



KOBAR: People check the remains of the house of a Palestinian after it was demolished by Israeli authorities in this village near Ramallah in the occupied West Bank yesterday. — AFP

ISRAEL DEMOLISHES HOME OF PALESTINIAN WHO STABBED 3

KOBAR: Israeli forces demolished the home yesterday of a Palestinian who fatally stabbed three Israelis in a nearby settlement as tensions soared last month over Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa mosque compound. The military confirmed the demolition in the village of Kobar in the occupied West Bank. Residents said that army vehicles and bulldozers entered the area north of Ramallah at around 3:00 am (0000 GMT) and surrounded the two-storey house, one floor of which was still under construction.

Clashes broke out in the area between stone-throwing Palestinians and Israeli soldiers. According to the Palestinian Red Crescent, 12 people were wounded by rubber bullets. Video appeared to show a Palestinian news cameraman, Mohammed Radi, being hit in the nose with a rubber bullet. It seemed from the video that clashes were not taking place at that time and location. Radi was later treated at a hospital in Ramallah. Israel's army said it was looking into the "claim".

"During overnight activity in the village of Kobar, a riot of about 100 Palestinians erupted," an army spokeswoman said. "During the riot, the protesters ignited tyres and hurled rocks toward (Israeli) soldiers. The forces used crowd control measures to disperse the riot." It added that the "claim that a Palestinian journalist was lightly injured by rubber bullets is currently being reviewed." In recent weeks, Israeli authorities also arrested the father, mother and three brothers of the 19-year-old attacker, Omar al-Abed, according to villagers. The family members are suspected of having known of Abed's plans to carry out the attack in the nearby Israeli settlement of Neve Tsuf, also known as Halamish, and of failing to prevent it, Israeli media reported. The Israeli army

said the assailant had spoken of Al-Aqsa and of dying as a martyr in a Facebook post. He was shot while carrying out the attack and later arrested.

The July 21 attack came with tensions high over the highly sensitive mosque compound in Israeli-annexed east Jerusalem, known to Jews as the Temple Mount. Violence erupted in and around the compound last month after three Arab Israelis shot dead two policemen on July 14 before being killed by security forces. Israel responded to that attack by installing metal detectors at the entrance to the holy site, used as a staging point for the attack.

For nearly two weeks, worshippers refused to submit to the checks and held mass prayers in surrounding streets. Ensuing protests and clashes left seven Palestinians dead and the stabbings of the Israelis at the settlement was carried out at the height of the tensions. The crisis abated when Israel removed the detectors. The Jerusalem holy site, which includes the revered Al-Aqsa mosque and the golden-topped Dome of the Rock, is the third-holiest in Islam and the most sacred for Jews.

Central to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the compound is located in east Jerusalem, occupied by Israel in 1967 and later annexed in a move never recognized by the international community. Palestinians fear Israel will gradually seek to assert further control over it, though Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has said repeatedly he is committed to the status quo. Israel regularly demolishes the homes of Palestinian attackers, calling it a deterrent against future violence. However, human rights groups say it amounts to collective punishment, with family members forced to suffer for the acts of relatives.

ARAB FIGHTERS STRUGGLE TO ASSERT ROLE IN RAQQA

FIGHT AGAINST IS SPEARHEADED BY KURDISH MILITIA

RAQQA, Syria: The inexperienced fighters in an Arab group battling to take Raqqa back from Islamic State are playing a secondary role to hardened Kurdish militia in the campaign for their home city. The performance of one lightly trained group seen by Reuters in Raqqa underscored the difficulty of making Arabs the "vanguard" in the battle for the mostly Arab city, as the United States said last year they would be.

In one recent incident, the fighters were quick to open fire after stray bullets flew above their makeshift compound. "Cease fire! Can you even see what you're shooting at? Our comrades are somewhere up ahead!" their 27-year-old commander Hassan Khalil shouted to his fighters in the Foj Al-Raqqa (Raqqa Regiment).

Meanwhile, Reuters reporters covering the Raqqa assault have watched the Kurdish YPG militia take the most visible role. It is a sensitive point both for Syrian Arabs and for neighboring Turkey, which is fighting a Kurdish insurgency in its south-east and has unsuccessfully lobbied Washington to abandon its alliance with the YPG. Turkey opposes the YPG's role in the operation, saying it threatens to change the demographics of Raqqa. But in March the new US administration started distributing arms to the YPG ahead of a final assault. The ragtag, 300-strong Foj al-Raqqa appears to have a more minor role. They are among the myriad militias swelling the ranks of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) alliance, formed in 2015 to fight IS.

