

Twin blasts in rebel-held Syrian city Idlib kill at least 15

Author:

Associated Press

ID:

1550498857448243900

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AMMAN: Twin explosions in the bustling centre of the rebel-held northwestern Syrian city of Idlib on Monday killed at least 15 people and injured scores, medics and witnesses said.

They said an explosive device planted in a parked car detonated in a main street in the provincial capital. Many of the casualties were civil defence workers who reached the site moments before a second explosion nearby. That blast was attributed by some witnesses to a bomb rigged to a motorcycle. Social media footage showed aid workers carrying away bodies and rescuing wounded civilians amid smouldering wreckage.

Idlib province, in Syria's northwest corner, is under the control of Hayat Tahrir al Sham, a bloc of Islamist militant factions spearheaded by Syria's former al Qaeda affiliate, and has long been targeted by bombings and assassinations.

Alliance commanders say they hundreds of people have been rounded up for suspected links to Syrian President Bashar al Assad's intelligence services or Islamic State sleeper cells who they blame for some of the bombings.

They say the wave of blasts in the densely populated region, a haven for tens of thousands of civilians opposed to Assad's rule, aims to destabilise the last opposition bastion remaining after almost eight years of civil war.

Idlib, which borders Turkey, has also seen an escalation in artillery fire from the Syrian army and allied Iranian-backed militias on rebel-held towns, witnesses said.

Damascus has vowed to retake every last inch of Syria to cap a string of military gains in the last two years that have recovered almost all rebel-controlled regions with the key assistance of Russian air power.

Russia is keen to help Assad regain the entire country, including eventually Idlib, but Turkey, which wants the Syrian leader to leave power, has so far successfully pushed back.

Last week President Vladimir Putin said Russia, Turkey and Iran had agreed to take unspecified extra steps to clear Idlib of what he called "a hotbed of terrorists," but the Kremlin said there would be no military operation there.



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[Far behind in polls, Israel's Livni quits politics](#)

Author:

AFP

ID:

1550497768608168100

Mon, 2019-02-18 13:46

TEL AVIV: Former Israeli foreign minister Tzipi Livni, whose party has trailed far behind in polls ahead of April 9 elections, announced Monday she was retiring from politics.

Livni, who gained international recognition in part thanks to her past role

as a negotiator with the Palestinians, also said her Hatnua party would not run in the elections.

The 60-year-old said in a statement before journalists in Tel Aviv she was bringing her party to “an end ... knowing I did all I could for my beloved state and to unite the forces that would fight for it. It’s not up to me any more.”

Livni, who also previously served in the Mossad spy agency, narrowly missed out on becoming prime minister after 2009 elections.

She had recently helped lead Israel’s main opposition, the center-left Zionist Union alliance, but a split in January ended the arrangement that also included the Labour party.

Labour party leader Avi Gabbay dramatically announced then that he would no longer partner with Livni as she sat stone-faced next to him.

While the Zionist Union won the second-most seats in the last general election in 2015, it more recently tumbled in opinion polls.

Livni sought to mount a campaign for April 9 elections outside the Zionist Union, but struggled to gain any traction or form the large alliance she sought.

Labour and Gabbay have also faltered in opinion polls.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is likely to remain premier after the elections, polls consistently show, despite a series of corruption investigations into his affairs.

The attorney general is however expected to announce in the coming weeks whether he intends to indict Netanyahu, and an announcement before the elections could shake up the campaign.

The right-wing prime minister’s main challenger is seen as former military chief of staff Benny Gantz and his centrist Israel Resilience party.



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Former minister Livni named Israel opposition leader

[Germany wants trial for Syria militants but warns of difficulties](#)

Author:

AFP

ID:

1550486889657428400

Mon, 2019-02-18 10:44

BERLIN: Germany vowed Monday to prosecute German Daesh fighters but warned that it would be “extremely difficult” to organize the repatriation of European nationals from Syria, after US President Donald Trump called on allies to take back alleged militants.

