

Facebook removes more accounts tied to Iran

Thu, 2019-01-31 22:48

Facebook Inc. said on Thursday it removed pages, groups and accounts tied to Iran for using and coordinating fake accounts. These accounts targeted people across the world, although more heavily in the Middle East and South Asia, the company said.



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In former Daesh bastion, displaced

Syrians clamor to go home

Author:

Thu, 2019-01-31 22:43

HAJJIN, Syria: In the former militant bastion of Hajjin in eastern Syria, 50-year-old Khaled Abed shouts at the top of his lungs amid the rubble, asking why he cannot go home.

The US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) expelled Daesh from the town last month, but it has since forbidden anyone from returning to its town center.

"I want to go home. Why can't I?" Abed bellows in the street near what was once the town market but has become a cordoned off military area.

"Our sons are the ones who liberated" this town, says the father of four SDF fighters, wearing a checkered red-and-white scarf on his head.

"Why won't they allow us back? By God, it's outrageous."

Backed by airstrikes of the US-led coalition, the SDF is still battling the last militants south of Hajjin.

Abed fled Hajjin last year while it was still under Daesh rule, seeking refuge in a camp for the displaced in SDF-held territory.

He returned in recent days to find his family's five homes destroyed, but wants access to rebuild them.

The SDF has allowed people to return to others parts of the town, but not in its devastated center.

"No civilians allowed," they repeat all day long, to anybody trying to enter.

The main road is closed, but two trucks carrying people and their belongings drive down a side road toward an adjacent neighborhood.

Abu Khaled, an SDF field commander in charge of the area, tells AFP the road needs to be checked for ordnance before it can reopen.

Daesh has often planted land mines before retreating, causing casualties among advancing SDF troops and returning civilians.

But these warnings do not deter residents like Abed.

"We'll clear the mines ourselves," he says, still shouting. "We've become experts. They tried all sorts of weapons on us... Just let us go home!"

Sixty-year-old shepherd Aswad Al-Aysh is also defiant.

"No problem, we'll get our sheep and make them walk in front of us," he quips, to show if there are mines.

His brother Abed Al-Ibrahim, who fled town with him a year ago, says the town's people need to return to their land.

"Where else are we supposed to go?" he asks quietly.

Hajjin was once a bustling Daesh hub, but today food is hard to come by, and the town's water and electricity networks have been ravaged in the fighting.

At the town's entrance, a young boy sells cigarette packs displayed on a broken table, while a man next to him peddles cans of fuel.

An armored vehicle pulls up, and an SDF fighter swings open its door to distribute small bottles of water, and children come running.

After receiving his share, a young boy pleads for more.

"Give me another one for Granny," he says.

On the banks of the Euphrates, trucks pump up water from the river before distributing it in the area.

In recent weeks, the SDF has cornered Daesh in a small patch of 4 sq km south down the river.

The SDF commander-in-chief last week said he expected Daesh to be flushed out within a month, before operations to root out any remaining sleeper cells.

Unable to return to the Hajjin town center, residents are staying in a nearby village and commuting daily to see whether the SDF has lifted its ban.

Even the town's mayor, Ali Jaber Ali, no longer lives there – though he says "there's nothing left of the town hall" anyway.

With his destroyed home out of reach in central Hajjin, the 56-year-old is staying in the village of Abu Hamam.

He says he tried to convince the US-backed forces to let his people return.

"There are no more sleeper cells" here, he says he told them. "I know every single one of the townspeople. We need to go home."

Near the town center, some residents are already rebuilding their homes.

A woman wearing a face veil shovels debris off her porch while a man rebuilds a collapsed wall.

Watching the scene, Amer Douada, 35, who hails from the cordoned-off area, is incensed.

"Why don't they open up the roads?" he asks. "We're ready to go back and set up a tent amid the ruins."

"They're scared of us, but we're a peaceful people. They should know that."



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US court finds Syria liable for journalist Marie Colvin's killing
Foreign ministers to meet in US on Daesh amid Syria pullout

[US court finds Syria liable for journalist Marie Colvin's killing](#)

Author:

Reuters

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Thu, 2019-01-31 18:19

WASHINGTON: A US judge has ruled that Syrian President Bashar Assad's government is liable for at least \$302.5 million in damages for its role in the 2012 death of renowned American journalist Marie Colvin while covering the Syrian civil war.

US District Judge Amy Berman Jackson said in a ruling made public on Wednesday that the Syrian government "engaged in an act of extrajudicial killing of a United States national."

Colvin and French photographer Remi Ochlik were killed in the besieged Syrian

city of Homs while reporting on the Syrian conflict.

The lawsuit filed by Colvin's family in 2016 accused officials in Assad's government of deliberately targeting rockets against a makeshift broadcast studio where Colvin and other reporters were living and working.

Jackson wrote that "a targeted attack on a media center hosting foreign journalists that resulted in two fatalities and multiple injuries ... is an unconscionable act." The judge ruled that compensatory damages to be awarded in addition to the \$300 million in punitive damages would be calculated at a later date.

A biographical film about Colvin, called "A Private War" and starring British actress Rosamund Pike, was released last year, bringing fresh attention to her career.



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Marie Colvin was 'assassinated' by Syrian government, say family members
Biopic tribute to slain war reporter Marie Colvin as journalism comes 'under attack'

UN envoy 'deeply concerned' about Yemen hostilities

Author:

Thu, 2019-01-31 19:30

LONDON: The United Nation's Yemen envoy warned Thursday that he was deeply concerned about "recent hostilities" in Yemen where a precarious regional truce is under increasing pressure.

Martin Griffiths did not specify which hostilities, but the Yemeni government on Wednesday accused Houthi militants of attacking an explosives safety team who were on their way to clear land mines from near a food store in Hodeidah.

The Arab coalition supporting the government also said Wednesday that it had shot down a Houthi drone over Saudi Arabia.

Griffiths traveled to Yemen this week to shore up the Hodeidah ceasefire deal signed in Sweden in December. Since the agreement, the coalition have accused the Houthis of dozens of violations and of failing to withdraw its troops from certain areas. They have also been accused of opening fire on the UN team sent to monitor the deal.

"Deeply concerned about recent hostilities in Yemen," Griffiths tweeted. He called on all sides to "exercise utmost restraint and de-escalate tensions."

On Wednesday, Anwar Gargash, the UAE minister of state for foreign affairs, said the Arab coalition is prepared to use "calibrated force" to push the Iranian-backed Houthis from Hodeidah as per the Sweden deal.

Gargash said the coalition struck 10 Houthi training camps outside Hodeidah governorate on Wednesday.



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Arab coalition to use 'calibrated force' in Yemen to drive Houthis out of Hodeidah
Houthis open fire on UN bomb safety team in Yemen

[Lebanese leaders agree new government breaking months of deadlock](#)

Thu, 2019-01-31 19:06

BEIRUT: Lebanese leaders reached a deal on Thursday to set up a new unity government ending months of wrangling that has added to concerns for the heavily indebted state.

Prime Minister-designate Saad Al-Hariri now faces a big challenge in delivering reforms needed to address the dire public finances and unlock billions of dollars in pledged aid and loans to boost low growth.

The new government will include most of Lebanon's rival factions, who have

been negotiating over the make-up of the cabinet since a May 6 election in which allies of the Iran-backed Hezbollah group gained ground.

The government will be announced on Thursday, the sources said, as Hariri met President Michel Aoun at the presidential palace in Baabda. Media reports said he was later joined by Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri.

A senior official said Ali Hassan Khalil will stay on as finance minister, and a source familiar with the government formation talks said Hezbollah had chosen doctor Jamil Jabak, who is not a member of the group, as health minister.

By picking the health minister, the heavily armed Hezbollah will be moving beyond the more marginal role it has played in past governments: the ministry has the fourth-biggest budget in the state apparatus, the outgoing minister has said.

The United States regards Hezbollah as a terrorist organization and has put new sanctions on the group as part of a campaign against Iran.

Since the election, Hariri's last government, appointed in late 2016, has continued in a caretaker capacity.

Hariri lost more than a third of his lawmakers in the election but kept his status as the leading Sunni Muslim and so returns as premier, a position reserved for his sect under Lebanon's sectarian system of rule.

But the election produced a parliament tilted in favor of Hezbollah thanks to gains by groups and individuals that support its possession of a major arsenal. Together, they won more than 70 of the 128 seats.

While Lebanon's economy and financial system have shown resilience during previous periods of political paralysis, investor concerns have been reflected of late in bond prices and the costs of insuring against debt default.

Hariri, speaking earlier on Thursday, said the new government would be forced to "take difficult decisions" to reduce spending.



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