

Regime forces advance toward key town in northwest Syria

Author:

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NEAR SARMADA/SYRIA: Syrian regime forces pushed further into an opposition-held bastion in the country's northwest region on Wednesday, inching toward a key town following months of deadly bombardment, a monitor said.

After eight years of civil war the Idlib region, controlled by Syria's opposition, is the last major stronghold of opposition to Bashar Assad's regime.

Airstrikes and rocket fire by the regime and its ally Russia have pounded Idlib for more than three months, killing hundreds and displacing tens of thousands.

In the south of the stronghold, almost all residents of Khan Sheikun – which lies on a key highway coveted by the regime – have left the town.

The road in question runs through Idlib, connecting regime-held Damascus with the northern city of Aleppo, which was retaken by loyalists from opposition in December 2016.

After a week of ground advances, Assad's forces were just a few kilometers away from the town on Wednesday, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

"Regime forces are now 4 km from Khan Sheikun to the west, with nothing between them and it but fields," Observatory chief Rami Abdel Rahman said.

HIGHLIGHT

- Airstrikes and rocket fire by the regime and its ally Russia have pounded Idlib for more than three months, killing hundreds and displacing tens of thousands.
- Assad's forces were just a few kilometers away from the town on Wednesday.

To the east, pro-Assad forces are battling to control a hill just 6 km from the town, the head of the Britain-based Observatory said.

Airstrikes pounded the area, with a Russian warplane killing a civilian in the area of Maaret Hurma in Idlib province, said the Observatory, which relies on sources inside Syria for its information.

Clashes on Wednesday killed 14 members of the regime forces, as well as 20

opposition fighters, it said.

State news agency SANA on Wednesday said army troops had taken several villages from the opposition in the area west of Khan Sheikhun.

AFP correspondents have reported seeing dozens of families flee fighting over the past few days, heading north in trucks stacked high with belongings.

On the highway not far from the Turkish border on Wednesday, a family was driving north in their pickup truck.

"We want to save ourselves," said Abu Ahmad, 55, behind the wheel on the road near the town of Sarmada.

"We left our sheep, we left our homes, and we fled," he said, dressed in a long white robe.

Sitting beside him, his wife Umm Ahmad said they had left almost everything behind.

"Our land is spilling with grapes and figs," she said of the family farm near the town of Maaret Al-Noman.

A buffer zone deal brokered by Russia and Turkey last year was supposed to protect the Idlib region's 3 million inhabitants from an all-out regime offensive, but it was never fully implemented.

An alliance led by fighters from Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS) took full control of the anti-Assad stronghold in May.

Regime and Russian airstrikes and shelling since late April have killed 820 civilians, according to the Observatory.

The UN says dozens of health centers as well as schools have been targeted.

Humanitarian workers have warned that any full-blown ground attack on Idlib would cause one of the worst humanitarian disasters of Syria's war.

The conflict has killed more than 370,000 people and displaced millions at home and abroad since starting with the brutal repression of anti-regime protests in 2011.

Regime forces have taken back large parts of the country from opposition fighters and militants with Russian military backing since 2015.

But Idlib, nearby areas controlled by the Turkey-backed opposition, and a large swathe of the northeast held by Kurds remain beyond its reach.

Analyst Nawar Oliver said that, with the ongoing airstrikes and ground advances, regime forces aimed not only to retake the road running through Idlib, but also pile pressure on HTS and allied fighters.

Regime forces "won't hesitate to bite off or control everything they can," said Oliver, an expert at the Turkey-based Omran Center for Strategic

Studies.

They want to “impose a new reality on the region, the rebels, and their Turkish ally, and to use it as a tool or weapon in any current or future negotiations,” he said.



