

Syria Kurd autonomy under threat after Daesh 'caliphate' falls

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BEIRUT: Now the Daesh group's "caliphate" has fallen, the hard-won limited autonomy of Syria's Kurds will be left in peril if their key US ally goes ahead with its announced pullout.

On Saturday, the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces announced the end of the proto-state that the Sunni Arab extremist group declared across large parts of Syria and neighboring Iraq in 2014.

The Kurds have largely stayed out of Syria's eight-year civil war, instead building their own institutions in a third of the country under their control.

But a planned US military pullout has left them exposed to an attack by Turkey and in need of protection from Damascus, in a massive blow to their dreams of self-rule.

"The Kurds have been caught between a Syrian rock and a Turkish hard place," Syria expert Fabrice Balanche said.

Kurdish fighters have spearheaded the fight against Daesh since late 2014, but neighboring Turkey views them as "terrorists".

The presence of American troops in areas held by Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) had acted as a shield against any Turkish offensive. But US President Donald Trump in December shocked Washington's allies by announcing a full withdrawal of all 2,000 US troops from Syria as Daesh had been "beaten".

"The Kurds are facing an uncertain future. The most urgent threat appears to be from Turkey," analyst Mutlu Civiroglu said.

After his announcement, Trump attempted to ease tensions by speaking of a 30-kilometre "safe zone" on the Syrian side of the border.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has said his country would establish the "security zone" itself if it took too long to implement.

The Kurds have rejected any Turkish implementation, especially since any such buffer would include their major cities.

They are demanding instead the deployment of an international observer force. "Kobane, Tal Abyad, Darbasiya, Qamishli, Dehik, Derbassiyeh – most of the Kurdish cities are on the border line," Civiroglu said.

Turkey and its Syrian rebel proxies have led two previous offensives inside Syria, most recently seizing the northwestern enclave of Afrin from the Kurds last year.

Syria's civil war has killed more than 370,000 people and displaced millions since it started in 2011 with the brutal repression of anti-government protests.

It has since spiraled into a complex conflict, with rebel backer Turkey and regime ally Russia emerging as key powerbrokers.

Beyond American approval, Civiroglu said Turkey would likely need a green light from Russia before any Turkish offensive in Syria.

"Russia's position is going to be very important, because Russia has a strong power over Turkey," he said.

President Bashar al-Assad's regime now controls two-thirds of Syria thanks to Russian military backing since 2015, and it seems determined to also return to oil-rich northeastern Syria.

To protect themselves, the Kurds have dispatched delegations to Washington and Moscow.

And in ongoing talks, they have scrambled to mend ties with Damascus.

After decades of marginalization, the Kurds have developed their own political system in northeast Syria – holding elections, collecting taxes and running schools teaching the Kurdish language.

"In a war-torn country, the Kurdish system is working fine," Civiroglu said. "The Kurds want this to be recognized."

They want "Kurdish education to be offered officially", he said, after decades of an effective ban on their mother tongue.

But talks so far have failed to bear fruit, and Balanche warns the Kurds are in a weak position.

"The regime is demanding an unconditional surrender. Damascus does not want to let them retain any autonomy," he said.

Syrian Defense Minister Ali Abdullah Ayoub said Monday that the government would recapture all areas held by the SDF "in one of two ways: a reconciliation agreement or... by force".

Although the end of the Daesh "caliphate" has been declared, Daesh is still present in eastern Syria's vast Badia desert.

The US Defense Department has warned that without sustained pressure on the extremists, they could resurge in Syria within months.

In the end, the future of the Kurds mainly depends on the United States, says analyst Nicholas Heras of the Center for a New American Security.

"Every other actor in Syria cannot make a move until there is greater clarity on what the United States ultimately decides to do," he said.

And after any troop pullout, the United States could still stay on with a paramilitary force, he added.

"The best hope for the SDF is for the Americans and the coalition to stick it out in Syria for the long haul."

The White House has said that around 200 American "peace-keeping" soldiers would remain in northern Syria indefinitely.

Acting Pentagon chief Patrick Shanahan said he would be discussing with NATO partners the potential to establish an "observer force" in the area.



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[Daesh defeated, 'caliphate' eliminated: US-backed SDF](#)

Author:

Reuters

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Sat, 2019-03-23 06:09

BEIRUT: US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) formally announced the destruction of Daesh's control of land in eastern Syria on Saturday but said it would continue its military and security campaigns against the group's sleeper cells.

At a televised ceremony, its general command called on the Syrian government, which has sworn to retake the whole country, to recognize the autonomous administration that runs areas the SDF controls in northeast Syria.

It also called on Turkey, which regards the SDF as a terrorist organization and has staged incursions into Syria against it, to leave Syrian territory, especially the mostly Kurdish region of Afrin.

The SDF has been battling to capture Baghouz at the Iraqi border for weeks.

