

Young Egyptians trudge through mud to clean up Nile

Author:

Reuters

ID:

1549908899604991200

Mon, 2019-02-11 17:50

CAIRO: Hundreds of young Egyptians, including actress Mai El Gheity, trudged through the mud on the banks of the River Nile to collect tons of old plastic bags, bottles and other rubbish.

The teens and twenty-somethings also climbed into boats to reach trash floating through the center of Cairo during the "Youth for the Nile" clean-up – a program backed by the government and other groups to raise awareness of pollution.

Volunteer Dai Soliman worked on as people watched from a bridge.

"Those people above looking at us must have thought that they threw something in, and now there are some people who are collecting their garbage. So this is awareness, it is direct awareness in action," she said.

The teams, most wearing the scheme's white boots and blue and yellow gloves, collected three to four tons of waste on Saturday, the environment ministry said.

A report issued last year by government's Egyptian Environmental Affairs Agency said 150 million tons of industrial waste end up in the Nile every year.

Similar clean-ups are scheduled in Luxor, Aswan, Assiut and other provinces through the rest of the year.





Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Egypt](#)

[Nile](#)

[clean up](#)

[Russia, Turkey agree on need for decisive measures in Idlib](#)

Author:

Mon, 2019-02-11 21:22

MOSCOW: Russia and Turkey's defense ministers agreed on the need to take what they called decisive measures to stabilize the situation in Syria's Idlib province during talks on Monday, Russia's RIA news agency cited a joint statement as saying.

Russia, an important Syrian regime ally, and Turkey brokered a deal in September to create a demilitarized zone in the northwest Idlib region that would be evacuated of all heavy weapons and radical fighters.

However, the area has been the site of continued hostilities with Russia saying that militants who used to belong to the Nusra Front group are in

control of large swaths of territory.

A joint statement published after the talks between the two defense ministers in Ankara spoke of "the need in particular to take decisive measures to ensure security in the Idlib demilitarized zone," RIA reported. A UN report seen by Reuters last week estimated there are up to 18,000 Daesh militants in Iraq and Syria, including up to 3,000 foreign fighters.

It warned the group was interested in attacking aviation and using chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear materials.

Some military analysts say Daesh still has enough leaders, fighters, facilitators and financial resources to fuel a menacing insurgency in Syria and Iraq.

The top American commander overseeing American forces in the Middle East earlier said the US was likely just weeks away from starting the withdrawal of ground troops from Syria.

US Army General Joseph Votel, head of the US Central Command, cautioned that the exact timing would depend on the situation in Syria, where DSF troops have launched a final assault against Daesh enclaves near the Iraqi border.

The US military has already started withdrawing equipment from Syria. Asked whether the withdrawal of America's more than 2,000 troops would begin in days or weeks, Votel said: "Probably weeks. But again, it will all be driven by the situation on the ground."

"In terms of the withdrawal ... I think we're right on track with where we wanted to be," Votel told reporters traveling with him during a trip to the Middle East.

"Moving people is easier than moving equipment and so what we're trying to do right now is again (to) kind of clear out those materials, that equipment, that we do not need."

Trump's surprise announcement in December that he was withdrawing American troops from Syria helped trigger the resignation of his defense secretary, Jim Mattis, and sent US military officials scrambling to construct a withdrawal plan that preserves as many gains as possible.

Hundreds of additional troops have been sent to Syria to facilitate the withdrawal.

US officials have long estimated that the Syria pullout could take until sometime in March or April to execute fully, but have been reluctant to set an exact timeline given hard-to-predict battlefield conditions.

Votel did not speculate about when the drawdown would be completed.

One big question has been whether some US forces in Syria might move to Iraq, where the US has more than 5,000 troops helping Baghdad fight Daesh and prevent the group's resurgence.

Votel said he did not believe the US would broadly increase overall troop numbers in Iraq.

He did leave open the possibility of changing the composition of forces to help the US keep pressure on the militant group.

Referring to future US troop levels in Iraq, Votel said: "I think it's going to remain more or less steady."

"This isn't just wholesale – 'Everybody in Syria move over to Iraq.' That doesn't make sense," Votel said.

Votel is one of many current and former US officials who have warned of the risk of a resurgence by Daesh unless the US and its allies can keep pressure on the group following the US withdrawal.

