

US strikes Al-Qaeda leaders in Syria as regime violates Idlib ceasefire

Sat, 2019-08-31 01:19

BEIRUT: US forces attacked extremist leaders in Syria Saturday, the Pentagon said, in what a battlefield monitor called a missile strike that left at least 40 dead.

The US Defense Department said the attack targeted leaders of Al-Qaeda in Syria north of Idlib. It did not say what kind of weapon was used or give any details.

The missiles targeted leaders of terrorist groups and allied factions near Idlib, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

“A missile attack targeted a meeting held by the leaders of Hurras Al-Deen, Ansar Al-Tawhid and other allied groups inside a training camp” near Idlib city, said Rami Abdel Rahman, head of the Observatory.

The attack killed at least 40 extremist leaders, the Britain based monitor said.

The US Central Command said in a statement that the attack targeted leaders of Al-Qaeda in Syria (AQ-S) “responsible for attacks threatening US citizens, our partners and innocent civilians. Additionally, the removal of this facility will further degrade their ability to conduct future attacks and destabilize the region.”

An AFP correspondent saw clouds of black smoke rising over the area after blasts rocked the extremist stronghold.

Ambulances rushed to the site of the attack, which was closed off to journalists, he said.

It was not immediately clear if the missiles were launched from war planes or positions on the ground, the monitor said.

CENTCOM declined to say what kind of weaponry was used.

Regime bombardment on Syria’s northwest province of Idlib on Saturday killed a civilian just hours after a Russian-backed truce for the area started, Abdel Rahman also said.

The truce that came into effect on Saturday is the second such agreement between the Syrian regime and extremists since an August 1 ceasefire deal covering the Idlib region broke down only days after going into effect.

Russia-backed regime forces have been pressing an offensive against the major opposition stronghold in Idlib since April.

But Russia and Damascus are not the only players with a history of strike activity in the area.

On July 1 the United States said it had carried out a strike on Hurras Al-Deen in northwestern Syria, in its first such operation there in two years. Al-Qaeda-linked Hurras Al-Deen was established in February 2018 and has some 1,800 fighters, including non-Syrians, according to the Observatory.

The group and its ally Ansar Al-Tawhid both operate in the Idlib region and are members of a joint extremist operation room that also includes Al-Qaeda’s former Syria affiliate, Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham.

Most of Idlib province and parts of neighbouring Aleppo and Latakia provinces are controlled by HTS.

Syrian state news agency SANA on Saturday said the government agreed to the Idlib ceasefire deal, which Russia said aimed "to stabilise the situation" in the anti-government bastion.

But the army "reserves the right to respond to violations" by extremists and allied rebel groups, SANA added, citing a Syrian military source.

The Idlib region is home to some three million people, nearly half of whom have been displaced from other parts of Syria.

Air strikes by Damascus and Russia have killed more than 950 civilians since the end of April, according to the Observatory.

The United Nations says the violence has also displaced more than 400,000 people.

The Idlib region is supposed to be protected from a massive government offensive by a Turkish-Russian deal struck in September 2018 that was never fully implemented as extremists refused to withdraw from a planned demilitarised cordon.

Turkey backs rebels in northwestern Syria.

"Russia and the Syrian government may be willing to give Turkey another opportunity to implement the terms of its September 2018 bilateral agreement with Russia," said Sam Heller of the International Crisis Group.

"Alternately, this ceasefire may just be an operational pause for Damascus and Moscow to consolidate their territorial gains and prepare for the next phase of their offensive," the Syria expert added.

Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad, whose forces control around 60 per cent of territory, has vowed to reclaim the rest of the country, including Idlib.

Saturday's truce is the latest attempt to avert a full-blown offensive, which the UN has said would result in one of the worst humanitarian "nightmares" in Syria's eight-year conflict.

Only a few hours before it went into effect, a Russian air strike hit a health facility in Aleppo's western countryside, putting it out of service, the Observatory said.

The UN has said 43 hospitals and clinics and 87 educational facilities have been impacted by fighting since April.

"The attacks we have seen on health facilities, educational facilities and water points is one of the highest in the world," Panos Moumtzis, the UN's Syria humanitarian chief, told AFP.

The Syrian conflict has killed more than 370,000 people and driven millions from their homes since it started with the brutal repression of anti-government protests in 2011.



