

Deadly attack on US forces leaves Syria town fearful for future

Author:

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MANBIJ: Charred walls, shattered windows, uncooked kebabs still on the counter – the blast that hit US forces at this small restaurant in northern Syria has left residents fearful for the future.

Wednesday's suicide bombing, claimed by Daesh, was the deadliest to hit US troops since they deployed to Syria in 2014.

Nineteen people, including four Americans, were killed in the attack on the grill house in the central market of the flashpoint northern town of Manbij.

"We come to the market but we are afraid. We go to work and we are afraid... we don't know what could happen," says Jomaa Al-Qassem, eyeing the shops from his car along with his three-year-old son.

In front of the blackened storefront, armed security forces hustle curious onlookers away and are quick to prevent them from taking photos with their cellphones.

Behind its twisted metal exterior, a clump of raw red meat lies abandoned on a counter, covered with dust. Tables and cookware from the kitchen have been twisted into a tangled mess on the floor.

Run by a Washington-backed town council since the US-led coalition and its ground partners pushed out militants in 2016, Manbij has been a realm of relative quiet.

The town was considered sufficiently secure that a group of top US military commanders and lawmakers strolled through the same market place without body armor during a tour of the area last summer.

Next to the blast site, Abu Abdel Rahman lifts an armful of red teddy bears out of his storefront display, carefully avoiding the shattered glass.

Just meters away from the restaurant, his shop was also hit by the blast.

But the US military presence in the town has been thrown into question after President Donald Trump's shock announcement last month that he would pull all American troops from Syria, claiming the Daesh had been "largely defeated."

Sen. Lindsey Graham, a longtime Trump supporter who was among this summer's visitors, has been one of the most vocal critics of the president's decision and was in Ankara for talks with top officials on Friday.

"I was at the door of my shop and saw a fireball come out of the restaurant. Then, there were body parts on the ground," he told AFP, a red keffiyeh

headscarf wrapped around his face to help fend off the cold winter air.

The four Americans killed in the blast were two soldiers, a civilian defense department employee and a Pentagon subcontractor.

The US Defense Department has previously reported only two American personnel killed in combat in Syria, in separate incidents.

The attack came as tensions between Washington's Syrian Kurdish ground partner and its NATO ally Turkey flare.

Ankara views the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) as a "terrorist offshoot" of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which has waged a deadly insurgency for self-rule in southeastern Turkey since 1984.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has threatened an all-out offensive to clear the group from its border.

At the town's entrance, security checkpoints manned by forces of the US-backed Manbij Military Council meticulously check vehicles and the IDs of people entering and exiting the town. Regular patrols move through the streets.

But for Malek Al-Hassan, it is not enough.

The 45-year-old was in the market that day to buy books for his children.

"When the explosion happened, I don't know how we managed to escape," he says.

"We hope the forces will be more vigilant at the roadblocks, and that they will work hard to prevent these infiltrators from committing these acts of sabotage," he says.

After sweeping across swathes of Syria and Iraq in 2014, the militants' cross-border "caliphate" has been erased by multiple offensives and is now confined to a tiny embattled enclave in eastern Syria close to the Iraqi border.

But despite the stinging defeats, Daesh has proved it is still capable of carrying out deadly attacks using hideouts in the sprawling desert or sleeper cells in the towns.

One day after the blast, Naassan Dandan's eyes well up with tears when he remembers the attack.

"I was outside when the explosion happened and was thrown to the ground," says the man in his 40s, still clearing shards of glass from his nearby photography studio.

On the walls of his shop, child portraits he has taken throughout his career are covered in black dust.

“I saw the bodies – the dead and the wounded,” he says, as two young passers-by stop to lend a hand with the clean up.



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US names Americans killed in Manbij, Syria ‘Daesh attack’ Turkey-backed fighters await ‘zero hour’ to attack Syria’s Manbij

[Explosion in north Syria targets Al-Qaeda gunmen, kills 11](#)

Author:

Associated Press

ID:

1547835492333047300

Fri, 2019-01-18 (All day)

BEIRUT: An explosion outside an office belonging to an Al-Qaeda-linked group in northwestern Syria on Friday killed at least 11 people and wounded several others, opposition activists said.

The blast comes a week after members of the Al-Qaeda-linked Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham, Arabic for Levant Liberation Committee, or HTS, took over control of

wide parts of Idlib province and the surrounding countryside after forcing rival insurgents to accept a deal for a civil administration run by HTS in their areas.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights and Smart news agency, an activist collective, said the blast occurred on the southern edge of the rebel-held city of Idlib.

The Observatory said 11 people were killed in the blast, including seven HTS members. Smart said 12 people were killed, many of them militants.

In the country's east, an airstrike in the last area held by Daesh killed at least 20 people.

State news agency SANA said 20 people were killed in the airstrike on the Daesh-held village of Baghouz, while the Observatory said 23 people were killed including 10 IS members.

They both blamed the US-led coalition that has been providing air cover to the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces in their monthslong offensive to capture the area from extremists near the Iraqi border.

The SDF has intensified its offensive over the past weeks on the Daesh-held area.

Meanwhile in Turkey, President Tayyip Erdogan met with US Republican Senator Lindsey Graham to discuss the situation in Syria as the United States prepares to withdraw troops.

Graham, a prominent voice on foreign affairs in the US, met with Erdogan and other Turkish officials Friday for talks that were also expected to include a proposal for the creation of a "safe zone" in northeast Syria.

