighted the trauma the youngest among them had suffered.

The children who fled Daesh-held areas were "likely to have witnessed acts of brutality and lived under intense bombardment and deprivation in the last enclave held by the group," the British charity said.

One of the children cited in the report was an 11-year-old named Mai.

"I always tried not to look when there were beheadings. I would hide behind my mum," she was quoted as saying.

The charity stressed much more needed to be done to help these children.

"That includes funding and access for case management and protective services, and for foreign children repatriation to their countries of origin," said Save the Children's Syria response director, Sonia Khush.

The local Kurdish administration is struggling to cope with the humanitarian burden and has repeatedly urged the world to step up its aid effort.

The countries of origin of detained militants are reluctant to repatriate them, fearful of the impact such returns could have on security and on public opinion.



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Russia, Syria call on US troops to leave Syria Hundreds more leave Syria Daesh holdout: AFP reporter

[Israeli PM vows to bar Iran from securing presence in Syria](#)

Author:

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV | AP

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Wed, 2019-02-27 17:54

MOSCOW: Israel's prime minister vowed Wednesday to prevent Iran from securing a lasting presence in Syria as he visited Moscow for talks focusing on regional security.

For Benjamin Netanyahu, it's the first trip to Moscow since September's

downing of a Russian warplane by Syrian forces that were responding to an Israeli air strike. The incident left 15 Russian crew dead and threatened to derail close security ties between Russia and Israel.

Russian President Vladimir Putin said at the start of Wednesday's talks that "it's very important to discuss the situation in the region and security issues."

He added that the high-level consultations are essential in view of the evolving situation.

Netanyahu began the talks by reaffirming Israel's strong determination to block attempts by Iran to establish a foothold in Syria.

"The greatest threat to stability and security in the region comes from Iran and its satellites," he said. "We are determined to continue with our aggressive action against the efforts of Iran, which calls for our destruction, and against its attempts to entrench militarily in Syria."

Moscow has played a delicate diplomatic game of maintaining friendly ties with both Israel and Iran. Last summer, Moscow struck a deal with Tehran to keep its fighters away from the Golan Heights to accommodate Israeli concerns about the Iranian presence in Syria.

Netanyahu noted that he and Putin have had 11 meetings since September 2015 and hailed "the direct, open and true way in which we maintain the relationship between Russia and Israel."

"The direct connection between us has been an essential element that has prevented risks and conflicts between our militaries, and that has contributed to regional security and stability," the Israeli leader said.

Netanyahu congratulated Putin on the military holiday Russia marked last weekend and invited him to visit Israel to attend the opening of a monument to the Nazi siege of Leningrad during World War II.

"We will never forget the role of Russia and the Red Army in the victory over the Nazis," he said.

Putin, a native of the city, accepted the offer.

Netanyahu praised "excellent bilateral relations," noting "more than one million Russian speakers who have made a great contribution to Israel, have turned into a part of us, and have made Russian culture a part of Israeli culture."



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[Israel arrests senior Palestinian official](#)

Author:

Wed, 2019-02-27 21:33

JERUSALEM: Israeli police on Wednesday arrested a senior Palestinian official after recent scuffles at a highly sensitive holy site in Jerusalem, officials said.

The Palestinian governor of Jerusalem, Adnan Gheith, was among 22 Palestinians arrested overnight in raids in East Jerusalem, official Palestinian news agency WAFA said.

Police spoke of two arrests, including “a senior official from the Palestinian Authority,” over suspicions of fraud and forgery.

Police spokesman Micky Rosenfeld told AFP they were also arrested in connection with "recent incidents" at the Haram Al-Sharif, or Holy Sanctuary, which includes the Al-Aqsa Mosque and Dome of the Rock.

The suspects were being questioned, Rosenfeld said, without providing further details.

The arrests risked further raising tensions surrounding the site holy to both Muslims and Jews, who refer to it as the Temple Mount.

There have recently been scuffles between worshippers and police there over access to a side building in the compound closed by Israel since 2003.

Arguing there was no longer any reason for it to remain closed, Palestinian officials reopened the building on Friday and worshippers prayed inside despite an Israeli order barring access.

The building is known as the Golden Gate or Gate of Mercy in Arabic.

On Sunday, police arrested and later released a top Palestinian Muslim official, Abdel Azeem Salhab, and his deputy after the holy site incidents.

Salhab is the head of the council of the Waqf in Jerusalem, the religious authority that governs the site in the disputed city.

The arrest drew condemnation from Jordan, the custodian of the holy compound. The site is the third-holiest in Islam and a focus of Palestinian aspirations for statehood. It is also the location of Judaism's most holy spot, revered as the site of the two biblical-era Jewish temples.

It is a frequent scene of conflict between the two sides.

Palestinians fear Israel will seek to assert further control over it, while Israel accuses Palestinians of using such claims as a rallying cry to incite violence.

Access to Golden Gate was closed by an Israeli court order in 2003 during the second Palestinian intifada over alleged militant activity there, police say. Waqf officials argue that the organization that prompted the ban no longer exists.

The site is located in East Jerusalem, occupied by Israel in the 1967 Six-Day War and later annexed in a move never recognized by the international community.

Palestinian Authority activities are barred from Jerusalem by Israel.

As a result, the PA has a Jerusalem governor located in Al-Ram, just on the other side of Israel's separation wall from the city in the occupied West Bank.



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[Qatar Airways complains boycott forced suspension of planned Africa routes](#)

Wed, 2019-02-27 20:22

JEDDAH: Qatar Airways has been forced to suspend planned new routes to Africa because of pressure from a boycott over Doha's links to extremist groups.

The airline said the sanctions by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt meant it "had to suspend some planned new destinations especially in West and Central Africa."

Since the 2017 boycott, Qatari jets have been banned from the airspace of its three Gulf neighbors, forcing flights to carry out large detours.

The quartet of Arab nations cut transport, trade and diplomatic ties with Qatar, accusing the country of hosting and funding terror groups and interfering in their internal affairs.

Qatar Airways chief executive, Akbar Al-Baker, has previously blamed the boycott for his airline's poor financial performance. In September, the airline said it suffered a \$69 million loss for the financial year and said the severing of ties with other Arab countries was behind it falling into the red.

Due to the unjust blockade against [#Qatar](#), we had to suspend some planned new destinations especially in West and Central Africa, highlighting how the illegal blockade has not only impacted my country but also other innocent countries. [#avaf19](#)
pic.twitter.com/4tAQzGLvVf

– Qatar Airways (@qatarairways) [February 27, 2019](#)



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Qatar Airways announces \$69 million revenue loss this year

[Syria's Bashar Assad invites Iran FM Zarif to visit Damascus](#)

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Wed, 2019-02-27 16:46

LONDON: Syrian President Bashar Assad on Wednesday invited Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif to visit Damascus, state news agency IRNA reported, without specifying a date for the trip. Zarif tendered his resignation two days ago but Iran's President Hassan Rouhani rejected it on Wednesday, calling it "against national interests." More to follow.



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