

Daesh terrorists in Syria face two choices: Surrender or death

Author:

Tue, 2019-02-19 21:23

OMAR OIL FIELD, SYRIA: Militants defending their last dreg of territory in Syria will be “killed in battle” if they do not surrender, a Kurdish-led force said on Tuesday ahead of a final showdown.

The US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) said they are trying to evacuate civilians trapped in the last half-a-square km of Daesh’s once-sprawling “caliphate” before storming the terrorist holdout.

“We are working on secluding and evacuating civilians and then we will attack. This could happen soon,” spokesman Mustafa Bali said, declining to provide more details on the operation.

Daesh militants “have only two options, either they surrender or they will be killed in battle,” he said. Daesh declared a “caliphate” across large swathes of Syria and neighboring Iraq in 2014.

A small hamlet of buildings in the village of Baghouz is all that is left of the proto-state, which at its height spanned an area the size of the UK.

The UN on Tuesday expressed concern over “the situation of some 200 families, including many women and children, who are reportedly trapped” in the Daesh holdout.

“Many of them are apparently being actively prevented from leaving by Daesh,” the UN said in a statement. The frontline in Baghouz was quiet on Monday afternoon. Tattered buildings and the twisted skeletons of cars dotted the side of the road.

At the entrance of the village, the SDF had turned an embattled building into a temporary base.

Thousands of people have streamed out of Daesh turf in recent weeks, but no civilians have made it out in the past three days.

Those that managed to escape have been ferried on trucks to Kurdish-held camps for the displaced to the north.

The International Rescue Committee said on Monday that 62 people, mostly children, had died on the way to the Al-Hol camp or shortly after arriving in past weeks.

Beyond Baghouz, Daesh still has thousands of fighters and sleeper cells scattered across several countries.

In Syria, it retains a presence in the vast Badia desert, and the terrorists

have claimed deadly attacks in SDF-held territory.

An SDF official on Monday said that an announcement will be made this week.

“In a few days we will announce a great victory over the largest terrorist organization that waged war on the world and wreaked chaos and death everywhere,” Zeidan Al-Assi said in a statement.

Trucks entered Baghouz to evacuate remaining civilians on Tuesday, Reuters quoted an SDF source as saying. A Reuters witness in a location near Baghouz saw dozens of trucks moving along a road toward the village.



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Daesh defends final pocket of dying 'caliphate' in Syria
Daesh 'caliphate' on brink of defeat in Syria as Trump urges Europe to do more

[**No autonomy to Syrian Kurds, says**](#)

Assad adviser

Tue, 2019-02-19 21:15

MOSCOW: A senior adviser to Bashar Assad on Tuesday flatly rejected the idea of giving Syrian Kurds a measure of autonomy, saying such a move would open the door to the partition of the country.

The Kurdish-led authority that runs much of north and east Syria has presented a road map for a deal with Assad in recent meetings with his key ally Russia.

The Kurds want to safeguard their autonomous region inside a decentralized state when US troops currently backing them pull out. They also hope a deal with Damascus would dissuade neighboring Turkey from attacking them.

But when asked on Tuesday if Damascus was willing to do a deal that would hand the Kurds some measure of autonomy, Bouthaina Shaaban, a senior adviser to Assad, flatly rejected the suggestion.

“Autonomy means the partition of Syria. We have no way to partition Syria,” she told Reuters on the sidelines of a Middle East conference in Moscow organized by the Valdai Discussion Club.

Her comments come after Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad expressed optimism last month over dialogue with Kurdish groups, and suggest the Kurds will face an uphill struggle to wring concessions from Damascus, which has said it wants to retake every inch of territory lost during eight years of war.

Shaaban praised Moscow for its Syria intervention, saying it had shown “amazing consistency in dealing with facts on the ground.”

She was scathing about Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his idea of carving out “a safe zone” in northeast Syria however.

Ankara wants the area near the Turkish border to be cleared of the US-backed Kurdish YPG militia and to move into territory there, some of which is currently controlled by US forces.

Shaaban said the idea smacked of an illegal land grab.

“Turkey has all the new ambition to occupy other people’s land and I think we are facing Erdogan who has dreams of reinvigorating and recreating the Ottoman Empire,” she said.

“But I don’t think he will be able to do that because our people are there to defend our land.”

Turkey backs the anti-Assad opposition that still has a foothold in northwestern Syria, and has troops in that area.



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Don't abandon us, Syrian Kurds tell Europe
Syria Kurds reject 'security zone' under Turkish control

[US voices concern over Hezbollah's role in Lebanese Cabinet](#)

Author:

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Tue, 2019-02-19 16:33

BEIRUT: The US ambassador to Lebanon expressed concerns Tuesday over the militant Hezbollah group's growing role in the new Cabinet, saying it does not contribute to stability.

Hezbollah, which also takes part in elections, has named a health minister and two other posts in Lebanon's Cabinet. US officials have called on Prime

Minister Saad Hariri's new government to ensure the group does not receive support from public resources.

At a meeting with Hariri on Tuesday, Ambassador Elizabeth Richard said the Iran-backed Hezbollah continues to violate Lebanon's policy of non-involvement in regional conflicts by fighting in "at least three countries." She was apparently referring to Syria, where the group fights alongside the government, and Iraq and Yemen, where Iran supports local armed groups. "I was also very frank with the prime minister about US concern over the growing role in the Cabinet of an organization that continues to maintain a militia that is not under the control of the government," Richard told reporters after the meeting.

