

Hezbollah claims it would not use Lebanon ministry funds for own benefit

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BEIRUT: The leader of Lebanon's Hezbollah said on Monday that it would never use state funds for its benefit and that the new health minister was close to the Iran-backed movement but not a member.

"This is a ministry for all the Lebanese people," Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah said in a televised speech.

The US State Department urged the new Lebanese cabinet last week to ensure resources do not go to Hezbollah, after the group assumed three seats, including naming the health minister.



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Trapped in shrinking Syria holdout, Daesh turns to human shields

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BAGHOUZ: On a rooftop near the front line with the Daesh group's collapsing caliphate in eastern Syria, a US-backed fighter and his comrades sip tea as they await orders to restart the battle.

The Syrian Democratic Forces halted their ground assault on Daesh's final shreds of territory last week, saying the militants are increasingly using civilians as human shields to block the advance.

In the desert hamlet of Baghouz, held mostly by the SDF, 22-year-old Mohammed Ibrahim Mohammed points toward a dirt mound separating areas under their control and the militants.

"Since we arrived to this point almost six days ago we haven't moved forward," explained the young fatigue-clad man from the nearby town of Hajjin, who joined the SDF just five months ago.

"The fighting has stopped as we wait for the remaining civilians to leave," he said.

Just a few dozen meters away, on the other side of the dirt berm, trucks, motorcycles and cars driven by Daesh fighters zip along the front line and out toward white tents further away, surrounded by women wearing long black robes.

"These are all Daesh houses," said Mohammed, using an Arabic acronym for Daesh.

"Sometimes we see women coming to take wood" from nearby palm trees, he said. The streets of Baghouz, which the SDF entered two weeks ago, are lined with the burnt-out skeletons of cars and bullet-pocked buildings, some of them completely destroyed.

SDF fighters group in clusters around some of the structures, tending small fires and exchanging small talk and cigarettes.

Others perch on balconies and roofs with a view over the other side.

On one terrace, a fighter uses binoculars to get a closer look at militants just a stone's throw away.

As the SDF, with air support from the US-led coalition, ramped up its offensive in recent weeks, thousands of civilians have poured out of the beleaguered extremist-held pocket.

More than 36,000 people, mostly women and children from militant families, have fled since December via humanitarian corridors opened up by the SDF, according to the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

That figure also includes some 3,100 extremists, the war monitor added.

But while hundreds of people a day reached SDF-held territory early last month, the flow has slowed to a trickle.

Recent arrivals say there are still many civilians and foreign fighters in the besieged pocket of territory.

With the final push paused, the eerie quiet is only broken by intermittent gunfire and the occasional roar of a coalition airstrike or artillery fire targeting extremist positions.

In the neighboring village of Al-Shaafa, the SDF's spokesman for the Deir Ezzor region said the assault has been put on hold to protect civilians.

"The jihadists are using the civilians as human shields to block our advance," Adnan Afrin told AFP.

That has forced women and children, including members of fighters' families, to remain close to the battle.

"They are putting the civilians on the front lines," he said, adding that airstrikes and artillery continued to target positions further back, "where the jihadists are concentrated."

IS has shown a pattern of trapping civilians among its fighters in order to slow offensives as its cross-border "caliphate," proclaimed in 2014, has withered under multiple offensives.

As the extremists withdraw, they leave minefields and booby traps to slow their attackers and prevent civilians from escaping.

To help protect those that remain cornered, the SDF is pushing to open new "safe corridors" to help civilians escape before the US-backed force delivers the final blow, said Afrin.

And while SDF leaders prefer not to speculate on when the battle against the militants will finish, they are clear it will end by military means.

"We do not negotiate with terrorists," Afrin said.



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Palestinian wounded by Israeli fire dies: Gaza ministry

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GAZA CITY: A Palestinian died Sunday from gunshot wounds inflicted by Israeli soldiers during violent protests along the Gaza Strip's border, the enclave's health ministry said.

Ahmed Abu Jamal, 30, was wounded during clashes in Beit Lahiya in the north of Gaza on January 29, said ministry spokesman Ashraf Al-Qudra.

Unrest has shaken the frontier between Gaza and Israel since March as residents of the blockaded enclave have staged mass protests.

More than 30 Palestinians were wounded by Israeli fire on Friday as the weekly demonstrations again turned violent.

At least 247 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli fire in Gaza since March 30, the majority during border protests but also by tank fire and air strikes.

Two Israeli soldiers have been killed during the same period.

Israel says its actions are necessary to defend the border and stop mass incursions into its territory.

It accuses Gaza's Islamist ruler Hamas, with whom it has fought three wars since 2008, of seeking to use the protests as cover to carry out violence.



