

Hopes for missing Yazidis dim as extremists' defeat looms

Author:

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DAHUK: Baseh Hammo was 38 when she was enslaved by militants of Daesh. Raped and abused, she was sold 17 times among members of the so-called "caliphate," and moved from city to city across a vast stretch of territory Daesh once controlled in northern Iraq and Syria.

Her ordeal came to an end in January in the Syrian village of Baghouz, when an Daesh member took pity on her as the final battle loomed with US-led Syrian Kurdish forces.

He put her on a truck with his own family and allowed them to leave the village.

She was picked up by Syrian Kurdish forces and reunited with her two daughters in Iraq a few days later.

Yet many Yazidis are still missing, five years after Daesh militants stormed Yazidi towns and villages in Iraq's Sinjar region and abducted women and children. Women were forced into sexual slavery, and boys were taken to be indoctrinated in extremist ideology.

Hopes surged last month during a two-week pause in the US-led coalition's assault on Baghouz that some of the estimated 3,000 Yazidis still unaccounted for would emerge.

But few turned up among the thousands who streamed out of the tiny village.

Hussein Karo, who heads the Yazidi Rescue Bureau in Iraq's regional Kurdish government, said only 47 Yazidis were rescued.

Now, as US-backed forces resume their final assault on Baghouz, Hammo and Farha Farman, another rescued Yazidi woman, said they fear many may never return home and that the offensive endangers Yazidis who are still in the village.

The two said some are refusing to leave their children behind with their Daesh fathers while others are staying out of conviction, having adopted the extremist ideology. Many are simply too terrified to flee.

Hammo said her days as a slave were consumed with loneliness and violence.

She was sold 17 times. One of her owners, a Swede, would lock her in the home for days without food while he went to fight. Another man, an Albanian, stomped on her hands in his military boots, after she scolded him for buying a nine-year-old slave girl.

In the Syrian town of Raqqa, once the seat of the caliphate, her nephews, 12 and 13 years old, carried guns and served as guards to a German Daesh fighter. When she invited them to eat with her, they refused, saying she was an infidel. She snapped back at them, "You're one of us. You're infidels, too."

Hammo's final months in captivity were especially trying as hunger gripped what was left of the caliphate. Bread grew scarce, and she began making dough for herself out of chicken feed. By the time she was brought to Baghouz, she was eating grass and leaves.

"I cannot even look at anything the color green anymore," said a frail Hammo, her face gaunt, and her hands scarred from the abuse.

She had heard there were still 1,000 Yazidis inside Baghouz, including 130 boys training to become terrorists.

Farman, 21, who arrived in Iraq in early February, feared for her sister and nine young male relatives still missing after being abducted five years ago.

Both Farman and Hammo, now staying in bleak camps for the displaced in Iraq, said international airstrikes had killed some Yazidis living as slaves in the caliphate.

Hammo said she had urged a Yazidi woman married to an Uzbek Daesh fighter to leave Baghouz with her, but the woman, who has had two children with the man, refused.

"She said she'd blow herself up first," said Hammo.

Another Yazidi woman in Baghouz was forced to give up two of her boys to be trained as Daesh fighters.

"She said she could not leave without them," Hammo said.

In 2014, when Daesh was at the height of its power and its self-styled caliphate spanned a third of both Syria and Iraq, Daesh militants stormed Yazidi communities in Iraq's Sinjar region.

The extremists, who consider the Kurdish-speaking religious minority to be heretics, enslaved, raped and killed thousands of Yazidis. Close to 200,000 members of the minority fled their homes.

Farman was 17 when she was abducted by Daesh from Sinjar. She was sold to a Syrian man who went on to carry out a suicide operation for Daesh. His family then sold her to a man who beat her savagely for trying to escape – twice.

The first time she tried to flee, she slipped out with a group of other Yazidi women to the countryside.

"But we couldn't get anywhere, so we gave ourselves up," she said, speaking to the AP in a tent she is staying in with her aunt. She said she is haunted by nightmares that keep her from sleeping.

Daesh jailed her for a week after her first escape attempt, then turned her over to her captor who beat her savagely with cables and hoses.

The second time she tried to escape, her parents sent a paid smuggler to bring her to safety, but he was caught and gave up her name under Daesh interrogation. The man again punished Farman.

All the while, the militants were losing territory against advancing Syrian regime and Syrian Kurdish forces, and she moved from city to city with her abuser along the Euphrates River, until they were finally trapped in Baghouz.

“I got to see half of Syria,” she said, ironically.

Finally, the man asked if she would flee with him to Turkey.

She refused, so he sold her to a smuggler for \$10,000, money arranged by the Yazidi community in exile, to help her leave on her own.

Farman made it out, but the man did not.

He was caught by the US-backed Syrian Kurdish forces outside Baghouz, and has not been heard of since, she said.



