

# Northwest Syria fighting damages schools, health facilities

Thu, 2019-05-23 20:39

BEIRUT: Bombings by Syrian government forces damaged two schools and a health facility in the rebels' last stronghold in the northwest, activists said Thursday, after insurgents successfully hit a power station in a government-held town.

Fighting has raged in the last 48 hours in the region, where insurgents launched a counteroffensive earlier this month, trying to regain territory lost to government forces. The area is among the last controlled by anti-government rebels in Syria's eight-year civil war.

Activists and rescue workers said the government retaliated with an intense air bombing campaign. First responders said dozens of air raids and barrel bombs were dropped on villages and towns south of Idlib, killing at least eight civilians.

Syrian insurgents had recaptured Kfar Nabudah from government forces on Wednesday, two weeks after troops entered it at the start of a ground offensive against the rebels' stronghold.

Naji Al-Mustafa, a spokesman for the rebel fighters, said the government is carrying out a "revenge campaign for its defeat" in Kfar Nabudah.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said ground clashes have subsided but government warplanes carried out more than 60 raids on various parts of southern Idlib, part of the rebel stronghold that spans the province and nearby Hama.

One of the raids knocked out a health facility in Kfar Oweid village, the Observatory said.

Rights groups say that since the offensive was launched in late April, government strikes have hit at least 18 health facilities, including five identified to the government through the United Nations. Some of the facilities were targeted twice.

The White Helmets, a team of first responders, said the raids also targeted two schools in Kfar Nubul and burned crops on several farms.

Syrian Electricity Minister Mohammad Zuhair Kharboutly said Thursday that Al-Zara power station in Hama province was back online and linked up to the national grid.

Station manager Mostafa Shantout said a drone operated by insurgents dropped a number of bombs late Wednesday on the station, causing huge damage. He didn't elaborate. The comments by both officials were carried by the official state news agency SANA.

Al-Mustafa denied the fighters targeted the power station. He said the rebels have shelled Hama military airport because it is used to attack their stronghold.



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## [Iran, US tension is a 'clash of wills': Guards commander](#)

Author:

Reuters

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Thu, 2019-05-23 10:52

GENEVA: The standoff between Iran and the United States is a "clash of wills," a senior commander of Iran's powerful Revolutionary Guards said on Thursday, suggesting any enemy "adventurism" would meet a crushing response, Fars news agency reported.

Tensions have spiked between the two countries after Washington sent more

military forces to the Middle East in a show of force against what US officials say are Iranian threats to its troops and interests in the region. "The confrontation and face-off of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the malicious government of America is the arena for a clash of wills," Iran's armed forces chief of staff Major General Mohammad Baqeri said.

He pointed to a battle during the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war where Iran was victorious and said the outcome could be a message that Iran will have a "hard, crushing and obliterating response" for any enemy "adventurism." On Sunday, US President Donald Trump tweeted: "If Iran wants to fight, that will be the official end of Iran. Never threaten the United States again!" Trump restored US sanctions on Iran last year and tightened them this month, ordering all countries to halt imports of Iranian oil or face sanctions of their own.

Trump wants Iran to come to the negotiating table to reach a new deal with more curbs on its nuclear and missile programs.

Reiterating Iran's stance, the spokesman for its Supreme National Security Council said on Thursday that "There will not be any negotiations between Iran and America."

Keyvan Khosravi was also quoted as saying by the state broadcaster that some officials from several countries have visited Iran recently, "mostly representing the United States."

He did not elaborate, but the foreign minister of Oman, which in the past helped pave the way for negotiations between Iran and the United States, visited Tehran on Monday.

"Without exception, the message of the power and resistance of the Iranian nation was conveyed to them," he said.

In Berlin, a German diplomatic source told Reuters that Jens Ploetner, a political director in Germany's Foreign Ministry, was in Tehran on Thursday for meetings with Iranian officials to try to preserve the 2015 Iran nuclear deal and cool tensions in the region.





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## [Israel cuts Gaza fishing limit after fire balloons](#)

Author:

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Thu, 2019-05-23 06:12

JERUSALEM: Israel reduced the offshore fishing limits it imposes for vessels operating out of Gaza from Thursday after Palestinians floated balloons fitted with incendiaries over the border, officials said.