Though the defeat of Daesh at Baghouz ends the group's grip over the extremist quasi-state straddling Syria and Iraq that it declared in 2014, it remains a threat.

Some of its fighters still hold out in Syria's remote central desert and in Iraqi cities they have slipped into the shadows, staging sudden shootings or kidnappings and awaiting a chance to rise again.

The US believes the group's leader, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, is in Iraq. He stood at the pulpit of the great medieval mosque in Mosul in 2014 to declare himself caliph, sovereign over all Muslims.

A senior US diplomat said the territorial defeat of Daesh is a "critical milestone" that delivers a crushing and strategic blow to the extremist group.

William Roebuck, the State Department's official in charge of Syria, added, however, that the campaign against Daesh is not over, saying the group remains a significant threat in the region.

"We still have much work to do to achieve an enduring defeat of IS," Roebuck said Saturday at a ceremony in eastern Syria's Al-Omar oil field base, celebrating victory over the group in Baghouz, Daesh's last stronghold in Syria.

Roebuck promised continued support to America's local partners in Syria to continue fighting the terrorist group.

British Prime Minister Theresa May said Saturday the fall of the last bastion held by Daesh terrorist in Syria marked "a historic milestone" as she paid tribute to British forces and coalition partners.

"The liberation of the last (IS)-held territory is a historic milestone that would not have been possible without their commitment, professionalism and courage," she said in a statement.

French President Emmanuel Macron paid tribute to the international coalition and its allies after US-backed forces declared military victory over Daesh in Syria.

Macron tweeted that "a major danger to our country is now eliminated, yet the threat remains and the fight against terrorist groups must continue."

He expressed condolences for the victims of Daesh.

France has been a member of the coalition fighting Daesh since 2014. The group claimed responsibility for several attacks in France, including assaults in Paris in 2015 that killed more than 130 people.

President Donald Trump hailed the end of the of Daesh's "caliphate" Saturday, vowing that the United States would remain "vigilant" against the diehard terrorists.

"We will remain vigilant... until it is finally defeated wherever it operates," Trump said in a statement.

"The United States will defend American interests whenever and wherever necessary." He added that the US will continue to work with its partners and allies to totally crush radical terrorists.





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Renewed US-led airstrikes pound Daesh holdouts Trump declares all Daesh-held territory eliminated in Syria but SDF continue fighting

Arab coalition targets Houthi military camps in Sanaa

Author:

Reuters

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Sat, 2019-03-23 03:35

The Saudi-led Arab coalition targeted Houthi military camps in Sanaa on Saturday, Al-Arabiya TV reported on Saturday.

Eyewitnesses from the area said that the coalition air force targeted the Al-Dailami air base with three raids, two raids on Beit Atran and another camp in a different location.

This comes hours after the Houthis announced the fall of a coalition aircraft in the outskirts of Sanaa, according to media published by the Houthis.

The US ambassador to Yemen blamed the Iran-aligned Houthi movement on Thursday for the hold-up to a UN-led peace deal in the main port of Hodeidah and said Houthi weapons pose a threat to other countries in the region.



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[White House: All Daesh-held territory in Syria has been '100 percent eliminated'](#)

Fri, 2019-03-22 19:11

ABOARD AIR FORCE ONE: The White House said on Friday that all Daesh held territory in Syria has been "100 percent" eliminated.

White House press secretary Sarah Sanders told reporters aboard Air Force One Friday that President Donald Trump was briefed about the development by acting Defense Secretary Patrick Shanahan.

Trump has been teasing the victory for days.

Sanders showed reporters a map of Iraq and Syria that showed that the terror group no longer controlled any territory in the region.

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[Israeli forces kill two Palestinians in Gaza border clashes](#)

Fri, 2019-03-22 19:03

Gaza City: Two Palestinians were killed by Israeli fire in renewed clashes along the Gaza border Friday, the health ministry in the enclave said. The clashes took place a week before the first anniversary of the weekly protests, when organisers have pledged larger than usual demonstrations. Ministry spokesman Ashraf Al-Qudra told AFP the two men, aged 18 and 29, were shot in separate incidents along the fractious border. The teenager was shot in the head east of Gaza City, while the older man was hit in the chest near the Al-Bureij refugee camp in central Gaza, Qudra told

AFP.

He did not name them but said at least 55 other people were shot.

The Israeli army did not comment on the deaths but said “approximately 9,500 rioters and demonstrators” gathered in various locations, “hurling explosive devices, hard objects and rocks” at troops.

Troops were “firing in accordance with standard operating procedures,” a spokeswoman said.

At least 257 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli fire in Gaza since protests began on March 30 2018.

Most have been killed during protests, though others have died in airstrikes and by tank fire.

Two Israeli soldiers have been killed.

The often violent protests are demanding Palestinian refugees and their descendants be allowed to return to former homes now inside Israel.

Israeli officials say that amounts to calling for the Jewish state’s destruction, and accuse Hamas of orchestrating the protests.







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