

# Opposition's underground network unearthed in Syria

Author:

Thu, 2019-09-26 22:15

LATAMINAH, SYRIA: Tunnels run for hundreds of meters, connecting caves strewn with mattresses that formed what the Syrian army and its Russian allies say was a vast opposition underground network.

The road leading to the entrance of the tunnels in Lataminah in northwestern Syria is lined with the charred shells of cars and armored vehicles.

According to the Russian army, which organized a press tour of the site for dozens of journalists, the network of caves dug into a rocky outcrop could shelter up to 5,000 people.

"We think this network was dug about four years ago with sophisticated machinery, of a kind which is not available in Syria," a Syrian army colonel said as he led reporters into the tunnels, escorted by Russian demining experts.

The red-brick entrance to this underground base still bears the scars of the battle that saw Russian-backed regime forces retake the area in the province of Hama earlier this year.

"Those who fought here retreated to the north. First to Khan Sheikhun and then further into Idlib province when our forces took the city," the colonel said.

In some places, the tunnels are barely big enough to stand in but connect large rooms carved out of the rock, including a prayer room, a drone workshop, a bathroom and even a prison.

Military officials told AFP reporters that the total size of the underground network, in which crates of ammunition were found, has not yet been fully assessed.

It was used primarily by fighters from opposition groups, among them the alliance known as Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham that now dominates the entire Idlib enclave.

The caves provided shelter to those fighters from the intensive air strikes Russian and Syrian aircraft usually conduct as a prelude to any ground advance.

In some of the caves, empty food cans and crumpled plastic water bottles, jerricans and decaying clothes give a glimpse of daily life in the dark hideout.

Some rooms were done up with tile panels and a coat of paint while others

have fully cemented walls, over which Syrian forces have since scribbled slogans praising Syria's Bashar Assad.

One room was even equipped with an old TV, wired up with cables that run around one kilometer from the nearby town of Lataminah.

The room which officers believe was used as a prison was dug out no less than 400 meters deep into the maze of tunnels and caves.

Blood stains are still visible on the ground, as are tiny separate cells with rusting doors.

The Russian army said it has uncovered around 10 such underground networks across northwestern Syria and others in the desert region of Palmyra.

Officers said the Lataminah cave was a local hub for the manufacture of drones that jihadist fighters used against regime and Russian forces.

The massive Russian military base of Hmeimim, which lies in the neighboring province, has been repeatedly targeted by rebel drone attacks.



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# All agreements off if Israel annexes territory, Palestine's Mahmoud Abbas warns at UN

Author:

AFP

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1569519641857208400

Thu, 2019-09-26 17:20

NEW YORK: Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas told the United Nations Thursday he would terminate all signed agreements with Israel if it moved forward with plans announced by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to annex a key part of the West Bank.

Netanyahu, who is trying to form a new government following a deadlocked election, pledged before the vote to impose Israeli sovereignty over the Jordan Valley and the northern Dead Sea which account for one-third of the West Bank.

The promise was widely condemned, including by UN chief Antonio Guterres who warned it would violate international law.

"Our response if any Israeli government is to proceed with this plan is that all signed agreements with the government of the occupation and any obligations therein will be terminated," said Abbas.

"And it is our right to defend our rights by all possible means, regardless of consequences, while remaining committed to international law and combating terrorism," he warned.

[#LIVE: #Palestine](#) president Mahmoud Abbas at [#UNGA](#) – Our hands remain extended for peace but we will defend our rights at all cost and in line with international law [#Israel](#)  
[pic.twitter.com/5TidiByBYf](https://pic.twitter.com/5TidiByBYf)

– Arab News (@arabnews) [September 26, 2019](#)

Abbas made a similar vow in July but did not follow through.

In the early 1990s Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization, then headed by Yasser Arafat, signed a number of peace agreements under US sponsorship.

The agreements were supposed to be for a transitional five-year period but a

longer-term deal proved elusive and a second bloody Palestinian intifada, or uprising, broke out in 2000.

Abbas, 84, also renewed a pledge to hold fresh parliamentary elections, which last took place in 2006.

[#LIVE: #Palestine](#) president Mahmoud Abbas at [#UNGA](#) – Our hands remain extended for peace but we will defend our rights at all cost and in line with international law [#Israel](#)  
[pic.twitter.com/5TidiByBYf](https://pic.twitter.com/5TidiByBYf)

– Arab News (@arabnews) [September 26, 2019](#)

Those elections, which were surprisingly won by Islamist movement Hamas, eventually led to a dramatic split, with Hamas seizing control of Gaza in 2007.