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Syrian rebels shoot down government warplane in northwest Clashes kill nearly 60 fighters in northwest Syria

[How to tackle Basra's water problems](#)

Wed, 2019-08-14 21:42

DUBAI: It was dubbed the “Venice of the Middle East” for its network of waterways that invited comparisons to the Italian city. But Basra is today emblematic of almost everything that is wrong with Iraq. Few maladies, though, reflect the depth of the rot in the country’s system like the port city’s acute water crisis.

Situated where the Euphrates and Tigris rivers merge near the Gulf at Iraq’s southern tip, Basra is home to 2.5 million people but lacks an effective water treatment system. Be it the Shatt Al-Arab River or the canals, Basra’s

water resources have fallen victim to “decades of pollution, mismanagement and corruption,” according to a recent report by the Human Rights Watch (HRW).

The study was prompted by a creeping sense over the past two decades that the concept of human rights is not relevant to the average citizen of fragile states such as Iraq. Belkis Wille, a senior Iraq researcher in the HRW’s Middle East and North Africa division, said a desire to counter that impression inspired her to conduct the investigation.

“I wanted to emphasize to Iraqis that the issues they care about on a daily basis are human rights issues, so I was waiting to come across the right opportunity to drive home that point,” Wille said.

In Basra’s water crisis, which has blighted large expanses of southern Iraq, she found a direct connection between human rights violations and corruption. “In Iraq, no matter what their religion or ethnic identity, everyone agrees that corruption is one of the biggest problems facing the country, with deeply damaging consequences,” she said. “So I wanted to look at it from a rights perspective.”

In the 1960s, Basra had an advanced sanitary infrastructure, but for almost 30 years, governments have failed to provide safe, drinkable water to much of the population. Tempers flared in the summer of last year when water-borne disease outbreaks led to the hospitalization of tens of thousands of residents. Protests erupted in the city once against this summer as anger over deteriorating services and economic hardship boiled over.



A decrease in the amount of water flowing to the Shatt Al-Arab and its canals resulted in higher levels of sewage, industrial pollution and water salinity.

(AFP)

Wille says what lies at the root of Basra's chronic water crisis is not one but a number of different factors: Reduced water flow, seawater intrusion, pollution and mismanagement of waterways.

"It rained and snowed a lot over Christmas and early this January, so that means the water situation across Iraq this year is theoretically better, with more water flowing through the waterways.

"This means Iraq should not have as much seawater intrusion as before, so water pollution should therefore also be reduced," she said.

The reality of the situation is another matter.

"We know in terms of global trends of low rainfall and increasing temperatures, this means that when there is another year of low rainfall, then the crisis will be worse," Wille said.

Until the early 1980s, Basra was a magnet for Middle Eastern tourists, but these days an estimated 338,400 residents of the city live in informal housing spread throughout the oil-rich governorate. These homes are excluded from the formal water and sanitation networks, making them water-insecure.

According to the UN, almost 4,000 individuals in the Basra governorate had to leave their homes in August 2018. This was most likely due to poor access to adequate supplies of potable water, although a causal link between the two has not been proven.

What is known is that last year, there was a decrease in the amount of water flowing to the Shatt Al-Arab and its canals from rivers upstream, which resulted in higher levels of sewage, agricultural, industrial pollution and salinity in the water.

Prior to 2018, Basra had experienced water-related health emergencies in 2009 and 2015, but, according to the HRW report, local and federal authorities failed to properly address the underlying causes or establish procedures to protect residents before a new crisis arose. For example, during the 2018 crisis, authorities did not adequately alert residents to the dangers posed by poor water quality.

Iraqi ministries did cooperate with Wille's investigation, but the report also said that the results of tests of water samples from the Shatt Al-Arab and treatment plants after the protests of 2018 summer were not made public. HRW was told by all federal and local authorities that the results and reports were confidential.

With the help of satellite imagery, Wille's research found that two major spills had occurred in 2018 that leaked oil into the Shatt Al-Arab in central

Basra.

INNUMBERS

118,000

People hospitalized in the summer months of 2018 and 2019 because of water contamination.

