

# Two police officers killed after terror suspect blows himself up near Al-Azhar Mosque in Cairo

Mon, 2019-02-18 23:38

CAIRO: Two police officers were killed when a terror suspect blew himself up after he was surrounded by police near Al-Azhar Mosque in Cairo on Monday.

Three other policemen were injured in the blast in the Darb Al-Ahmar district, the interior ministry said. The explosion took place after police chased the suspect who they believe had planted a bomb near a mosque last week.

Security forces have cordoned off the area and are searching for other explosives, according to local media reports.

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Egypt official: Home-made bomb explodes near mosque, 3 hurt

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# Daesh defends final pocket of dying 'caliphate' in Syria

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Mon, 2019-02-18 12:28

OMAR OIL FIELD, Syria: Extremists defending their last dreg of territory in Syria have no choice but to surrender, a Kurdish-led force said on Monday, ahead of a victory declaration expected within days.

The warning by the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) comes as EU foreign ministers are scheduled to meet Monday to discuss the repatriation of European nationals in Syria, which Germany said would be "extremely difficult" to do.

Diehard extremist fighters are now trapped in their last patch of territory of less than half a square kilometer in the village of Baghouz near the Iraqi border.

The SDF are moving cautiously on the extremist holdout, saying Daesh is increasingly using civilians as "human shields" to block the advance.

"The clashes are sporadic and very limited," SDF spokesman Mustefa Bali told AFP on Monday.

"So far there have been no significant changes on the ground," he said, adding that coalition warplanes have reduced air strikes on Daesh positions over the past two days.

The SDF "are still working on trying to get civilians out," the spokesman said.

Thousands of people have streamed out of the so-called "Baghouz pocket" in recent weeks, but no civilians have made it out in the last three days.

An informed source told AFP that holdout Daesh fighters are seeking safe passage to the extremist-held city of Idlib in northwestern Syria.

"They want to take the remaining civilians with them as human shields. But the SDF are not willing to discuss this option," said the source who asked not to be named.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a Britain-based war monitor, said the SDF have turned down the request.

AFP could not confirm this with an SDF official, but a commander with the

alliance said that Daesh has no leverage to negotiate.

“They are besieged in a very tight area and they have no other choice but to surrender,” said the SDF commander, who asked not to be named.

The group declared a “caliphate” across large swathes of Syria and neighboring Iraq in 2014, which at its height spanned an area the size of United Kingdom.

Successive offensives in both countries have since shattered the proto-state, but the extremist group still retains a presence in Syria’s vast Badia desert and has claimed deadly attacks in SDF-held territory.

After years of fighting Daesh, the Kurdish-led SDF hold hundreds of foreign suspected Daesh fighters, as well as related women and children.

Syria’s Kurds have long urged their home countries to take them back, but these nations have been reluctant.

The issue has taken on greater urgency, however, amid fears of a security vacuum since US President Donald Trump’s shock announcement in December that American troops would withdraw.

The subject is to be raised on Monday at a meeting of European foreign ministers called to discuss among other issues “the situation in Syria, in particular the recent developments on the ground,” according to an agenda for the talks.

The meeting comes after Trump on Sunday called on his European allies to take back their citizens who are being held by the Kurds in Syria.

“The United States is asking Britain, France, Germany and other European allies to take back over 800 Daesh fighters that we captured in Syria and put them on trial,” Trump said in a tweet.

His appeal sparked a reaction from Berlin, Paris, and Brussels.

Germany’s Foreign Minister Heiko Maas warned that it would be “extremely difficult” to organize the repatriation of European nationals from Syria.

A return could only be possible if “we can guarantee that these people can be immediately sent here to appear in court and that they will be detained,” he said.

Germany’s Defense Minister Ursula von der Leyen stressed the difficulties however of putting the ex-fighters on trial.

“We must be able to ensure that prosecution is possible,” she said.

French junior interior minister Laurent Nunez said Sunday that, if suspected extremists return, “they will all be tried, and incarcerated.”

In Belgium, justice minister Koen Geens called for a collective “European

solution.”

Meanwhile, a top Kurdish official called on Europe not to abandon Syrian Kurds.

European powers “have a political and moral responsibility” to the Kurds, Aldar Khalil told AFP in an interview in Paris late Sunday.

The Kurds would seek the protection of Syrian President Bashar Assad if failed by Europe and the United States, he said.



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SDF fighters close in on last Daesh-held village in Syria SDF fighters vow to 'finish off' Daesh in Hajjin operation

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[\*\*Twin blasts in rebel-held Syrian city\*\*](#)

# Idlib kill at least 15

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Mon, 2019-02-18 13:30

AMMAN: Twin explosions in the bustling centre of the rebel-held northwestern Syrian city of Idlib on Monday killed at least 15 people and injured scores, medics and witnesses said.

They said an explosive device planted in a parked car detonated in a main street in the provincial capital. Many of the casualties were civil defence workers who reached the site moments before a second explosion nearby. That blast was attributed by some witnesses to a bomb rigged to a motorcycle. Social media footage showed aid workers carrying away bodies and rescuing wounded civilians amid smouldering wreckage.

Idlib province, in Syria's northwest corner, is under the control of Hayat Tahrir al Sham, a bloc of Islamist militant factions spearheaded by Syria's former al Qaeda affiliate, and has long been targeted by bombings and assassinations.