“Upon my return to the homeland, I will call for regular local elections in the West Bank, in the Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem, and anyone who opposes these elections will be held accountable before God and the international community,” said Abbas, likely referencing Hamas.

Abbas has made similar promises before, most recently in in December 2018 Abbas when he said he would hold parliamentary elections within six months.



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## [Turkey doctor gets 15 months for revealing pollution cancer risk](#)

Author:

AFP

ID:

1569518838067107700

Thu, 2019-09-26 14:08

ISTANBUL: A Turkish scientist was sentenced to 15 months in prison on Thursday for revealing the cancer risks posed by toxic pollution in western Turkey.

The court in Istanbul found Dr. Bulent Sik guilty of "disclosing classified information" – a verdict described as a "travesty of justice" by Amnesty International.

Dr. Sik last year revealed the results of a study carried out with other scientists for the Ministry of Health between 2011 and 2015 linking the toxicity in soil, water and food to high rates of cancer in several western provinces.

He wrote the articles for newspaper Cumhuriyet after realizing the government was not acting on the study's findings.

The study "clearly revealed the extent to which water resources were contaminated by toxic materials," Dr. Sik told reporters after the verdict. "The court ruling shows that the results of a study that directly concerns public health can be hidden. This is unacceptable," he added.

Dr. Sik remained free on Thursday pending appeal.

Rights groups and environmentalists accuse the government of failing to enforce environmental regulations amid a rapid industrial boom in many parts of the country.

Pollution from the industrial zone of Dilovasi, around 80 kilometers from Istanbul and home to many chemical and metallurgy factories, was singled out in the report for having cancer rates well above the international average.

“The case against Bulent Sik has been, from the start, a travesty of justice,” Amnesty’s Turkey researcher Andrew Gardner told AFP.

“Instead of pursuing a whistleblower through the court, the Turkish authorities should be investigating this important public health issue.”

Amnesty said it would consider Dr. Sik a prisoner of conscience if he was jailed.

Turkey has seen a wide-ranging crackdown on many aspects of free speech, especially since a failed coup against President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in 2016.

Dr. Sik had faced up to 12 years in prison, but the court found him not guilty of “obtaining classified information.”



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[\*\*Sudan closes borders with Libya,\*\*](#)

# Central African Republic

Author:

Reuters

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1569511775736424600

Thu, 2019-09-26 15:25

KHARTOUM: Sudan's transitional government ordered the immediate closure of the nation's borders with Libya and Central African Republic on Thursday, citing unspecified security and economic "dangers."

A statement by the Sovereign Transitional Council said vehicles had been illegally crossing the borders with the two nations, which have both been mired in violence. The council did not give further details about what the "dangers" were.

The announcement followed a meeting between the council and the government of South Darfur State, part of Sudan's western Darfur region that has suffered from violence since 2003 when a conflict erupted between mainly non-Arab tribes and the Arab-led national government of ousted President Omar Hassan Al-Bashir.

Sudan has often complained about arms trafficked through its borders with Libya and Central African Republic. Conflicts in both nations have left their governments with little or no control of security over swathes of their territory.

The statement did not mention Chad, which has a long border with Sudan's Darfur region. Chad and Sudan have security pacts in place and joint forces patrol the boundary.



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## [‘Forgotten’ war: Syria conflict a footnote at UN meeting](#)

Author:

Wed, 2019-09-25 21:34

BEIRUT: As dozens of heads of state convene for the annual UN General Assembly in New York this week, the lingering conflict in Syria is taking a back seat while tensions in the Arabian Gulf and global trade wars take center stage.

Now in its ninth year, many Syrians fear the unresolved war has become a footnote in a long list of world crises, with weary leaders resigned to live



with Syria's Bashar Assad ruling over a wrecked and divided country for the foreseeable future.

On the eve of the global gathering in New York, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres announced that a long-awaited committee that would draft a new Syrian constitution has been finalized – a step the UN hopes will put the war-ravaged country on track for a political solution.

But few see any real chance that the committee can make significant progress toward that end.

“The world has forgotten about us – not that anyone cared about Syria to begin with,” said Hussein Ali, a 35-year-old internally displaced father of two. He now lives with his family in one rented room in the opposition-controlled northern town of Azaz, near the Turkish border. “The rise of Daesh made the West care momentarily, but not anymore,” he said, using an Arabic acronym for the Daesh group.

Most of Syria has returned to regime control after eight years of war. The exceptions are the opposition-held bastion of Idlib in the northwest, where fighters, militants and their families from all over the country have been cornered, and the oil-rich northeast, held by US-backed Kurdish groups.

### **A frozen conflict**

The violence has largely tapered off in most of the country, but few among the nearly 6 million refugees scattered across the globe have returned. Many fear detention if they come home – or they simply have no homes to return to.