The visit comes days after a suicide bombing, claimed by Daesh, killed two US service members and two American civilians in the northeastern town of Manbij.

Graham has said he is concerned that US President Donald Trump's troop withdrawal announcement had emboldened Daesh militants and created dangerous uncertainty for American allies.

The Pentagon identified three of the four Americans killed in the suicide bomb attack in Manbij – Army Chief Warrant Officer 2 Jonathan R. Farmer, 37, of Boynton Beach, Florida, who was based at Fort Campbell, Kentucky; Navy Chief Cryptologic Technician (Interpretive) Shannon M. Kent, 35, from upstate New York and based at Fort Meade, Maryland; and a civilian, Scott A. Wirtz, from St. Louis.

The Pentagon hasn't identified the fourth casualty, a civilian contractor.



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[Trump giving 'new life' to Daesh, former envoy says](#)

Author:

Thomas WATKINS | AFP

ID:

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Fri, 2019-01-18 17:10

WASHINGTON: President Donald Trump's decision to pull US troops from Syria was made without deliberation, left allies "bewildered" and has rejuvenated Daesh, the official formerly in charge of fighting the militants said Friday.

Brett McGurk, who quit as America's envoy to the anti-Daesh coalition after Trump declared victory over the group last month, warned a US withdrawal would shore up President Bashar Assad and lessen America's leverage with Russia and Iran.

And "the Islamic State and other extremist groups will fill the void opened by our departure, regenerating their capacity to threaten our friends in Europe – as they did throughout 2016 – and ultimately our own homeland," McGurk wrote in an opinion piece in The Washington Post, referring to another name for Daesh.

McGurk, a Barack Obama-era appointee whom Trump kept on, said he was in the US embassy in Baghdad on December 17 when he got an urgent call from Secretary of State Mike Pompeo informing him of Trump's decision.

Two days later, Trump tweeted, "We have defeated Daesh in Syria," referring to another acronym for Daesh.

"But that was not true, and we have continued to conduct airstrikes against the Islamic State," McGurk said.

The decision came just days after National Security Adviser John Bolton had suggested an indefinite US troop presence in Syria, and as McGurk and then defense secretary Jim Mattis met coalition partners to confirm commitments for at least the next year.

"My counterparts in coalition capitals were bewildered," McGurk said.

"The president's decision to leave Syria was made without deliberation, consultation with allies or Congress, assessment of risk, or appreciation of facts."

Mattis quit after Trump's decision.

McGurk said Trump had made his decision after a phone call with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who had said Istanbul would lead the fight against Daesh remnants in Syria.

But Turkey has also vowed to take action against US-backed Syrian Kurds who have conducted the fight against Daesh and lost thousands of troops as they slowly wrested territory from the militants.

"The irony is that defeating the Islamic State is what the president said from the beginning was his goal," McGurk said.

"His recent choices, unfortunately, are already giving the Islamic State – and other American adversaries – new life."

Just one month after Trump declared victory over Daesh, the militants claimed responsibility for a brutal attack in Syria this week.

Four Americans, including two services personnel, were among those killed when a suicide bomber hit a restaurant in the key city of Manbij in Syria's north – the deadliest attack against US forces since they first deployed in the war-torn nation four years ago.

The Pentagon on Friday identified three of those killed.

Among them was Navy Chief Cryptologic Technician Shannon Kent of New York. Her death marked the first time a female US service member was killed in Syria.

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US names Americans killed in Manbij, Syria 'Daesh attack' New envoy stresses need for UN-backed solution to Syria war

[French military to continue fight against Daesh in Levant: Macron](#)

Thu, 2019-01-17 20:09

PARIS: President Emmanuel Macron said on Thursday the death of four Americans in Syria this week showed that the battle against Daesh militants would continue and he vowed that France would keep its troops in the region this year.

"The announced withdrawal of our American ally should not deflect us from our strategic objective to eradicate Daesh", Macron said in a speech in Toulouse to the armed forces.

Citing the death of 16 people, including four Americans, in a suicide bombing in Manbij, Syria, near the border with Turkey, Macron said the next few months would be decisive.

"We will remain militarily engaged in the Levant in the international

coalition (...) over the coming year," he said.



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Daesh Syria attack kills at least 16, including US soldiers
Pakistan security forces kill 2 Daesh men linked to abduction of American

[Man detained in Lebanon on suspicion of entering from Israel](#)

Author:

By BASSEM MROUE | AP

ID:

1547738397804280900

Thu, 2019-01-17 (All day)

BEIRUT: Lebanon's army intelligence have detained a man on suspicion that he crossed into Lebanon from Israel, a military official said Thursday. The

country's state news agency said the detainee is a US citizen. Lebanon and Israel are in a state of war and each bans its citizens from visiting the other country. There are no border crossings at the tightly-controlled frontier.

The official, who spoke Thursday on condition of anonymity in line with regulations, gave no further details saying the man is being questioned and once they have information the army will release a statement.

State-run National News Agency said the man who was detained is a US citizen adding that he was detained in the southern port-city of Tyre where he had been staying since Tuesday. It added that the man is being questioned under the supervision of judicial authorities.

There was no immediate comment from the US embassy in Lebanon.

Suspicion about someone crossing the tightly guarded border known as the Blue Line began to surface on Tuesday.

The Israeli military said: "Israeli army troops identified a break in the fence and signs that point to the suspicion of a person crossing the border from Israel into Lebanon. The incident is under investigation."



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