But a clear US plan on how to keep up the pressure has yet to be articulated. It is also unclear whether the United States will be able to satisfy the security concerns in Syria of its NATO ally Turkey without sacrificing the interests of US-backed Kurdish fighters there.

Ankara sees the Kurdish militia as terrorists.

Washington views the Kurdish militia as loyal partners in the fight against Islamic State, whose help will likely continue to be needed to prevent the group's resurgence.

The Pentagon's own internal watchdog released a report last week warning about the risks still posed by Islamic State. It cautioned that, absent sustained pressure, the group would likely resurge in Syria within six to 12 months and retake some limited territory.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Syria](#)

[Russia](#)

[Turkey](#)

Airstrikes kill 16 civilians as US-backed Syrian forces battle to take last Daesh pocket
Withdrawal of US forces in Syria likely to start in 'weeks' – US general

[Egypt arrests students for mocking Christianity online](#)

Author:

AFP

ID:

1549908899574991100

Mon, 2019-02-11 17:40

CAIRO: Egyptian authorities have arrested four students for mocking Christian rituals in an online video and ordered them to be kept in custody for four days, a judicial source said Monday.

The university students aged between 19 and 24 were accused of being in "contempt of the Christian religion," the source said.

If tried and found guilty they could face up to five years in prison.

They were arrested last week and remanded in custody by the state prosecutor overnight Sunday.

At the end of January they posted a video on YouTube in which they were allegedly seen mocking Coptic hymns and prayers.

But they later removed the clip and posted an apology online.

Copts, a Christian minority which accounts for 10 percent of Egypt's 98 million people, have repeatedly complained of marginalization in the mostly Muslim country.

In recent years they have been targeted by Daesh group extremists.

Trials for "contempt" of Christianity are rare in Egypt where more frequently charges are levelled for contempt of Islam usually against liberal Muslim intellectuals.

In 2016 four Coptic teenagers were found guilty of being in contempt of Islam and three of them were handed five-year sentences each after mocking Muslim prayer in a video.

Later that year they fled the country, traveling to Switzerland where they obtained political asylum.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Egypt](#)

[Christians](#)

[video](#)

[Russia 'repatriates' 27 Daesh children from Iraq](#)

Sun, 2019-02-10 23:21

BAGHDAD: A Russian official said Sunday that Moscow had repatriated a fresh batch of children whose mothers are being held in Iraq for belonging to Daesh.

"Twenty-seven Russian children have been repatriated from Baghdad," a Russian Foreign Ministry official said.

Thirty other children were sent back to Moscow in late December.

The fathers of the children were killed during three years of fighting between the militants and Iraqi troops, the official said.

Daesh seized large swathes of Iraq in a lightning 2014 offensive, before the government dislodged the militants from urban centers and eventually declared victory in December 2017.

The Kremlin announced in early January that 115 Russian children aged below 10 – along with eight aged between 11 and 17 – were still in Iraq.

Iraqi law allows detainees to be held with their offspring until the age of three, but older children have to live with relatives.

In November, Kheda Saratova – an adviser to Chechnya’s authoritarian leader Ramzan Kadyrov – estimated “around 2,000” widows and children of Russian Daesh fighters were still in Iraq and neighboring Syria.

Around 100 women and children, mostly from Caucasus republics, have returned to Russia so far.

Nearly 4,500 Russian citizens had gone abroad to fight “on the side of terrorists,” Russia’s FSB domestic intelligence agency said last year.

More than 300 people, including around 100 foreign women, have been sentenced to death in Iraq for belonging to Daesh, while others have been sentenced to life in prison. Most of those convicted are Turks or originate from former republics of the Soviet Union.

Their home countries do not want them and holding trials in Syria is not an option: Now suspected foreign militants could end up facing tough justice over the border in Iraq. Both countries have suffered for years at the hands of Daesh and Iraqi courts have already meted out hefty sentences to hundreds of foreigners detained on its soil, often after lightning-quick trials.

The fate of foreign fighters in Syria has come into sharper focus since President Donald Trump’s announcement in December that the US will withdraw its troops from the war-torn country.