Entire towns and villages are in ruins. The West will not contribute to reconstruction plans as long as Assad is in power and other countries are unwilling to invest without there first being a political settlement.

In Idlib, a Russia-backed regime offensive to recapture the province continues to claim lives. Hundreds have been killed and more than 400,000 displaced in the past four months under Syrian and Russian airstrikes. But the bloodshed hardly makes a dent in global news.

“The world apparently has long since tired of the war, and resigned itself to frozen conflict, with a nationwide cease-fire as the best possible scenario,” said Heiko Wimmen, project director for Iraq, Syria and Lebanon at International Crisis Group.

Syria's conflict was a domino effect of the so-called Arab Spring uprisings that began in late 2010, toppling dictators in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. What started in March 2011 as largely peaceful demonstrations against the Assad family rule turned into an armed insurgency following a brutal regime crackdown. The conflict eventually became a proxy war pitting the US, Turkey and Gulf countries who supported the opposition, against Russia, Iran and Hezbollah who fought alongside the regime. In the chaos, extremists such as Daesh flourished, seizing a third of Syria and Iraq.

Nearly half-a-million people have been killed and half of Syria's prewar

population displaced. The opposition has been crushed for the most part, and Assad is widely considered to have prevailed militarily. Daesh militants who dominated the news for years have been defeated, although the group continues to stage sporadic insurgent attacks.

A tentative cease-fire has been in place in Idlib since the end of August, but there is no suggestion it will be anything other than a pause before regime troops and their allies regroup and relaunch their campaign.

“The Syrian regime appears determined to clench back every last bit of territory, without the tiniest bit of compromise,” Wimmen said. “As long as Damascus persists in its attitude, and is enabled by its foreign backers, the war will continue.”

### **Diplomatic efforts**

While the world remains deadlocked over Syria, there is no initiative on the horizon to help resolve it. The UN’s current Syria envoy Geir Pedersen is the fourth to hold the post after the previous three resigned following years of mediating peace talks that led nowhere.

The constitutional committee announced on Monday is made up of 150 members divided equally among regime, opposition and civil society members. It is tasked with drafting a new Syrian constitution in talks facilitated by the UN in Geneva. Desperate for a breakthrough, Guterres touted it as “the beginning of the political path out of the tragedy toward a solution.”

Syria is scheduled to hold presidential elections in 2021, and the UN hopes the talks can help create a climate and mechanism for holding a neutral and fair vote. But with a clear military upper hand, Assad regime is unlikely to offer any concessions, and Syrian officials have suggested he will run again.

A Western diplomat called it an “important step” in the sense that talks overseen by the UN would provide some form of international scrutiny over the balloting.

“It will not be a solution for the war but rather a method to get a Syria platform going and try to be more inclusive than the two-side indirect talks,” the diplomat said, referring to several rounds of talks between the regime and the opposition in Geneva overseen by the UN envoy. The diplomat spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive issues.

Underlining the distrust, Syrian lawmaker Safwan Qurabi said the committee is “sensitive and is also dangerous.”

“What is planned through this committee is to steal Syria’s political decision, which they couldn’t do through destructive military action,” Qurabi said, referring to the opposition and their foreign supporters.

### **Far from over**

While the violence may have diminished, analysts say the war is likely to continue for a long time.

At its height, the conflict unleashed a global migrant crisis that continues to reshape Europe and neighboring countries that once opened their borders to millions fleeing war. That reception has chilled over the past year. Suffering an economic downturn and rising unemployment, the mood in Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan has soured, and calls for the refugees to return home are growing.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan says his country can no longer shoulder the burden of 3.6 million refugees it hosts, and earlier this month, he threatened to “open the gates” and allow a flood of Syrian refugees to leave Turkey for Western countries unless a so-called “safe zone” is established in Syria soon in negotiations with the US

The rising resentment against Syrians seems to be behind a new wave of migrants sailing from Turkey to the Greek island of Lesbos every day.

Erdogan used his speech at the UN on Tuesday to highlight the humanitarian cost of the war by holding up a photo of Aylan Kurdi, a 3-year-old boy whose lifeless body was found on a Turkish beach in 2015 and drew the world’s attention to the plight of refugees.

Erdogan said the world must “never forget” the world’s “baby Aylans.”

An all-out Syrian regime offensive to recapture Idlib, which seems inevitable, will likely have disastrous consequences, pushing hundreds of thousands of people toward the Turkish border.

“Assad won’t go away, since pushing him out is no longer an option, but neither is rehabilitating him, or rebuilding the country in his presence,” Wimmen said. “The status quo of misery will likely persist.”



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