Alliance commanders say they hundreds of people have been rounded up for suspected links to Syrian President Bashar al Assad's intelligence services or Islamic State sleeper cells who they blame for some of the bombings.

They say the wave of blasts in the densely populated region, a haven for tens of thousands of civilians opposed to Assad's rule, aims to destabilise the last opposition bastion remaining after almost eight years of civil war.

Idlib, which borders Turkey, has also seen an escalation in artillery fire from the Syrian army and allied Iranian-backed militias on rebel-held towns, witnesses said.

Damascus has vowed to retake every last inch of Syria to cap a string of military gains in the last two years that have recovered almost all rebel-controlled regions with the key assistance of Russian air power.

Russia is keen to help Assad regain the entire country, including eventually Idlib, but Turkey, which wants the Syrian leader to leave power, has so far successfully pushed back.

Last week President Vladimir Putin said Russia, Turkey and Iran had agreed to take unspecified extra steps to clear Idlib of what he called "a hotbed of terrorists," but the Kremlin said there would be no military operation there.



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## [Far behind in polls, Israel's Livni quits politics](#)

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Mon, 2019-02-18 13:46

TEL AVIV: Former Israeli foreign minister Tzipi Livni, whose party has trailed far behind in polls ahead of April 9 elections, announced Monday she was retiring from politics.

Livni, who gained international recognition in part thanks to her past role

as a negotiator with the Palestinians, also said her Hatnua party would not run in the elections.

The 60-year-old said in a statement before journalists in Tel Aviv she was bringing her party to “an end ... knowing I did all I could for my beloved state and to unite the forces that would fight for it. It’s not up to me any more.”

Livni, who also previously served in the Mossad spy agency, narrowly missed out on becoming prime minister after 2009 elections.

She had recently helped lead Israel’s main opposition, the center-left Zionist Union alliance, but a split in January ended the arrangement that also included the Labour party.

Labour party leader Avi Gabbay dramatically announced then that he would no longer partner with Livni as she sat stone-faced next to him.

While the Zionist Union won the second-most seats in the last general election in 2015, it more recently tumbled in opinion polls.

Livni sought to mount a campaign for April 9 elections outside the Zionist Union, but struggled to gain any traction or form the large alliance she sought.

Labour and Gabbay have also faltered in opinion polls.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is likely to remain premier after the elections, polls consistently show, despite a series of corruption investigations into his affairs.

The attorney general is however expected to announce in the coming weeks whether he intends to indict Netanyahu, and an announcement before the elections could shake up the campaign.

The right-wing prime minister’s main challenger is seen as former military chief of staff Benny Gantz and his centrist Israel Resilience party.



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[Tzipi Livni](#)

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Former minister Livni named Israel opposition leader

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## [Germany wants trial for Syria militants but warns of difficulties](#)

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Mon, 2019-02-18 10:44

BERLIN: Germany vowed Monday to prosecute German Daesh fighters but warned that it would be “extremely difficult” to organize the repatriation of European nationals from Syria, after US President Donald Trump called on allies to take back alleged militants.

Syria’s US-backed Kurdish forces, which are battling Daesh group militants in their last redoubt in eastern Syria, hold hundreds of suspected foreign Daesh

fighters and the calls for their reluctant home countries to take them back have grown in urgency.

"We must be able to ensure that prosecution is possible," Defense Minister Ursula von der Leyen told Bild daily.

Underlining the difficulties however of putting the ex-fighters on trial, the minister noted that there is "no government in Syria with which we have a sensible relationship."

President Bashar "Assad cannot be our counterpart, the Syrian-democratic forces are not a unity government," she added, stressing that proof and witness statements needed to be secured in Syria if the militants are to be put on trial.

Foreign Minister Heiko Maas said separately that a return could only be possible if "we can guarantee that these people can be immediately sent here to appear in court and that they will be detained."

For this, "we need judicial information, and this is not yet the case," Maas told ARD television late Sunday. Under such conditions a repatriation would be "extremely difficult to achieve."

Berlin wants to "consult with France and Britain ... over how to proceed," he said.

The subject is to be raised on Monday at a meeting of European foreign ministers called to discuss among other issues "the situation in Syria, in particular the recent developments on the ground," according to an agenda for the talks.

Trump on Sunday called on his European allies to take back alleged militants captured in Syria.

Daesh imposed a self-declared caliphate across parts of Syria and neighboring Iraq from 2014, but has since lost all of it except a tiny patch of less than half a square kilometer near the Iraqi border.

After years of fighting Daesh, the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) hold hundreds of foreigners accused of fighting for the group, as well as their wives and children.

Syria's Kurds have repeatedly called for their countries of origin to take them back, but these nations have been reluctant.

"The United States is asking Britain, France, Germany and other European allies to take back over 800 Daesh fighters that we captured in Syria and put them on trial," Trump said in a tweet.

After initial reluctance, Paris appears ready to consider the return of its nationals.

In Belgium, Justice Minister Koen Geens called for a "European solution" on Sunday, calling for "calm reflection and looking at what would be the least security risks."



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Don't abandon us, Syrian Kurds tell Europe  
France snubs Trump's appeal to repatriate Daesh fighters en masse, for now