Syria’s US-backed Kurdish forces, which are battling Daesh group militants in their last redoubt in eastern Syria, hold hundreds of suspected foreign Daesh

fighters and the calls for their reluctant home countries to take them back have grown in urgency.

"We must be able to ensure that prosecution is possible," Defense Minister Ursula von der Leyen told Bild daily.

Underlining the difficulties however of putting the ex-fighters on trial, the minister noted that there is "no government in Syria with which we have a sensible relationship."

President Bashar "Assad cannot be our counterpart, the Syrian-democratic forces are not a unity government," she added, stressing that proof and witness statements needed to be secured in Syria if the militants are to be put on trial.

Foreign Minister Heiko Maas said separately that a return could only be possible if "we can guarantee that these people can be immediately sent here to appear in court and that they will be detained."

For this, "we need judicial information, and this is not yet the case," Maas told ARD television late Sunday. Under such conditions a repatriation would be "extremely difficult to achieve."

Berlin wants to "consult with France and Britain ... over how to proceed," he said.

The subject is to be raised on Monday at a meeting of European foreign ministers called to discuss among other issues "the situation in Syria, in particular the recent developments on the ground," according to an agenda for the talks.

Trump on Sunday called on his European allies to take back alleged militants captured in Syria.

Daesh imposed a self-declared caliphate across parts of Syria and neighboring Iraq from 2014, but has since lost all of it except a tiny patch of less than half a square kilometer near the Iraqi border.

After years of fighting Daesh, the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) hold hundreds of foreigners accused of fighting for the group, as well as their wives and children.

Syria's Kurds have repeatedly called for their countries of origin to take them back, but these nations have been reluctant.

"The United States is asking Britain, France, Germany and other European allies to take back over 800 Daesh fighters that we captured in Syria and put them on trial," Trump said in a tweet.

After initial reluctance, Paris appears ready to consider the return of its nationals.

In Belgium, Justice Minister Koen Geens called for a "European solution" on Sunday, calling for "calm reflection and looking at what would be the least security risks."



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Don't abandon us, Syrian Kurds tell Europe
France snubs Trump's appeal to repatriate Daesh fighters en masse, for now

[Israel clears Palestinians from Jerusalem home claimed by settlers](#)

Author:

AFP

ID:

1550428613842457600

Sun, 2019-02-17 17:32

JERUSALEM: Israeli police on Sunday evicted a Palestinian family from their home in the Muslim Quarter of Jerusalem's Old City, after the supreme court ruled Jewish claimants were the rightful owners.

An AFP photographer said residents of the neighborhood in Israeli-annexed east Jerusalem scuffled with police, who stood guard as about a dozen Israeli settlers took possession of the large building.

A police spokesman said two people were detained.

"They disturbed police activities," he told AFP but could not say if they were subsequently released.

Rania Abu Asab, who lived in the house with her husband, their children and his aunt, stood weeping outside as the settlers raised the Israeli flag on the roof.

"We live there, it's my house, it's my whole life," she said. "They took everything."

She said the family was compelled to leave behind all its furniture and belongings.

Ir Amim, an Israeli watchdog group which monitors settlement activity in Jerusalem, reported on February 3 that the Abu Asab family had been served an eviction notice ordering them to vacate the property by February 12.

It said family members had lived there since the 1960s.

Israeli NGO Peace Now said the home originally belonged to a Jewish family which fled during the 1948 war which accompanied Israel's foundation.

East Jerusalem was occupied during that conflict by Jordan until the 1967 Six-Day War, when it was seized by Israel and subsequently annexed, moves never recognized by the international community.

The Abu Asab family lived until 1948 in a neighborhood it fled before eventually moving to the home in question.

Peace Now said in a statement Sunday that under an Israeli law passed in 1950 Palestinians cannot return to homes they fled in 1948.

A 1970 act, however, decreed that property in east Jerusalem abandoned by Jewish owners could be reclaimed.

