

[Syrian state media says Israel artillery strikes Quneitra province](#)

Mon, 2019-02-11 21:38

AMMAN: Israeli tank artillery hit a demolished hospital and an observation post in Syria's southern Quneitra province near the border with Israel, Syrian state media said on Monday, adding there had been only material damage.

The two sites were hit by several tank artillery rounds, state media reported.

Asked about the reported Quneitra strikes, an Israeli military spokeswoman declined comment.

Israel has mounted attacks in Syria as part of its effort to counter the influence carved out there by Iran, which has supported Syrian President Bashar Assad in the war that erupted in 2011.

A senior Israeli official said in September Israel had carried out more than 200 attacks against Iranian targets in Syria in the last two years. Iranian and Iran-backed groups including Lebanon's Hezbollah have deployed into Syria in support of President Bashar Assad's rule during the war.



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Arab League chief: No consensus yet for Syria return
Syrian state media says Israel artillery strikes Quneitra province

Young Egyptians trudge through mud to clean up Nile

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CAIRO: Hundreds of young Egyptians, including actress Mai El Gheity, trudged through the mud on the banks of the River Nile to collect tons of old plastic bags, bottles and other rubbish.

The teens and twenty-somethings also climbed into boats to reach trash floating through the center of Cairo during the "Youth for the Nile" clean-up – a program backed by the government and other groups to raise awareness of pollution.

Volunteer Dai Soliman worked on as people watched from a bridge.

"Those people above looking at us must have thought that they threw something in, and now there are some people who are collecting their garbage. So this is awareness, it is direct awareness in action," she said.

The teams, most wearing the scheme's white boots and blue and yellow gloves, collected three to four tons of waste on Saturday, the environment ministry said.

A report issued last year by government's Egyptian Environmental Affairs Agency said 150 million tons of industrial waste end up in the Nile every year.

Similar clean-ups are scheduled in Luxor, Aswan, Assiut and other provinces through the rest of the year.





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[Russia, Turkey agree on need for decisive measures in Idlib](#)

Author:

Mon, 2019-02-11 21:22

MOSCOW: Russia and Turkey's defense ministers agreed on the need to take what they called decisive measures to stabilize the situation in Syria's Idlib province during talks on Monday, Russia's RIA news agency cited a joint statement as saying.

Russia, an important Syrian regime ally, and Turkey brokered a deal in September to create a demilitarized zone in the northwest Idlib region that would be evacuated of all heavy weapons and radical fighters.

However, the area has been the site of continued hostilities with Russia saying that militants who used to belong to the Nusra Front group are in

control of large swaths of territory.

A joint statement published after the talks between the two defense ministers in Ankara spoke of "the need in particular to take decisive measures to ensure security in the Idlib demilitarized zone," RIA reported. A UN report seen by Reuters last week estimated there are up to 18,000 Daesh militants in Iraq and Syria, including up to 3,000 foreign fighters.

It warned the group was interested in attacking aviation and using chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear materials.

Some military analysts say Daesh still has enough leaders, fighters, facilitators and financial resources to fuel a menacing insurgency in Syria and Iraq.

The top American commander overseeing American forces in the Middle East earlier said the US was likely just weeks away from starting the withdrawal of ground troops from Syria.

US Army General Joseph Votel, head of the US Central Command, cautioned that the exact timing would depend on the situation in Syria, where DSF troops have launched a final assault against Daesh enclaves near the Iraqi border.

The US military has already started withdrawing equipment from Syria. Asked whether the withdrawal of America's more than 2,000 troops would begin in days or weeks, Votel said: "Probably weeks. But again, it will all be driven by the situation on the ground."

"In terms of the withdrawal ... I think we're right on track with where we wanted to be," Votel told reporters traveling with him during a trip to the Middle East.

"Moving people is easier than moving equipment and so what we're trying to do right now is again (to) kind of clear out those materials, that equipment, that we do not need."

Trump's surprise announcement in December that he was withdrawing American troops from Syria helped trigger the resignation of his defense secretary, Jim Mattis, and sent US military officials scrambling to construct a withdrawal plan that preserves as many gains as possible.

Hundreds of additional troops have been sent to Syria to facilitate the withdrawal.

US officials have long estimated that the Syria pullout could take until sometime in March or April to execute fully, but have been reluctant to set an exact timeline given hard-to-predict battlefield conditions.

Votel did not speculate about when the drawdown would be completed.

One big question has been whether some US forces in Syria might move to Iraq, where the US has more than 5,000 troops helping Baghdad fight Daesh and prevent the group's resurgence.

Votel said he did not believe the US would broadly increase overall troop numbers in Iraq.