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UN to 'facilitate' evacuations from Syria desert camp
Russia announces ceasefire in Syria's Idlib from Saturday

[Daraa – cradle of Syria's uprising turns into 'chaotic' south](#)

Author:

Sat, 2019-08-31 01:12

BEIRUT: Bombings, gun violence and mysterious assassinations: In Syria's southern province of Daraa, an experiment to use surrendering opposition fighters as regime proxies has seen the area descend into lawlessness.

Unlike other parts of Syria retaken by the regime, the army has not deployed across the whole province, relying instead on its unlikely partners to ensure security.

But the surrender deal “has failed to usher in stability, and chaos reigns,” according to Salam, a former Daraa resident who left the province last month.

“The assassinations and explosions are increasing day by day,” the man in his thirties added, asking to use a pseudonym for fear of reprisals.

Some fighters and their families started evacuating Daraa in July 2018 under a surrender deal brokered by regime ally Russia after weeks of fierce bombardment.

Their loss of the province dealt a symbolic blow to the uprising, which started with massive protests in Daraa in 2011 after a group of teenagers were arrested over anti-regime graffiti.

Under the 2018 deal, opposition fighters who chose to remain were granted amnesty on condition they hand over heavy weapons. Light firearms were exempt.

After a series of victories against fighters and militants, Bashar Assad’s regime now controls around 60 percent of the country.

Regime institutions have returned to Daraa. But unlike in other parts of Syria back under regime control, from which most opposition fighters withdrew, many former opposition fighters stayed behind in Daraa.

They retain control over large rural areas to its south, west and east, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

They also hold southern parts of Daraa’s provincial capital, known as Daraa Al-Balad, the Britain-based monitor says.

Some have started working with state institutions or joined a Russian-backed contingent of the Syrian army.

Syrian military and security forces man checkpoints on the outskirts of these areas, the Observatory says.

Daraa province lies on the frontier with Jordan, which used to back opposition in the province before last year’s detente between Amman and Damascus.

It also borders Israel, which is suspected of working with Russia to prevent Iranian-backed forces from deploying near its frontier, according to analysts.

The region’s “uniqueness lies in the degree to which opposition structures have remained intact,” said Alex Simon of the Synaps network, a Beirut-based research group.

The regime’s “comparatively hands-off approach” to the province reflects an “effort to economise what remains of a depleted military apparatus,” he said.

Simon said former opposition factions “make convenient proxies for the

Russians and the regime" in areas where the army is absent.

"But they're also a liability: Residual weapons and simmering anti-Assad sentiment create the potential for violent flareups," he added.

Loyalists in Daraa routinely face the menace of explosions and gunfire, says the Observatory, which has documented 60 such attacks since June.

Omar Al-Hariri, an opposition activist, said the proliferation of weapons in a province still bubbling with anti-Assad sentiment "will naturally result in the formation of sleeper cells."

"This is why operations against the regime have started to intensify," the Daraa-born activist told AFP.

But, Rifaat, another Daraa resident, said it was impossible to determine who is responsible.

"There are weapons in every house," he told AFP, also using a pseudonym.

"Anyone can murder anyone for whatever reason."

The UN says civilians working with state institutions, as well as former opposition fighters, have been hit by seemingly targeted killings.

In March, dozens took part in a rare protest after a statue of Assad's late father, Hafez Assad, was erected to replace one destroyed by protesters at the start of the uprising.

And last month, anti-regime graffiti re-appeared on a Daraa wall.

Daraa is similar to other former opposition bastions in that hundreds there have been detained and forcibly conscripted into Assad's army despite the so-called "reconciliation deals."

Between July 26 last year and the end of March, at least 380 people were arrested or detained, the UN says.

"Many of those arrested were humanitarians, army defectors or people affiliated with anti-government forces," said Sara Kayyali, Syria researcher at Human Rights Watch.

Such abuses have transformed reconciliation promises into "empty words," she said.

To avoid arrest or conscription, Rifaat said he does not leave Daraa Al-Balad.

"There are many others just like me," he told AFP.

"As long as we don't cross regime checkpoints outside the area, nobody can reach us."

Rifaat said he sometimes feels as if he is under siege.

But, he said, that is “a million times better than fighting with the regime or being imprisoned.”



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Rebels, families begin evacuating Syria's Daraa city
Swaths of Syria out of regime hands despite Daraa victory

[Lebanese protest outside Canadian embassy after false reports of emigration opportunities](#)

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Sat, 2019-08-31 21:07

BEIRUT: Dozens of Lebanese men and their children protested outside the Canadian embassy on Friday morning after fraudulent websites convinced them

that the country is offering free immigration.