"The court granted the settlers the house and the Abu Asab family became refugees for the second time," Peace Now said.



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[UK teen who joined Daesh gives birth in Syrian refugee camp](#)

Author:

AFP

ID:

1550423368712076200

Sun, 2019-02-17 16:08

LONDON: A teenager who joined the Daesh group in Syria but now wants to return to Britain on Sunday gave birth in a refugee camp, as European governments grapple with what to do with returning extremists ahead of a US troop pullout.

Shamima Begum, whose fate has stirred controversy ever since she and two friends fled London to join the terror network in 2015 aged just 15, told Sky News she had delivered a boy.

"I just gave birth so I'm really tired," the 19-year-old said as she made a renewed appeal to be allowed back to Britain with her newborn baby.

"I'm afraid he might even die in this camp. I feel a lot of people should have sympathy for me, for everything I've been through," she said.

"I didn't know what I was getting into when I left. I just was hoping that maybe for the sake of me and my child they let me come back," she added.

Her case comes as European nations struggle with how to deal with extremists eager to return home following the disintegration of Daesh's "caliphate" in eastern Syria.

US President Donald Trump again demanded on Saturday that they take back hundreds of captured Daesh fighters.

Trump said on Twitter that the United States was asking Britain and other continental allies "to take back over 800 Daesh fighters that we captured in Syria and put them on trial."

The demand came as he prepared – ahead of the pullout of US troops – to declare the group's so-called "caliphate" destroyed, with US-led Arab and Kurdish forces close to capturing its last Syrian territorial holdout.

"The US does not want to watch as these Daesh fighters permeate Europe," Trump added.

"Time for others to step up and do the job that they are so capable of doing. We are pulling back after 100% Caliphate victory!"

Begum, previously gave birth to two other children after marrying in Syria.

Both children died.

Leading politicians, including interior minister Sajid Javid, have vowed to prevent her return, pointing to her lack of remorse for joining the terror group.

Begum told Sky News she was aware of Daesh's brutal tactics, including conducting beheadings, but did not regret going to Syria.

"I knew about those things and I was OK with it at first," she said. "They take care of you... you're living under Islamic law.

"I don't regret it because it's changed me as a person, made me stronger, tougher."

The teenager, who said she had had no contact with British officials, added the government should not block her homecoming because she was "just a housewife" while there.

"I never made propaganda, I never encouraged people to come to Syria.

"They don't really have proof that I did anything that is dangerous," she said.

Europe has long been grappling with how to respond to foreign fighters, and their supporters or dependants, caught in Syria.

However the looming US departure has created a deadline for those governments whose citizens joined IS and have now been captured by the US-backed, Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

Britain's government appears split on the issue.

Culture Secretary Jeremy Wright, a former attorney general – the country's chief legal adviser – told the BBC on Sunday that it was "obliged, at some stage at least, to take them back."

He noted it was "a matter of international law and domestic law."

However, writing in The Sunday Times – under the headline "if you run away to join Daesh, I will use all my power to stop you coming back" – Javid insisted the government should strip "dangerous individuals of their British citizenship."

He said Britain had already exercised this power more than 100 times.

"In considering what actions need to be taken now, I have to think about the safety and security of children living in our country," Javid wrote.

Other European countries that have chosen to leave the extremists in SDF detention are now being forced to confront the situation.

"All German citizens – including those who are suspected of fighting for the so-called Islamic state – have a fundamental right to travel back into Germany," a German foreign ministry source said Sunday.

Belgian justice minister Koen Geens told Flemish broadcaster VRT there was the need for a "European solution" to the issue, but appeared irked by Trump's blunt call.

"It would have been nice for friendly nations to have these kinds of questions raised through the usual diplomatic channels rather than a tweet in the middle of the night," he said in Dutch.



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Daesh 'caliphate' on brink of defeat in Syria as Trump urges Europe to do more
Syria stuck with Assad for now, says UK minister Jeremy Hunt