The cut came just two days after Israel restored the limits to those set in April ahead of an Israeli general election.

“A decision was taken this Wednesday evening to reduce the fishing zone off the Gaza Strip to 10 nautical miles until further notice,” said COGAT, the defense ministry unit that oversees such regulations.

“The decision was taken after the launch of incendiary balloons from Gaza toward Israel,” it added.

Palestinians in Gaza have frequently floated balloons fitted with firebombs over the border to damage Israeli property and have in the past succeeded in setting fire to large areas of farmland.

Israel banned fishing completely when two days of deadly violence erupted earlier this month, but lifted the ban with a restriction of up to 12 nautical miles following a truce.

The 15-nautical-mile limit that had been restored on Tuesday was the largest allowed in years by Israel, which has fought three wars with Palestinian militants in the enclave and has blockaded it for more than a decade.

But human rights activists note that it still falls short of the 20 nautical miles agreed under the Oslo accords of the 1990s.

Israeli authorities have not said whether the 15-mile limit was one of the understandings reached as part of the May 6 cease-fire in Gaza but Israel media reported on Monday that it was.

The additional nautical miles are important to Gaza fishermen as they bring more valuable, deeper water species within reach.

Four Israeli civilians and 25 Palestinians, including at least nine militants, were killed in this month’s exchanges across the border.



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For Gaza grooms, crippling debt overshadows marital blissIsrael eases Gaza fishing restrictions after truce

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## [Pentagon mulling request for 5,000 more US troops to Middle East -Reuters](#)

Thu, 2019-05-23 00:37

– Developing story.



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## [Daesh revival in Iraq must be prevented, says UN envoy](#)

Wed, 2019-05-22 23:50

NEW YORK: The UN envoy for Iraq called on Tuesday for “wide-based international support” to prevent Daesh militants from regaining a foothold in the country.

Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert also told the Security Council that if the issue of thousands of returning Daesh militants and their families from Syria to Iraq is not managed properly “we risk creating a new breeding ground for the next generation of terrorists.”

She stressed that this “is not just an Iraqi problem” because there are non-Iraqi fighters as well, and she implicitly criticized some unnamed countries that are maintaining a “strategic distance” from their own nationals.

Daesh, which seized Iraqi cities and declared a proto-state in a large swathe of territory it took control of in Syria and Iraq in 2014, was formally declared defeated in Iraq in 2017 following a three-year bloody battle that left tens of thousands dead and Iraqi cities in ruins. But the group’s sleeper cells continue to launch attacks in different parts of Iraq.

Hennis-Plasschaert said that on an encouraging note the capital Baghdad “is opening up” and “very soon” the high-security Green Zone where many government offices and embassies are located “will no longer exist.” But she said the security situation in the capital and throughout the country will require close monitoring because the threat from Daesh “is still out there.”

The UN envoy quoted an unnamed representative of the US-led coalition in the country as saying recently that Daesh "is resurging. They rested, moved and are active."

Hennis-Plasschaert said "another dominant security concern" is "armed actors" operating outside the government who are engaged in illegal or criminal activities which undermine state authority, weaken the economy and prevent the return of thousands of displaced people.

She briefed the Security Council after it unanimously adopted a resolution extending the mandate of the UN political mission in Iraq that she leads until May 31, 2020.

More broadly, Hennis-Plasschaert also criticized political infighting in Iraq that has blocked key ministerial appointments a year after national elections, and corruption which is "pervasive at all levels in Iraq."

She alluded to escalating tensions between the US and Iran which have raised concerns that Iraq could once again get caught in the middle, just as it is on the path to recovery.

The country hosts more than 5,000 US troops, and is home to powerful Iranian-backed militias, some of whom want those US forces to leave.

Hennis-Plasschaert said she was pleased to report that Iraq's leaders continue to reach out to their regional and international counterparts, positioning the country "as a reliable partner."

"Iraq could well be a stabilizing factor in a turbulent region and instead of an arena for conflict, Iraq could well offer a space for regional reconciliation, preparing the ground for a regional security dialogue," she said.

"At the same time, we cannot ignore that Iraq faces serious challenges in preventing its territory from becoming the theater for different competitions," Hennis-Plasschaert said. "So, to all those feeling challenged: Placing a further burden on Iraq is truly, the last thing it needs."



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