4,000

People who left their homes in August 2018 over suspected water issues.

2009

Year that saw water-related health emergencies in Basra.

2015

Had the most health crises from water contamination.

2

Major undeclared oil spills that fouled waters of Shatt Al-Arab River in 2018.

Again, the government did not apprise the public of the oil spills, even though many residents had complained about a gasoline smell in their tap water and some were even able to set the water aflame.

In the process, the HRW report was able to identify a glaring drawback of Iraq's regulatory regime: The absence of a public health advisory to inform residents when drinking water is contaminated, how to reduce harm and protocols for government officials to respond to advisories and lift them.

"Basra residents now apparently risk illness from just using the water to wash their food or themselves, and the authorities have not enforced standards even for water for these purposes," Wille said.

"The lack of sufficient freshwater has also cost Basra its title as the country's biggest producer of dates. Farmers have been irrigating their farmland with the saline water from the Shatt Al-Arab for many years now, killing off most of their crops and livestock as a result."

Her next step will be to meet officials in Baghdad in September and push for the adoption of the three pages of recommendations from the HRW report. Later in the month, she intends to hold meetings with officials of European countries that may want to contribute to the amelioration of Iraq's water situation.

"Our primary recommendation is for the establishment of an inter-ministerial body that includes local authorities," Wille said, adding that the current arrangement "allows the federal government (in Baghdad) to blame the authorities in Basra for everything." Although she is not sure about the political will to implement the primary recommendation, Wille is not giving up hope. "The creation of such a body would be the first step towards implementing the report's recommendations," she said. "At the moment, even if the government adopts them, it does not have the buy-in to implement them."

After years of occupation, sectarian strife, misrule and underinvestment, few expect Basra to regain its fabled beauty any time soon. But some tentative steps towards a resolution of the ongoing water crisis do not seem like an unreasonable demand.



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[UAE says Khamenei meeting proves Houthis are Iran's proxy](#)

Wed, 2019-08-14 20:22

LONDON: A meeting between a Houthi official and Iran's Supreme Leader proves "in black and white" that the Yemeni militants are an Iranian proxy, a senior Emirati said Wednesday.

State TV showed Ayatollah Ali Khamenei praising the militants Tuesday, as he met the Houthi negotiator, Mohammed Abdul-Salam. Iran has long been accused of supporting the group, which sparked the war in 2014 when they seized the capital Sanaa.

Houthi relations with Iran, for long in search for proper designation, is clearer following their leadership's meeting with Ayatollah Khamenei. Stated in black & white in their statement of fealty the Houthis are a proxy and that is the correct terminology.

– أنور قرقاش (@AnwarGargash) [August 14, 2019](#)

Houthi relations with Iran are "clearer following their leadership's meeting with Ayatollah Khamenei," the UAE's Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Anwar Gargash said on Twitter. The relationship was "stated in black and white in their statement of fealty," he added. "The Houthis are a proxy and that is the correct terminology."

Iran's support for the Houthis and supply of weapons is regarded as one of the key reasons the war in Yemen has lasted so long. An Arab coalition, which includes Saudi Arabia, is supporting troops loyal to the internationally recognized government against the Houthis.

The meeting in Tehran is the first time Khamenei has held talks with a senior Houthi representative, Reuters reported.

“I declare my support for the resistance of Yemen’s believing men and women ... Yemen’s people... will establish a strong government,” Khamenei said.

Yemen’s government and the Arab coalition accuse the Houthis of collapsing previous UN-sponsored talks to find a political settlement to the conflict.

Saudi Arabia and its allies say Iran’s support of proxy militias in the region, including Hezbollah in Lebanon and groups in Iraq, is the main cause of instability in the region.