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Yazidis bid last farewell to spiritual leader in IraqIraqi Yazidis celebrate restoration of temple destroyed by Daesh

Closure of American consulate in Jerusalem rapped as 'political assault'

Author:

Mon, 2019-03-04 21:20

AMMAN: The controversial closure of the US diplomatic mission which has served Jerusalem for more than 175 years was on Monday branded a "political assault" on the Palestinian people.

US Ambassador to Israel David Friedman officially shuttered the consulate by thanking its Consul General Karen Sasahara for her "service and professionalism" and wishing her well representing America in her next posting.

"This decision was driven by our global efforts to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of our diplomatic engagements and operations," a US State Department spokesman said in a statement.

The three-story Jerusalem mansion, with its arched windows and bougainvillea-covered walls, was where the unofficial US envoy to the Palestinians lived and hosted Palestinian guests for Fourth of July parties.

The estate will now become the domain of the US ambassador to Israel, a move which has been criticized in many quarters.

Hanna Issa, secretary-general of the Islamic-Christian Commission to Support Jerusalem and the Holy Sites, told Arab News that the lowering of American diplomatic representation to Palestine was a continuation of discriminatory US policy.

"The attempts to merge the US consulate with the embassy is a contradiction of international law and specifically UN Security Council resolution 478 (one of several UN resolutions condemning Israel's attempted annexation of East Jerusalem) of 1980," said Issa.

Issa said the real purpose behind the US decision was to obliterate the idea of a Palestinian state alongside Israel.

In a statement issued on behalf of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), executive committee member Hanan Ashrawi said that the merging of the consulate with the embassy "is not an administrative decision. It is an act of political assault on Palestinian rights and identity, and a negation of the consulate's historic status and function, dating back nearly 200 years."

Speaking to National Public Radio former US diplomat Ed Abington, who served

in Jerusalem, noted that historically the position of Washington had been that the embassy in Tel Aviv and the consulate in Jerusalem "should not be merged."

Abington said that "the effect on our ability to deal with the Palestinians is being greatly damaged."

Jerusalem-based Israeli lawyer Daniel Seidemann told Arab News that the closure of the consulate was no mere merger.

"The consulate will not merge, but it will be subsumed into the embassy to Israel," Seidemann said. "This is no mere technicality, it precisely reflects current US policies: All things Palestinian are subservient to Israeli interests."

The US decision has been met with a storm of opposition from a wide spectrum of American diplomats.

Former US Under Secretary of State Nicholas Burns called it "a mistake," and said that all US presidents prior to Donald Trump had "understood its importance as our bridge to the Palestinian people. I was proud to serve there in the 1980s."

Dennis Ross, chief US negotiator with both Republican and Democratic administrations, criticized the move as "unfortunate" noting that the Palestinian public would read it "as a sign of indifference to them."

Ross said that the US administration needed to take steps "to reach out to Palestinians if it is to have any hope for its plan."

Hady Amr, a US researcher who worked in the Jerusalem consulate, said in a personal tweet that he was pained by the decision. "My heart is heavy. America should be playing the taps. A place I was honored to work out of during many trips in support of Secretary John Kerry (former US Secretary of State)."

Amr and security expert Ilan Goldenberg prepared a study for the Washington-based research group Brookings Institution which concluded that "merging units sounds efficient. But this merger does major harm to the US ability to act as a mediator in the conflict and serves as a severe blow to the prospects of Israeli-Palestinian peace through a two-state solution."

Jake Waller, a former consul general in Jerusalem, called the closure "a sad end to an important US diplomatic mission."

Israeli journalist Noa Landau tweeted that shutting the US consulate would have a negative effect on reporting about Jewish settlements.

"Reports about construction in new settlements will now be overseen by Ambassador Friedman, a longtime supporter of the settlement enterprise."

US President John Tyler was the first consul general in Jerusalem in 1844.

The first physical presence of a US mission there was inside Jaffa Gate in the old city of Jerusalem, a building that is now being used for Christian Swedes.

The mission then moved to Prophet Street outside the old city, and in 1912 it was moved to its current location on 18 Agron Street in a building that was established in 1868 by the German Lutheran missionary Ferdinand Vester, whose family would later build what became the American Colony.

The US also rented another building in 1951 on Nablus Road and this was kept as a US consular building until September 2010.



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US closes Jerusalem consulate, demoting Palestinian mission
US downgrade of Palestinian mission to take effect Monday: official

[US deploys THAAD missile defense in Israel for exercise](#)

Author:

Mon, 2019-03-04 19:23

JERUSALEM: The United States has deployed its advanced THAAD missile defense system temporarily to Israel for a joint military exercise, the first of its kind, officials said Monday.

The two countries confirmed the deployment, with Israel's military stressing it was "not related to any specific current event."