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[In Mosul exhibition, Iraqi artists process brutal rule of Daesh](#)

Author:

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MOSUL: A raven perched on the shoulder of a woman with flaming hair is Iraqi artist Marwan Fathi's symbol for the terrible events he and his home city Mosul have had to endure.

Three years under the oppressive and violent rule of Daesh and the military campaign which drove it out in 2017 left much of the northern city in ruins. Thousands were killed, rendered homeless or maimed. Those who survived are deeply traumatized.

"I still jump awake at night thinking an air strike is about to hit or that they are coming to take one of us," Fathi, 36, said. "Everyday is a struggle."

Fathi's work is on display in "Return to Mosul" – the city's first art

exhibition since before it was seized by Daesh, whose ultra hard-line version of Sunni Islam prohibits most art forms.

Artists from across Iraq are taking part in the six-day show, including many who lived in Mosul when it was in the militants' grip.

Hawkar Riskin's haunting work 'destruction' depicts a giant skeleton standing on one leg, while Mohammad Al Kinani's series of paintings – 'Caliphate I', 'Caliphate II' and 'Caliphate III' represents the beginning and end of Daesh, and Mosul's rebirth.

Fathi said the artists who stayed in the city lived in constant fear and despair.

"There was a time when we considered killing ourselves. We reached that low. But then we thought, what would happen to the children?" Fathi, a professor of fine arts, said.

JONAH AND THE CITY

The show is in the newly re-opened Royal Hall of the Mosul Museum, which was looted and destroyed by Daesh and in the ensuing war to wrest control of the city.

Ahmed Mozahem, another Mosul-born artist, continued to work in secret while the city was under the militants'. Using a writing pad he kept hidden to avoid discovery, Mozahem produced 40 pencil drawings which are now among his most cherished possessions, an expression of what he and his family suffered. For "City of the Whale," his painting in the exhibition, Mozahem drew on the story of the prophet Jonah and the whale, which features Nineveh, the ancient Assyrian city which stood roughly where Mosul is today.

Following their capture of the city in 2014, Daesh went on a rampage, destroying many of Mosul's ancient sites and artefacts, including a shrine believed by many to be Jonah's tomb.

The militants not only destroyed the city, Mozahem said. "They also killed something inside, our spirit."

But Matthew Vincent, an American archaeologist, says technology can help preserve some of what was lost. Vincent is a co-founder of a crowdsourced, digital preservation project called Rekrei, which collects photographs of damaged or lost monuments and artefacts to re-create these in 3D representations.

At the Mosul Museum, visitors are now able to catch virtual glimpse of ancient Assyrian treasures destroyed by Daesh. One of them, the Lion of Mosul, was a colossal Assyrian guardian lion from about 860 BCE, one of two which stood at the entrance of the Temple of Ishtar at Nimrud, Iraq.

"It is never going to replace the original but new technology is giving us a path we simply didn't have before," Vincent said.





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[Egypt hosts Palestinian groups, urges calm with Israel](#)

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Sun, 2019-02-03 14:27

GAZA: Egypt will hold talks with leaders of two major Palestinian factions to try to salvage faltering unity efforts and to restore calm with Israel, officials said on Sunday.

The head of the Islamist militant group Hamas, which runs the Gaza Strip, led a delegation to meet with Egyptian security officials in Cairo. The leader of a smaller Gaza-based faction, Islamic Jihad, also headed to Cairo, Palestinian officials said.

Hamas has been in a bitter rivalry with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, who is based in the occupied West Bank, for more than a decade. Numerous reconciliation efforts have failed.

Egypt is also trying to prevent an escalation in violence between Hamas and Israel, after months of tension along the Israel-Gaza border. Cairo sent officials to Gaza in recent weeks to keep an eye on the situation.

"Cairo is driven by its interest to avoid a new war in Gaza and in improving the living conditions of Gaza residents," said one Palestinian official, who asked not to be named.

Relations between Hamas and Abbas' Palestinian Authority (PA) worsened last month when Abbas ordered his men to leave their posts at the Rafah border crossing with Egypt, the main corridor for Gazans.

This prompted Cairo, which had in the past year coordinated operations with the PA, to close the crossing.

Gaza officials now say that Egypt has quietly resumed operations at the Rafah crossing over the past week, this time working with Hamas. However, there was no immediate comment on the reopening of Rafah from Egyptian officials.

On Sunday, Hamas chief Ismail Haniyeh passed through the Rafah crossing, along with dozens of other Palestinians.

Two million Palestinians live in the Gaza Strip, where poverty is rampant and unemployment stands at 50 percent. Israel, together with Egypt, maintains a blockade of the enclave, citing security concerns.

Gaza's health ministry says more than 220 Palestinians have been killed in the past year by Israeli troops in weekly protests along the border, billed as pressing for an end to the blockade.



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