Governments have been grappling for weeks with the question of foreign fighters detained by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, who have warned that they may not be able to guard their jails once US troops leave.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Daesh](#)

[Russian troops](#)

Caught in Syria, foreign terrorist suspects may face trial in IraqUS-backed fighters launch final push to defeat Daesh in Syria

[New US lawmakers' criticism of Israel pressures Democrats](#)

Author:

Sun, 2019-02-10 22:56

WASHINGTON: The support for a boycott of Israel by the first two Muslim women in the US Congress has opened a breach in the Democratic Party and threatens to create a fissure in the ironclad US-Israeli alliance.

Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib made their debut in the House of Representatives in January openly declaring their support for the Palestinian-led Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movement, or BDS.

The movement, launched more than a decade ago and modeled on the 1960s movement to pressure South Africa over apartheid, calls for people and groups to sever economic, cultural and academic ties to Israel, and to support sanctions against the Jewish state.

But for Israel partisans – including many Democrats and Republicans in Congress – BDS smacks of anti-Semitism and poses a threat to Israel.

Tlaib, 42, has Palestinian roots and represents a district of suburban Detroit, Michigan that is home to thousands of Muslims.

She argues that BDS can draw a focus on “issues like the racism and the international human rights violations by Israel right now.”

Omar, 37, is the daughter of Somali refugees who was elected to represent a Minneapolis, Minnesota district with a large Somali population.

She accuses Israel of discrimination against Palestinians akin to apartheid, but denies that she is anti-Semitic.

Her remarks in January to Yahoo News however sparked anger among the large pro-Israel contingent in Congress, the powerful, largely Democratic US Jewish community, and Israel itself, where BDS is seen as a national threat.

“When I see Israeli institute laws that recognize it as a Jewish state and

does not recognize the other religions that are living in it, and we still hold it as a democracy in the Middle East, I almost chuckle," she told Yahoo News.

"Because I know that if we see that in another society we would criticize it – we do that to Iran, any other place that sort of upholds its religion."

Omar and Tlaib sparked the BDS controversy during a period when Donald Trump's administration has strengthened relations with Israel and slashed aid to the Palestinians.

But Republicans saw their support for BDS as both a threat to Jews and an exploitable rift among Democrats.

"Democrats have made it clear that hateful, bigoted rhetoric toward Israel is not confined to a few freshman members. This is the mainstream position of today's Democratic Party and their leadership is enabling it," Republicans said in a statement on Jan. 29.

The worry about the still small but growing support for BDS in the US predates Tlaib's and Omar's political rise.

A number of states have passed or proposed constitutionally questionable legislation and policies that would penalize supporters of the boycott movement.

But the arrival of Tlaib and Omar in Congress was greeted with the first proposed federal law to fight to that end, in the Senate.

Sen. Marco Rubio argues that BDS aims to eliminate the state of Israel, and said his legislation would protect states' rights to exclude from public contracts any supporters of BDS.

Republicans, the majority in the Senate, along with more than half of the Democrats approved the legislation.

But a significant number of Democrats opposed it, because, they said, it violates constitutional guarantees of freedom of expression.

That has left Democrats vulnerable to charges of anti-Semitism.

To fight that, in January prominent party members formed the Democratic Majority for Israel, touting themselves as "The Voice of Pro-Israel Democrats," which for some came across as a rebuke of Omar and Tlaib.

After Omar joined the influential House Foreign Affairs Committee, according to The New York Times, Jewish committee Chairman Eliot Engel privately made it clear that he would not ignore any "particularly hurtful" remarks she might make.

"You hope that when people are elected to Congress, they continue to grow," he reportedly told her.

“There is obviously a serious fight going on within the Democratic Party with respect to how to deal with BDS and some within their party who advocate for it,” said Alvin Rosenfeld, who directs the Institute for the Study of Contemporary Antisemitism at Indiana University.

“Should the party swing to the far left and appear to be way out of line with America’s traditional ties to one of its strongest allies, Israel, the party will surely suffer at the polls,” he told AFP.

Amy Elman, a political science professor at Kalamazoo College, said anti-Semitism should not be used as a “political football by any party.”

“Democrats should care less where the charges of anti-Semitism come from. What matters is if the accusations are valid,” she said.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[BDS](#)

[Israel](#)

[Palestinians](#)

BDS supporter fights entry ban in Israel Israel to demolish Palestinian murder suspect’s home