"We're proud to be SDF. We hope Arab forces will become as strong as the YPG," Khalil said at Foj

al-Raqqa's makeshift base near the frontline last week. A live booby-trapped bomb rigged by Islamic State militants still lay on their kitchen floor. A YPG commander at a nearby house said the new recruits were inexperienced but useful. "They're keen to fight, and they know the area so it's good for intelligence," Haval Qahraman said.

SDF spokesman Mostafa Bali said Foj Al-Raqqa was made up of men from the city. But in a sign of its subsidiary role, two other senior SDF officials in the alliance's office in the town of Ain Issa said they had not heard of the group. Arab fighters hope for a long-term role in Raqqa's security. But Foj Al-Raqqa's future is uncertain - governance and security arrangements in Raqqa have not been finalized as the fight to capture the city rages.

Another YPG commander said last week that the SDF had surrounded IS in central Raqqa, but predicted that the battle could last up to four more months. In other areas taken by the alliance, such as the town of Manbij, security was handed over to mostly local forces who formed military councils that remained attached to the SDF. Whether Foj Al-Raqqa will receive further training and play that role is unclear. For now, it focuses on the fighting. "Our goal and that of our comrades is the same - finishing off Daesh," Khalil said, using a pejorative term for Islamic State.

Native to Raqqa

US coalition forces have trained more than 5,000 Arab fighters since the Raqqa campaign began in November, spokesman Colonel Ryan

Dillon said. The current number of Arabs in the SDF is around 24,000 with 31,000 Kurds, he told Reuters. Foj Al-Raqqa wore SDF patches on their clothes. Many others wear the patches of their own militia - often the YPG. A senior US general recently equated the SDF with the YPG, saying the SDF formed after Washington advised the YPG to change its brand.

A YPG commander acknowledged that the Kurdish militia was playing a leading role in Raqqa, but played up the part played by the Arab forces, saying it showed there was no ethnic approach in the operation. Foj Al-Raqqa is new and made up of men native to Raqqa who fled the city during the SDF's offensive in recent months. Its fighters were given a crash course in weapons training by the US-led coalition, which also backs the assault on Raqqa with special forces and air strikes.

US Training, Soviet Weapons

The fighters, many around 20 years old, showed videos on their phones of skirmishes. In one, they tried in vain to shoot down an IS drone. Another showed them attacking a sniper position using a rocket-propelled grenade launcher. Khalil's second-in-command, Mohammed Hawi, described a 23-day training U.S. forces gave them at a camp in northern Syria after security vetting. "They taught us how to fire AK47s, Doshka heavy machine guns, BKC light machine guns," all Soviet-made weapons. "We learned how to spot booby traps. They filled a room with mock bombs and we'd have to identify them. One mistake and an alarm went off." — Reuters

IRAN REJECTS US FREEDOM REPORT AS HYPOCRITICAL

TEHRAN: Iran yesterday rejected a US religious freedom report critical of Tehran as "hypocritical", coming from a country where Islamophobia was widespread. Washington released its annual religious freedom report on Tuesday, with Secretary of State Rex Tillerson criticising Bahrain, China, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Turkey. Tillerson charged that Iran had used "vague apostasy laws" to execute 20 members of religious minorities over the past year.

"Iran considers it an unrealistic, baseless, unfounded and biased report which has only been made with the intention of certain political gains," foreign ministry spokesman Bahram Ghasemi hit back on the ministry's website. He said Washington should focus on improving

its own record of discrimination, particularly regarding its Muslim population. "It is clear that religious and racial discrimination, Islamophobia, and xenophobia are a widespread and frequent phenomenon among American politicians," said Ghasemi. "Muslims in America face violent and discriminating actions on a daily basis by state bodies like the police and security forces."

The US report said the Iranian government "continued to harass, interrogate and arrest Bahais, Christians, Sunni Muslims and other religious minorities and regulated Christian religious practices closely to enforce the prohibition on proselytizing." The government in Tehran also used anti-Semitic language and promoted Holocaust denial, it charged. — AFP

TRIO DIGGING FOR TREASURE BUSTED

RIYADH: Three Saudis may face prison after authorities busted the trio digging through archaeological sites in the kingdom, authorities and reports said yesterday. The Commission for Tourism and National Heritage said it had referred three Saudi citizens to the public prosecutor's office for digging through archaeological sites after "false reports of hidden treasure" began to circulate online.

The commission issued a public warning against "taking action based on false information, which would damage archaeological sites and sites that contain important archaeological records". Newspapers close to Saudi Arabia's government reported prosecutors may charge the three excavators under the country's archaeological protection law, which would carry a prison sentence of "no less than one month and no more than one year". Saudi Arabia is home to dozens of archeological sites, including ruins dating back to the second century BC. — AFP

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