

Yemen's Houthi militants threaten to target Riyadh and Abu Dhabi

Author:

AFP

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SANAA: Yemen's Houthi militia warned on Saturday they could launch attacks against the capitals of Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

The threat came as the United Nations was trying to salvage a truce deal in Yemen, seen as crucial to diplomatic efforts to end the country's four-year war.

The Iran-backed Houthis have targeted Saudi border towns and Riyadh with ballistic missiles.

"We have aerial photographs and coordinates of dozens of headquarters, facilities and military bases of the enemy," militant military spokesman Yahya Saree said in comments carried by the group's Al-Masirah channel.

"The legitimate targets of our forces extend to the capital of Saudi Arabia and to the emirate of Abu Dhabi," he said.

"We have manufactured advanced generations of attack aircraft, and new systems will soon be functional."

The militants triggered the conflict when they seized the capital Sanaa in 2014 and attempted to occupy large parts of the country. An Arab Coalition intervened in support of the internationally recognized government in March 2015.

On Wednesday the UN Security Council met to discuss the stalled truce deal that had been agreed in Sweden in December between the Yemeni government and the Houthis.

The deal – which called for a cease-fire, rebel pullback and mutual redeployment from Hodeidah, Yemen's main Red Sea port controlled by the militants – offered the best hope in years of moving toward an end to the conflict.

While the fighting in Hodeida has eased, redeployment efforts have stalled in recent weeks.

UN envoy Martin Griffiths told the Security Council on Wednesday he was still working to make the redeployment a "reality."

The World Health Organization estimates nearly 10,000 people have been killed in Yemen since 2015.

*With AFP



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US should not curb aid to Saudi-led coalition in Yemen, says Pompeo
Security Council members report no progress on Yemen deal

[Iraq begins exhuming mass Yazidi grave left by Daesh](#)

Author:

By SALAR SALIM | AP

ID:

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ERBIL: The Iraqi government has started exhuming a mass grave left behind by Daesh in the northwestern Sinjar region in the presence of Nobel Peace Prize laureate Nadia Murad, whose slain relatives are believed to have been buried in the area.

The exhumation, which is being carried out with UN support, began Friday in the village of Kocho. Murad's official website said it marks the first exhumation of a mass grave containing the remains of Yazidis, a religious minority targeted for extermination by the extremists.

Daesh militants rampaged across Sinjar in 2014, killing Yazidi men and abducting thousands of women and children. Many followers of the minority faith are still missing, after women were forced into sexual slavery and boys were indoctrinated in extremist ideology.

"I pay my condolence to the Yazidis and the whole humanity. There is not a single Yazidi family that didn't taste the bitterness of this extermination," said Murad. "They all lost their loved ones, their properties and their dreams, and especially in this village," she said.

Murad was one of an estimated 3,000 Yazidi women and girls who were kidnapped and sold into sexual slavery. She was raped, beaten and tortured before she managed to escape after three months in captivity.

Over 70 mass graves have been discovered in Sinjar since it was liberated from Daesh in November 2015.

In November, UN investigators said they have verified the location of more than 200 mass grave sites from the time of Daesh rule in northern Iraq, containing the bodies of between 6,000 and 12,000 victims.

Nada Selo, an activist from Kocho, lamented the slow pace of efforts to identify and recover victims.

"Negligence has been going on for four years and until now. The people were hoping during all this time to see their relatives alive. So honestly, this is a huge disappointment for us as Yazidis, and it is a real tragedy," she said.

A statement issued earlier this week by Murad, global Yazidi NGO Yazda and their joint legal counsel Amal Clooney welcomed the process in Kocho. They expressed hope it would be part of a "comprehensive effort which will result in the exhumation of all Daesh mass graves in Sinjar and beyond, the return of victims' remains to their families and the investigation of the relevant crimes, leading to the prosecution of the responsible Daesh militants."

Daesh is on the verge of losing the last area it controls in Syria as US-backed fighters squeeze the extremists in the village of Baghouz near the Iraqi border. Over the past months a number of Yazidi women and children have been freed in eastern Syria.





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Hopes for missing Yazidis dim as extremists' defeat looms
Anti-Daesh Syria force boosted as extremist holdout shrinks

Turkey says two of its soldiers killed, eight wounded in northern Iraq

Author:

Reuters

ID:

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Sat, 2019-03-16 11:57

ISTANBUL: Two Turkish soldiers were killed and eight others were wounded on Saturday in a clash during operations into northern Iraq, Turkey's defense ministry said.