She added that Hezbollah continues to make its own "national security decisions" that "endanger the rest of the country."

The US views Hezbollah as a terrorist group, but is a strong supporter of Lebanon's national army, supplying it with arms worth hundreds of millions of dollars in recent years. Last week, the American Embassy said the US had delivered laser-guided rockets valued at more than \$16 million to the Lebanese army.

Richard said last year alone, the United States provided more than \$825 million in assistance, an increase from the year before. She said the US has also supported education and development programs to help Lebanese communities "deal with the unprecedented demands placed on them when their Syrian neighbors fled."

Lebanon is home to about a million Syrian refugees – a quarter of the tiny Mediterranean country's population – putting pressure on its crumbling infrastructure.

Minister of State for Refugee Affairs Saleh Gharib briefed President Michel Aoun and Hariri on Tuesday about his visit to Syria the previous day, telling reporters that Syrian officials "were very positive and showed interest in facilitating" refugees' return.



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[Two police officers killed after terror suspect blows himself up near Al-Azhar Mosque in Cairo](#)

Mon, 2019-02-18 23:38

CAIRO: Two police officers were killed when a terror suspect blew himself up after he was surrounded by police near Al-Azhar Mosque in Cairo on Monday.

Three other policemen were injured in the blast in the Darb Al-Ahmar district, the interior ministry said. The explosion took place after police chased the suspect who they believe had planted a bomb near a mosque last week.

Security forces have cordoned off the area and are searching for other explosives, according to local media reports.

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Saudi Arabia condemns terrorist attack on Egyptian troops in North Sinai
Egypt official: Home-made bomb explodes near mosque, 3 hurt

[Daesh defends final pocket of dying 'caliphate' in Syria](#)

Author:

AFP

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1550510437349130900

Mon, 2019-02-18 12:28

OMAR OIL FIELD, Syria: Extremists defending their last dreg of territory in Syria have no choice but to surrender, a Kurdish-led force said on Monday, ahead of a victory declaration expected within days.

The warning by the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) comes as EU foreign ministers are scheduled to meet Monday to discuss the repatriation of

European nationals in Syria, which Germany said would be “extremely difficult” to do.

Diehard extremist fighters are now trapped in their last patch of territory of less than half a square kilometer in the village of Baghouz near the Iraqi border.

The SDF are moving cautiously on the extremist holdout, saying Daesh is increasingly using civilians as “human shields” to block the advance.

“The clashes are sporadic and very limited,” SDF spokesman Mustefa Bali told AFP on Monday.

“So far there have been no significant changes on the ground,” he said, adding that coalition warplanes have reduced air strikes on Daesh positions over the past two days.

The SDF “are still working on trying to get civilians out,” the spokesman said.

Thousands of people have streamed out of the so-called “Baghouz pocket” in recent weeks, but no civilians have made it out in the last three days.

An informed source told AFP that holdout Daesh fighters are seeking safe passage to the extremist-held city of Idlib in northwestern Syria.

“They want to take the remaining civilians with them as human shields. But the SDF are not willing to discuss this option,” said the source who asked not to be named.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a Britain-based war monitor, said the SDF have turned down the request.

AFP could not confirm this with an SDF official, but a commander with the alliance said that Daesh has no leverage to negotiate.

“They are besieged in a very tight area and they have no other choice but to surrender,” said the SDF commander, who asked not to be named.

The group declared a “caliphate” across large swathes of Syria and neighboring Iraq in 2014, which at its height spanned an area the size of United Kingdom.

Successive offensives in both countries have since shattered the proto-state, but the extremist group still retains a presence in Syria’s vast Badia desert and has claimed deadly attacks in SDF-held territory.

After years of fighting Daesh, the Kurdish-led SDF hold hundreds of foreign suspected Daesh fighters, as well as related women and children.

Syria’s Kurds have long urged their home countries to take them back, but these nations have been reluctant.

The issue has taken on greater urgency, however, amid fears of a security vacuum since US President Donald Trump's shock announcement in December that American troops would withdraw.

The subject is to be raised on Monday at a meeting of European foreign ministers called to discuss among other issues "the situation in Syria, in particular the recent developments on the ground," according to an agenda for the talks.

The meeting comes after Trump on Sunday called on his European allies to take back their citizens who are being held by the Kurds in Syria.

"The United States is asking Britain, France, Germany and other European allies to take back over 800 Daesh fighters that we captured in Syria and put them on trial," Trump said in a tweet.

His appeal sparked a reaction from Berlin, Paris, and Brussels.

Germany's Foreign Minister Heiko Maas warned that it would be "extremely difficult" to organize the repatriation of European nationals from Syria.

A return could only be possible if "we can guarantee that these people can be immediately sent here to appear in court and that they will be detained," he said.

Germany's Defense Minister Ursula von der Leyen stressed the difficulties however of putting the ex-fighters on trial.

"We must be able to ensure that prosecution is possible," she said.

French junior interior minister Laurent Nunez said Sunday that, if suspected extremists return, "they will all be tried, and incarcerated."

In Belgium, justice minister Koen Geens called for a collective "European solution."

Meanwhile, a top Kurdish official called on Europe not to abandon Syrian Kurds.

European powers "have a political and moral responsibility" to the Kurds, Aldar Khalil told AFP in an interview in Paris late Sunday.

The Kurds would seek the protection of Syrian President Bashar Assad if failed by Europe and the United States, he said.



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SDF fighters close in on last Daesh-held village in Syria
SDF fighters vow to 'finish off' Daesh in Hajjin operation