He did leave open the possibility of changing the composition of forces to help the US keep pressure on the militant group.

Referring to future US troop levels in Iraq, Votel said: "I think it's going to remain more or less steady."

"This isn't just wholesale – 'Everybody in Syria move over to Iraq.' That doesn't make sense," Votel said.

Votel is one of many current and former US officials who have warned of the risk of a resurgence by Daesh unless the US and its allies can keep pressure on the group following the US withdrawal.

But a clear US plan on how to keep up the pressure has yet to be articulated. It is also unclear whether the United States will be able to satisfy the security concerns in Syria of its NATO ally Turkey without sacrificing the interests of US-backed Kurdish fighters there.

Ankara sees the Kurdish militia as terrorists.

Washington views the Kurdish militia as loyal partners in the fight against Islamic State, whose help will likely continue to be needed to prevent the group's resurgence.

The Pentagon's own internal watchdog released a report last week warning about the risks still posed by Islamic State. It cautioned that, absent sustained pressure, the group would likely resurge in Syria within six to 12 months and retake some limited territory.



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Airstrikes kill 16 civilians as US-backed Syrian forces battle to take last Daesh pocket
Withdrawal of US forces in Syria likely to start in 'weeks' – US general

[Egypt arrests students for mocking Christianity online](#)

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Mon, 2019-02-11 17:40

CAIRO: Egyptian authorities have arrested four students for mocking Christian rituals in an online video and ordered them to be kept in custody for four days, a judicial source said Monday.

The university students aged between 19 and 24 were accused of being in "contempt of the Christian religion," the source said.

If tried and found guilty they could face up to five years in prison.

They were arrested last week and remanded in custody by the state prosecutor overnight Sunday.

At the end of January they posted a video on YouTube in which they were allegedly seen mocking Coptic hymns and prayers.

But they later removed the clip and posted an apology online.

Copts, a Christian minority which accounts for 10 percent of Egypt's 98 million people, have repeatedly complained of marginalization in the mostly Muslim country.

In recent years they have been targeted by Daesh group extremists.

Trials for "contempt" of Christianity are rare in Egypt where more frequently charges are levelled for contempt of Islam usually against liberal Muslim intellectuals.

In 2016 four Coptic teenagers were found guilty of being in contempt of Islam and three of them were handed five-year sentences each after mocking Muslim prayer in a video.

Later that year they fled the country, traveling to Switzerland where they obtained political asylum.



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[Russia 'repatriates' 27 Daesh children from Iraq](#)

Sun, 2019-02-10 23:21

BAGHDAD: A Russian official said Sunday that Moscow had repatriated a fresh batch of children whose mothers are being held in Iraq for belonging to Daesh.

"Twenty-seven Russian children have been repatriated from Baghdad," a Russian Foreign Ministry official said.

Thirty other children were sent back to Moscow in late December.

The fathers of the children were killed during three years of fighting between the militants and Iraqi troops, the official said.

Daesh seized large swathes of Iraq in a lightning 2014 offensive, before the government dislodged the militants from urban centers and eventually declared victory in December 2017.

The Kremlin announced in early January that 115 Russian children aged below 10 – along with eight aged between 11 and 17 – were still in Iraq.

Iraqi law allows detainees to be held with their offspring until the age of three, but older children have to live with relatives.

In November, Kheda Saratova – an adviser to Chechnya’s authoritarian leader Ramzan Kadyrov – estimated “around 2,000” widows and children of Russian Daesh fighters were still in Iraq and neighboring Syria.

Around 100 women and children, mostly from Caucasus republics, have returned to Russia so far.

Nearly 4,500 Russian citizens had gone abroad to fight “on the side of terrorists,” Russia’s FSB domestic intelligence agency said last year.

More than 300 people, including around 100 foreign women, have been sentenced to death in Iraq for belonging to Daesh, while others have been sentenced to life in prison. Most of those convicted are Turks or originate from former republics of the Soviet Union.

Their home countries do not want them and holding trials in Syria is not an option: Now suspected foreign militants could end up facing tough justice over the border in Iraq. Both countries have suffered for years at the hands of Daesh and Iraqi courts have already meted out hefty sentences to hundreds of foreigners detained on its soil, often after lightning-quick trials.

The fate of foreign fighters in Syria has come into sharper focus since President Donald Trump’s announcement in December that the US will withdraw its troops from the war-torn country.

Governments have been grappling for weeks with the question of foreign fighters detained by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, who have warned that they may not be able to guard their jails once US troops leave.



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Caught in Syria, foreign terrorist suspects may face trial in IraqUS-backed fighters launch final push to defeat Daesh in Syria