Six militants, including a woman, were "neutralized" during the operations, the ministry said in a statement. The Turkish army uses the term neutralize when it has killed, captured or wounded combatants

Turkey regularly carries out air strikes on PKK bases in northern Iraq, as President Tayyip Erdogan pursues his aim of ending the militant group's presence near Turkey's borders.

The PKK, considered a terrorist organization by the United States, the European Union and Turkey, has waged a three-decade insurgency in Turkey's largely Kurdish southeast that has killed about 40,000 people.



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Turkey, Russia eye closer coordination on Syria
EU parliament calls for freeze on Turkey's membership talks

[Daesh clings on in face of Kurd-led assault in Syria](#)

Author:

AFP

ID:

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BAGHOUZ, Syria: US-backed forces battled Daesh group fighters overnight as the extremists Saturday clung onto their crumbling bastion in eastern Syria. "Clashes broke out again last night and have continued since," said Adnane Afrine, spokesman for the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). "There have so far been no surrenders (today) and there's no sign they are

giving up," he told AFP.

AFP journalists at an SDF post inside Baghouz village, the last Daesh redoubt, heard sporadic rounds of mortar fire and US-led coalition planes overhead.

Daesh launched three suicide attacks Friday outside Baghouz, killing six people among those fleeing the crumbling extremist bastion near the Iraqi border.

They were the latest casualties in Syria's devastating civil war as it entered its ninth year with 370,000 dead.

All that remains of a once-sprawling proto-state that the Daesh militants declared in 2014 is a battered riverside camp in Baghouz.

The SDF and coalition warplanes have rained fire on the enclave since last Sunday, blitzing more than 4,000 Daesh fighter and family members into surrender.

Their on-off assault has been mostly fought at night, suspending major operations dayside to allow more surrenders, especially of civilians.

In total, over 61,000 people have streamed out of Daesh-held territory since December, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights says.



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Anti-Daesh Syria force boosted as extremist holdout shrinks
Father of Daesh teenager Shamima Begum asks UK to let her return

For Syrians, 8 years of war leaves stories of loss and hope

Author:

By SARAH EL DEEB | AP

ID:

1552721302240734800

Sat, 2019-03-16 06:26

BAGHOUZ, Syria: War is personal. And in Syria, after eight years of a grinding conflict, there are as many stories of loss, dispossession and desperate hope as there are people.

What started as peaceful protests in 2011 asking for government change turned into one of the cruelest modern wars and left a trail of broken lives among the country's pre-war population of 23 million. Now half are displaced, nearly half a million dead and many live with permanent scars or have joined militias.

The years of war have left their mark on Dia Hassakeh's 45-year old face. The Arab fighter in the Kurdish-led U.S-backed Syrian Democratic Forces has seen his family suffer on the conflict's many fronts.

In the early days of the conflict, two of his brothers were wounded fighting in the government military against the armed opposition. In November, another brother was killed by the Daesh group. Now Dia is battling the militants at Daesh' last holdout, a speck of territory along the Euphrates River near the Iraqi border called Baghouz.

"As Syrians, every citizen has paid the price," he said, speaking just outside Baghouz. He took the name of his hometown Hassakeh as a nom de guerre when he joined the SDF.

While the Daesh group's territorial defeat will close one bloody chapter, Syria is still wracked by conflict on the eighth anniversary of its long-running civil war.

Syrian President Bashar Assad's government appears to have won the war against the insurgency trying to topple him. But much of the country is out of Assad's hands. The northeast and east, wrested from Daesh, is largely held by the US-backed Kurdish-led forces. But their fate as well is uncertain.

Though President Donald Trump announced he would withdraw American troops, the US is apparently keeping a small force, hoping to encourage the Europeans to strengthen their presence to protect its Kurdish allies from their nemesis Turkey, and counter Iran's expansion in the region.

Militants are still a potent force. The Daesh group has planted the seeds to wage an insurgency. The northwestern province of Idlib – an opposition stronghold throughout the war – is home to other jihadists as radical as Daesh. Nearly 3 million Syrians live in the province, most displaced from other parts of Syria that fell under government control. A Turkish-Russian truce that averted a government assault on Idlib and took pressure off Assad is fraying, threatening new bloodshed.

Assad remains hostage to his massive need for cash to rebuild and his

reliance on his allies, Russia and Iran, which are pursuing their own interests. Moscow wants to keep access to the Mediterranean and a position to challenge the West; Tehran is keeping an array of militias in Syria to preserve its domain of influence stretching from Iraq to Lebanon.

And public opposition is not extinguished.