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Houthi militia launches drone toward Saudi Arabia
Houthi militants confirm leader’s brother, Ibrahim Al-Houthi, killed

Tunisia electoral commission approves 26 presidential candidates

Wed, 2019-08-14 17:53

TUNIS: Tunisia's electoral commission said on Wednesday it had approved 26 candidates including two women for next month's presidential election and had rejected 71 other applicants. The Sept. 15 vote follows the death of Beji Caid Essebsi, the first president to be democratically elected in Tunisia after the popular uprising of 2011. Essebsi died last month at the age of 92. It will be the third free election in Tunisia since that uprising.

Among candidates approved for the presidential race are Prime Minister Youssef Chahed, former Premier Mehdi Jomaa, the vice president of the moderate Ennahda Movement, Abdel Fattah Mourou and Defense Minister Abdelkarim Zbidi.

Zbidi resigned from his post after submitting his candidacy to run for the presidential elections on Aug. 7.

Former Tunisian President Moncef Marzouki and Nabil Karoui, businessman and owner of the private channel Nessma TV, will also join the race.

Women candidates

The two women candidates approved are former Tourism Minister Salma Loumi and Abir Moussi, a staunch supporter of veteran leader Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali who was ousted in the 2011 uprising.

Tunisia's president controls foreign and defense policy, governing alongside a prime minister chosen by Parliament who has authority over domestic affairs.

The Independent High Electoral Authority (ISIE) received 29 applications on Aug. 2 over the first five days from the beginning of the race and 11 applications on the sixth day.

Government spokesman Iyad Dahmani confirmed in a press statement that Chahed's candidacy does not necessarily mean he must resign from his current post.

Dahmani pointed out that the premier will delegate his powers to a minister in the same government.

FASTFACT

The Sept. 15 vote follows the death of Beji Caid Essebsi, the first president to be democratically elected in Tunisia after the popular uprising of 2011. It will be the third free election in Tunisia since that uprising.

"It is impossible to form a government during this sensitive period, which is full of political deadlines," he stressed.

The spokesman accused supporters of Chahed's resignation of "attempting to overthrow the entire government and disrupt the presidential and parliamentary elections" in the country.

“Anyone who is seeking my resignation is in fact aiming to delay the elections and my resignation means the resignation of the government,” Chahed said.

Local political sources have indicated that Chahed will delegate Kamel Morjane, former head of the Initiative Party that has fully merged with Tahya Tounes.

They explained that his move aims at satisfying those who have disapproved the unified electoral lists, whose members will run in the parliamentary elections scheduled for Oct. 6.



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Tunisia PM Chahed announces run for president
Tunisian minister submits bid to run for president

Clashes kill nearly 60 fighters in northwest Syria

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Tue, 2019-08-13 15:50

BEIRUT: Clashes between regime loyalists and insurgents in rebel-held northwest Syria killed 59 combatants on Tuesday, a war monitor said. Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS), an extremist group led by Syria's former Al-Qaeda affiliate, has since January controlled most of Idlib province as well as parts of neighboring Hama, Aleppo and Latakia provinces.

Several other armed rebel groups also operate in the region.

Fighting in southern Idlib and rural Latakia on Tuesday claimed the lives of 29 pro-government forces as well as 30 extremists and allied rebels, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

It came as regime warplanes pummelled the Idlib region with air strikes, killing three civilians in the town of Khan Sheikhoun, the Britain-based monitor added.

Regime forces and anti-government fighters have been caught in fierce battles in the region for days, as the former presses with an advance toward a strip straddling the Hama and Idlib governorates.

On Sunday, regime forces seized the town of Al-Habeet in Idlib's southern countryside, in their first major ground advance in the province since an escalation on the extremist-dominated enclave more than three months ago.

The region was supposed to be protected from a massive government offensive by a Turkish-Russian buffer zone deal struck last September.

But it has come under increasing bombardment by Damascus and its backer Moscow since the end of April that has killed 816 civilians, according to the Observatory.

The violence has also pushed 400,000 people from their homes, according to the United Nations.

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



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Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham: Syria regime's toughest foe in Idlib
Turkey crackdown on Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham network