



**Erdogan rejects 'lessons in democracy' from West**

## NORTH KOREANS FLEE TO END UP ADRIFT IN THE SOUTH



**QARYATAIN, Syria:** Syrian soldiers celebrate their victory against the Islamic State group yesterday. — AP

## SYRIA QAEDA SPOKESMAN KILLED

### ARMY ADVANCES AGAINST ISLAMIC STATE POSITIONS

**BEIRUT:** Air strikes have killed several Al-Qaeda-linked Al-Nusra Front members including its spokesman and regime forces have retaken a strategic town from the Islamic State group in the latest setbacks for jihadists in Syria. Abu Firas Al-Suri, whose real name was Radwan Nammous, fought against Soviet forces in Afghanistan where he met Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden and the founding father of global jihad, Abdullah Azzam, before returning to Syria in 2011.

Suri was meeting with other leading Islamist fighters in an Al-Nusra stronghold in Kafar Jales in northwestern Syria when the raids struck on Sunday. He "was an old time Al-Qaeda member ... He was brought in from Yemen as an ideological counterweight" for rival jihadist group IS, said Pieter Van Ostaeyen, a historian and monitor of jihadist movements. "His death indeed is a blow for Al-Nusra. However, that will not change a lot on the operational level," he added.

Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, a research fellow at the Middle East Forum, a US think-tank, was of the same opinion. Suri "was a very senior member of Al-Nusra, but organizations like Al-Nusra aren't debilitated because they lose a single senior leader", he said. "Their organizational structures are well prepared for targeted assassinations, which are usual business for them."

According to the Syrian Observatory for

Human Rights, Suri, his son and at least 20 jihadists of Al-Nusra and Jund al-Aqsa and other fighters from Uzbekistan were killed in strikes on positions in Idlib province. Seven were high-ranking jihadists, the Britain-based Observatory said, adding that the Syrian air force had likely carried out the strikes.

#### Warning to Al-Nusra?

A temporary ceasefire between government forces and rebels has largely held since Feb 27, but it does not cover Al-Nusra and IS. The break has, in fact, allowed Russia and the US-led coalition that has been bombing IS in Syria to concentrate on their fight against the jihadists. Al-Nusra has generally kept a low profile since the truce brokered by the United States and Russia came into force. But on Friday, the Al-Qaeda affiliate and allied rebel groups pushed regime loyalists out of Al-Eis, a strategic town in the northern province of Aleppo, killing 12 members of the Lebanese Shiite Hezbollah movement.

"It was Al-Nusra's biggest operation since the ceasefire began," Observatory chief Rami Abdel Rahman said. Suri's killing may even be a warning by the regime to Al-Nusra against staging any more offensives in the future, Abdel Rahman added. Tamimi disagreed. "One should not over-interpret the timing," he said, adding that assassinations of

members of secretive organizations are usually carried out "when a window of opportunity opens". IS has also lost a string of high-ranking members in recent weeks, mainly to strikes by the US-led coalition that launched an aerial campaign against the jihadists in Iraq and Syria in 2014. Last Wednesday, a drone strike near IS's de facto capital Raqa killed Tunisian commander Abu al-Hajja, according to the Observatory. Fifteen IS commanders accused of revealing his position have since been executed by the jihadists, and the fate of another 20 men accused of collaborating with the US-led coalition remains unknown. "This is the highest number of executions of security officials by IS," said Abdel Rahman, whose Britain-based group has a wide network of contacts on the ground across Syria.

#### Recapture of Al-Qaryatayn

Also on Sunday, the army seized the town of Al-Qaryatayn, one of the last IS strongholds in central Syria, according to state television. IS jihadists withdrew from the town a week after the Russian-backed army and allied militia scored a major victory in the ancient city of Palmyra, which is also located in the vast province of Homs. The recapture of Al-Qaryatayn allows the army to secure its grip over Palmyra, where jihadists destroyed ancient temples during their 10-month rule and executed 280 people. —AFP

## ICELAND PREMIER IN HOT SEAT

**REYKJAVIK:** Iceland's prime minister found himself in the hot seat yesterday after the leaked "Panama Papers" revealed he and his wife used an offshore firm to allegedly hide million-dollar investments, sparking calls for his resignation. Financial records published by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists showed that Sigmundur David Gunnlaugsson, 41, and his wife Anna Sigurlaug Palsdottir bought a company in the British Virgin Islands in 2007. He sold her his 50-percent share for a symbolic sum of one dollar at the end of 2009.

But when he was elected to parliament for the first time in April 2009, as a member of the centre-right Progressive Party, he neglected to mention his stake in his declaration of shareholdings. The issue is particularly sensitive in Iceland, a country marked by the excesses of the 2000s when senior bankers used shell companies in tax havens to conceal their dealings in

risky financial products.

Iceland's big banks collapsed in Oct 2008 after borrowing beyond their means to fund ambitious investments abroad. Before their collapse their liabilities were worth more than ten times Iceland's total GDP. The crash led to an unprecedented financial crisis, a deep recession and a bailout from the International Monetary Fund. Gunnlaugsson insists that despite the financial turbulence he was never tempted to move his money offshore and that his wife paid all her taxes in Iceland.

"She has neither utilized tax havens nor can you say that her company is an offshore company," Gunnlaugsson said on his website, noting that, unlike offshore companies, his wife's company paid its taxes in Iceland. In an interview with Swedish public television SVT recorded last month, excerpts of which were aired in Iceland on Sunday, he became visibly upset

after being repeatedly asked about his wife's company, eventually storming out of the room. "It's like you are accusing me of something," he declared.

Gunnlaugsson, who started out as a journalist and whose father was also a lawmaker, entered parliament in 2009 after the economic meltdown. Elected prime minister in 2013, he was seen as a refreshing change from the political old guard, which was accused of having turned a blind eye to the banks' reckless investments. Gunnlaugsson's wife Palsdottir, also 41, is the daughter of a businessman who made a fortune from having Iceland's only Toyota dealership. On March 15, before the "Panama Papers" leaks, she took to Facebook to acknowledge the existence of Wintris, the company that she and Gunnlaugsson acquired in 2007 to manage her inheritance from her father. —AFP

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## FIRST WOMAN LEADER TAKES CHARGE IN INDIAN KASHMIR

**JAMMU, India:** Mehbooba Mufti was sworn in yesterday as Indian-administered Kashmir's first woman leader, taking over from her father nearly three months after he died in office. India's only Muslim-majority state had been ruled directly from New Delhi since the death in January of Mufti Mohammad Sayeed, who formed an uneasy alliance with the nationally ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) after a 2015 election.

His daughter, who heads the moderate People's Democratic Party (PDP) that he founded in 1999, had initially appeared reluctant to continue the unpopular coalition with the Hindu nationalist BJP. The PDP's main support base is among Muslims in the Kashmir Valley, the epicentre of a separatist insurgency that broke out in 1989,

although the party stops short of calling for independence for the Himalayan region. "Her key task will be to recoup the PDP's credibility among her constituents (Kashmiri Muslims), which is at an all time low, and manage support from Delhi vis-a-vis economic assistance," political historian Siddiq Wahid told AFP. Mehbooba Mufti reached an agreement at a meeting with Prime Minister Narendra Modi last month, although the terms of their deal have not been disclosed. Her swearing-in takes the number of female chief ministers in India to five, although she is the first woman to serve in the post in the deeply conservative state of



Mehbooba Mufti

Jammu and Kashmir. Modi did not attend the swearing-in ceremony in the state's winter capital, Jammu, but tweeted his congratulations. — AFP

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