Like Groundhog Day, protesters in southern Syria took to the streets of Daraa, the city where the 2011 anti-government rallies first erupted and where the government only finally managed to re-establish control last year. Men and children this month held day and night protests chanting against Assad after authorities planned to erect a statute for his late father. "The people want a new president," protesters chanted, a 2019 version of "the people want to bring down the regime."

Within this maze of conflicts, players and interests, Syrians try to find their way.

Dia never liked the anti-government protests. When they erupted in 2011, he left Hassakeh – in the northeast of Syria – to live in northern Iraq. There, while two of his brothers fought in the military against the rebels, he ran a home appliances business and sat out the war – until the war caught up with him unexpectedly. The Daesh group, feeding off Syria's chaos, swept over much of Syria and northern Iraq. Dia returned to Hassakeh and found the militants closing in on his home province.

He volunteered to fight against them to "protect our family, land and country," he said.

He blames outsiders– militants and superpowers – for breaking up his country. Having fought in the SDF and served in his own government's army before the revolts, he still believes the country will be put back together and heal.

"Any country that goes through this needs time."

The irony is he is fighting in a force backed by a foreign power – the US – and led by Kurds determined to stay as separate as possible.

Sefqan, a 29-year old Kurd who commands an SDF unit of more than 200 special forces fighters, has no issues with his country breaking up and the central government losing authority.

"The Baath regime is no good for us Kurds," he said, referring to Assad's ruling party. "Our rights were lost in Syria ... Our war is to get out from under of this injustice." Sefqan fought against Daesh and prior to that other jihadist groups who threatened his hometown, Amuda, in Hassakeh province. Kurds, who made of 10 percent of Syria's pre-war population, have long complained of discrimination and oppression by Damascus. Sefqan belongs to an even more disenfranchised community – he's one of thousands of Kurds who are stateless, because in the past they either failed to convince authorities they were Syrian residents or didn't take part in censuses in the 1960s and 1970s. Referred to as the "foreigners of Hassakeh," "the muted" or "the concealed," they were long deprived of basic rights like education and health services and were barred even from moving from province to province.

"Any group has a state. Why do we the Kurds not have one? To go to schools. To speak our language. To have an airport and travel. I can't even go to Damascus," said Sefqan, who spoke on condition he be identified only by his first name in accordance with SDF rules for its commanders.

Now Sefqan and many of his people enjoy new found confidence and clout, with the Kurdish-led administration controlling northeastern Syria and bolstered by natural resources and good relations with the U.S-led coalition.

Sefqan and other Kurds dream of emulating the extensive autonomy enjoyed by Iraq's northern Kurdistan. He said the Kurdish-led administration has made strides in giving real representation to the community and praised its efforts to introduce democracy.

"If they continue this, it will be good," he said – though with a note of wariness. Rights groups blame the SDF and the administration for arbitrarily detaining critics, forcing military conscription and controlling what are meant to be representative political bodies.

The SDF has emerged as the most organized non-state actor from the war. It and its political arm have successfully established facts on the ground that will likely be hard to reverse – such as teaching the Kurdish language in schools and setting up parallel governing institutions and their own economic infrastructure.

Ali Ahmed Al-Hassan, a 29-year-old Arab, works trucking crude oil from one of the richest oil fields controlled by the SDF. It is a profitable, but highly risky business, because remnants of Daesh have threatened those helping the "Kurdish economy."

Al-Hassan lived for four years under Daesh rule after the militants took over his home province of Deir Ezzor. Two of his brothers died, one as a bystander when airstrikes hit an Daesh position and another when he was caught in a cross fire.

"No one has been spared. My two brothers. My two nephews. And about six cousins. All were killed in the war," he said.

Deir Ezzor has been freed of Daesh, but it's still insecure. He has to be home before dark because of IS sleeper cells lurking in the countryside.

"We need more than a year" to regain security, he said.

Daesh has left its mark. The locals "have become foreigners. Many of the (foreign militants) married locals. Our children have become Chinese," he said – his term for the many Central Asian fighters who joined Daesh in Syria.

Dia believes the militants' presence is a pretext for foreign powers to meddle in Syria.

"Everyone is responsible for the creation of Daesh," he said. "It was created and put on a pedestal to ruin this country, like the Arab spring. "

"All my family has taken part in this war. Five of us. Two were injured – one lost a leg, and another carries a cane – and one was killed. There is only me and another left," he said. "So long as we have life and our hearts are beating, we will fight to liberate this country."



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Syria slams 'hypocrisy' of donors