Most of the men were unemployed and from Tripoli.

Ziad Bouz said: "I went along with my children – Najeeb, 6, and my young one who is 10-months-old – I pray they accept my application for my kids to have a future."

Some young men climbed the external fence after the embassy square flooded with dozens of people. Internal Security Forces (ISF) officers were caught off guard by the protesters.

A representative from the embassy said: "Canada respects freedom of expression and assembly." She told the protesters that the embassy "does not accept direct immigration applications. They can log into the website for information on immigration and protecting people from fraud and falsification."

She added that "the embassy did not ask anyone to transfer money via private funds." She also thanked the "ISF and protesters for maintaining a peaceful protest."

Former Lebanese Minister Ashraf Rifi told Arab News that "what drove young men to protest in front of the embassy was the lack of job opportunities and the unbearable situation."

He hoped that "the economic meeting chaired by President Michel Aoun at the presidential palace next Monday leads to the advancement of the country, not its decline."

Former MP Mustafa Alloush told Arab News that "the protest is about the deteriorating economic situation in Lebanon."

A large proportion of those gathered at the embassy hold university degrees.

Rani Mawwas from Tripoli said: "Is this the future of my countrymen and of young men holding university degrees? In less than 24 hours of publishing that the Canadian Embassy is accepting immigration applications, hundreds have gathered. They did not care about the weather or the time they will spend waiting for their turn, and they came from all over the country."

The World Bank warned earlier this year of "increasing unemployment rates in Lebanon, which, according to some studies, have reached 40 percent, especially among young people."

A Labor Ministry adviser, speaking on condition of anonymity, said that the poverty rate in Tripoli had made it the poorest city on the Mediterranean coast.

The adviser added that "since the Labor Ministry started combating foreign labor a month and a half ago, 3,000 job opportunities have been created for Lebanese. Companies which relied on Syrian workers and other nationalities turned to Lebanese labor and even university students. The ministry does not give work permits to a foreigner if the work can be done by a Lebanese."

There were many tweets about the scene in front of the embassy.

Iman Tatari wrote: "I am for immigration because there are no jobs in Lebanon. Lebanese are seeking to immigrate and the state is watching."

Zouhair tweeted: "The immigration doors should be open in Lebanon because more than half of the people are oppressed."



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Lebanon's endless wait for missing persons of the civil war
Lebanon 'forcibly deported' nearly 2,500 Syrian refugees: Amnesty

Sudan's ex-president Bashir charged with corruption, holding illicit foreign currency

Author:

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Sat, 2019-08-31 10:07

KHARTOUM: A Sudanese judge formally indicted former president Omar Al-Bashir on charges of possessing illicit foreign currency and corruption on Saturday.

A lawyer for Bashir said that his client denied the charges against him and that witnesses for the defense would be presented at the next hearing.

Questioned in court, Bashir claimed he received millions of dollars from various sources, including Saudi Arabia, but that he never used it for his own benefit

The judge denied a request for bail and said a decision on the duration of Bashir's detention would be taken at a hearing on Sept. 7.

Sudan's military ousted and arrested Bashir in April after months of protests across the country. His prosecution is seen as a test of how far military and civilian authorities now sharing power will go to counter the legacy of his 30-year rule.

Bashir was also charged in May with incitement and involvement in the killing of protesters. He has been indicted by the International Criminal Court in The Hague on charges of masterminding genocide in Sudan's Darfur region.

(With Reuters)





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Fri, 2019-08-30 15:00

VIENNA: Iran has gone further in breaching its nuclear deal with world powers, increasing its stock of enriched uranium while still refining to a greater purity than allowed, a UN atomic watchdog agency report showed on Friday.

The International Atomic Energy Agency, which is policing the 2015 deal, said in July that Iran had exceeded both its 202.8-kg limit on enriched uranium stock and its 3.67% cap on the fissile purity to which Tehran is allowed to refine uranium.

Almost two months after it overshoot those limits, Iran has accumulated 241.6 kg of enriched uranium and is enriching up to 4.5%, still far short of the 20% it reached before the deal and the roughly 90% that is considered weapons-grade material, the quarterly IAEA report to member states seen by Reuters showed.



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Leaked UK memo claims Trump axed Iran nuclear deal to spite ObamaLavrov and Pompeo urge closer US-Russia ties, still disagree over Iran nuclear deal