It is the first such exercise in Israel, although the two allies hold regular joint war games. No dates have been announced for the maneuvers.

Israel has its own missile defense system, but the exercise aims in part to examine how to incorporate THAAD so that "we are ready for any challenges in the future," military spokesman Jonathan Conricus said.

It will also allow the US military to practice the rapid deployment of THAAD across the globe, officials said.

"We see this as an opportunity to practice the integration of advanced American air defense systems into the Israeli air force air defense array," Conricus told journalists.

"The THAAD system is considered to be one of the most advanced of its kind in the world," the Israeli spokesman said.

The exercise with THAAD, or Terminal High Altitude Area Defense, involves more than 200 US military personnel and its components include radars and launching systems, Conricus said.

Components and personnel have come from the United States and Italy, Conricus said.

The THAAD will be deployed in southern Israel, but officials declined to say specifically where and for how long.

Israel's enemies in the region include Iran and Lebanon's Tehran-backed Hezbollah, both of which are supporting President Bashar Assad in neighboring Syria.

THAAD is capable of destroying short, medium and intermediate-range missiles. In 2017, the US government approved its sale to Saudi Arabia, providing Riyadh with state-of-the-art capabilities that could thwart an Iranian rocket attack.

It had already been supplied to Saudi Arabia's neighbors Qatar and the United Arab Emirates.

Its deployment by the US military in South Korea as defense against North Korean drew protests from Beijing, which feared its sensors would be capable of penetrating Chinese air space and upset the balance of power.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu welcomed the joint exercise, calling it "additional testimony to the commitment of the US to the security of Israel."



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Palestinians seek prosecution of Israeli leaders for Gaza 'war crimes'

[Turkish court accepts indictment against 16 over Gezi protests -lawyer](#)

Author:

Reuters

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ISTANBUL: A Turkish court accepted an indictment seeking life sentences against businessman and rights activist Osman Kavala and 15 others over the 2013 Gezi protests, Kavala's lawyer said on Monday.

Hundreds of thousands of people marched in Istanbul in 2013 to protest against a plan to build a replica of an Ottoman barracks on Gezi park in the city center. The protests turned into nationwide demonstrations against the government of then-prime minister Tayyip Erdogan.

Authorities recently launched a new investigation into the protests. The indictment, seen by Reuters, seeks life sentences against Kavala, other rights activists and opposition figures involved in the protests.

It said the defendants "at best wanted to force the government to resign or call early elections" and were making efforts "to prepare the grounds for a

civil war or coup” if that did not happen.

Opposition figures have said the renewed investigations are designed to polarize public opinion and rally support for Erdogan ahead of local elections at the end of March.

The Union of Chambers of Turkish Engineers and Architects (TMMOB), of which some defendants are members, said the indictment was part of efforts “to defame and sully the honorable history of Gezi.”

“We see the bad intentions despite all its dirtiness and we reject it with all our clarity,” TMMOB said in a statement published earlier on Monday.

In November, police detained more than a dozen people as part of the investigation into the Gezi protests. Billionaire philanthropist George Soros’s Open Society Foundation said it had become a target of the investigation and would cease operations in Turkey.



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[Fleeing Daesh fighters using civilians as human shields forced to surrender in Baghouz](#)

Mon, 2019-03-04 16:45

BEIRUT: Around 150 Daesh fighters have surrendered to US-backed forces in

Baghouz, the group's last enclave in eastern Syria, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights war monitoring group said on Monday.

The Daesh fighters were among 400 people to leave the area on Monday after the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces staged an assault in recent days, the Observatory said.

US-backed Syrian fighters said they were forced to slow their advance because the extremists were using civilians as human shields.

But despite this hindrance, spokesman for the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces Mustafa Bali tweeted that the battle to retake Baghouz, the last territory in Syria held by the Islamic State group, was "going to be over soon."

An SDF spokeswoman said the offensive had slowed down but pressure is being kept up away from the corridor to prevent fighters from infiltrating or sabotaging the area. She spoke on condition of anonymity because she was not authorized to speak to the press.

The US-backed forces resumed their offensive on Baghouz last Friday, after a two-week pause to allow for the evacuation of civilians.

Retaking the sliver of land would be a milestone in the devastating four-year campaign to end Daesh's self-proclaimed "caliphate" that once straddled a vast territory across both Syria and Iraq.

"We're slowing down the offensive" due to a small number of civilians held as human shields, Bali said. The previous night, an SDF statement said the Kurdish-led forces would continue their military campaign "to take control of the last ISIS-held pocket in Baghouz and to liberate the remaining civilians who are being used as human shields," using an alternative acronym for the extremist group.

"In order not to harm them, we are advancing slowly but we assert that the battle of Baghouz will end in a short period of time," it said.



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Germany to strip Daesh fighters of citizenship Daesh militants put up fierce resistance to defend last pocket