

## International

## Weeding out jihadists from civilians on Syria front line

## 'They told us the Kurds will slaughter you'

**BAGHOUZ:** A hesitation on a simple question or a callus on a trigger finger — it doesn't always take much for US-backed forces to spot potential jihadists hiding among fleeing civilians. At a desert outpost held by the Syrian Democratic Forces near the Iraqi border, trucks stream in carrying men, women and children from the ever-shrinking last bastion of the Islamic State group. "Men over here, women on the other side," one SDF member calls out, ushering those who have fled into orderly lines near the frontline village of Baghouz.

Men queue up in front of an SDF official, who registers each new arrival. He records each man's fingerprints with a small digital reader, takes their photo, and jots down their name and nationality. Opposite him, a man with a thick beard stutters when he is asked his country of origin. He fumbles for words, then answers: "Iraq". He is passed on to a colleague from the SDF Special Forces, who then ferries him on to a third investigator for even more questions.

After they are interrogated, the men are then led to the side, where they sit on the ground in crowded, neat lines, an identical distance between them. "Sometimes you feel you have an IS fighter in front of you from the way he speaks or when he hesitates to reply," an interrogator tells AFP. "Or if you find traces on his hands that show extensive use of a trigger, or on his shoulders from carrying a cartridge pouch," he says, asking to remain anonymous for his security.

## 'Scared'

Members of the US-led international coalition backing the SDF stroll around the area, but it is not immediately clear what their role is in the screening process. Backed by coalition air strikes, the SDF have since September pressed a battle to expel IS from the last shred of the "caliphate" they proclaimed in 2014. The Kurdish-led alliance has whittled down that pocket to just a few hamlets in the eastern province of Deir Ezzor,

sending thousands of people fleeing. Some 32,000 people have escaped into SDF-held territory since early December, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. They included more than 2,700 IS jihadists, the Britain-based war monitor says. Among the new arrivals in the desert, another bearded man stands in line waiting to be assessed. He says he stayed behind when his family fled a week earlier: "I was scared I'd be detained." But his family encouraged him to leave after they reached a Kurdish-held camp for IS relatives in Syria's northeast. "They told me, 'Come. Nothing will happen to you,'" he says.

In their own section, women too are searched and screened. Female SDF fighters lift up the black face veil of each new arrival to see their face and inspect their scant belongings. When they encounter a woman who is neither Syrian nor Iraqi — an "immigrant", they say — they also record her fingerprints and take her photo.

## 'Slaughter you'

After being vetted, women, children, and men not suspected of belonging to the extremist group are transported north to the Kurdish-run camp of Al-Hol. "The aim of this security operation is to know who the displaced are," says Mohammed Suleiman Othman, an official in charge of their transfer. "Are they civilians, or fighters hiding" among them?

Among the women waiting, several said a baby died during the night from the cold and had to be buried. Two women, they say, gave birth in the open. A truck draws up and they all rush towards it. SDF fighters have arrived to distribute bread. Sitting on the ground, Amina Hajj Hassan, 28, says she fled Baghouz with her five-year-old son after most of the village came under SDF control. Her husband — a "modest employee" of the jihadist group — fled five months ago, says the young Syrian woman from the northern province of Aleppo. He made it to Turkey where he now works, she



**BAGHOUZ:** People who fled battles between Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and fighters from the Islamic State (IS) group in the Syrian village of Baghouz, arrive after crossing a desert in the back of a truck to a region controlled by the SDF in the countryside of the Deir Ezzor province on January 26, 2019. — AFP

says. "I wanted to leave when the bombardment... started months ago, but they told us: 'The Kurds will slaughter you'."

Next to her, Noura al-Ali says she is wracked with worry after her husband was detained, though "not one

day" did he join IS. "He worked at a restaurant," says the 18-year-old, also from Aleppo province. "I used to listen to music in secret," she adds, whereas IS forbade it. Her only wish is "to go with my husband to join our family in Turkey". — AFP

## Nigeria: Top judge's suspension not linked to election

**ABUJA:** Nigeria's government has denied suggestions that the suspension of the country's top judge on corruption charges was linked to next month's election. President Muhammadu Buhari replaced Chief Justice Walter Onnoghen on Friday, sparking claims he had breached the constitution and was trying to manipulate the judiciary. The European Union, Britain and the United States each issued statements at the weekend expressing concern at the development, as elections are due on February 16. But Buhari's spokesman said Sunday that there was no connection.

"In Nigerian law there is no such linkage," Garba Shehu said in a statement. "The CJN (Chief Justice of Nigeria) does not run the election. Nor is he the first arbiter of any electoral complaints. He and the Supreme Court will only get involved as the final arbiter at the end of the appellate process... To link the CJN to the elections in this way is illogical unless they assume that election complaints will be filed and go all the way to the Supreme Court." Shehu's statement was his second against the EU, Britain and the United States, which are all scheduled to have election monitors on the ground. His later comments were more conciliatory in tone than the first, in which the government rejected outside "interference" and said the issue was an internal matter. Onnoghen is accused of failing to declare foreign currency bank accounts, in breach of rules governing the declaration of assets by public officials.

## 'Brazen act of dictatorship'

Shehu maintained that Onnoghen's position was "untenable" given the case against him and the president was forced to act because the judge had not stepped down voluntarily. The suspension was temporary until the conclusion of the case, he added. Buhari's opponents have questioned the timing of the charges against Onnoghen so close to elections at which the president is seeking a second term of office. The 76-year-old head of state, of the All Progressives Congress, came to power in 2015 on a pledge to tackle corruption.

International and domestic observers have already warned that the two main parties may attempt to rig the vote, in what is expected to be a close race. The main opposition candidate Atiku Abubakar said Buhari's suspension of Onnoghen was "a brazen act of dictatorship" in a clear reference to his army past. Buhari headed a military government in the 1980s.

## Executive overreach

Members of the Nigerian Bar Association were meeting on Monday to discuss the suspension, amid mounting protests that could lead to a court shutdown. The NBA has called Onnoghen's removal "an attempted coup against the judiciary". In another potential clash between the arms of government, parliament has been recalled today for an emergency session.

Buhari's critics, including the Senate leader Bukola Saraki, have previously alleged he has used state security agencies to target perceived political opponents. The president has been accused of conducting a political witch-hunt, as most of facing corruption charges are opposition lawmakers. Onnoghen is facing trial at the Code of Conduct Tribunal, where Saraki was also brought on charges of failing to disclose his assets. He was cleared by the Supreme Court.

Under Nigeria's constitution, the Senate has to approve a motion to remove the chief justice by a two-thirds majority. Analyst group SBM Intelligence said the only previous case of a chief justice being removed was in 1975, after general Murtala Muhammad ousted Yakubu Gowon in a coup. It said only the National Judicial Council, the advisory and regulatory body for judges, had the power to suspend a judicial officer. — AFP

## Yemen truce, prisoner swap timelines delayed

**SANAA:** The UN envoy for Yemen said yesterday the expected timeline for a truce in the flashpoint city of Hodeida and a prisoner swap between warring parties had been pushed back. Envoy Martin Griffiths hosted hard-won peace talks between the Saudi-backed Yemeni government and rival Iran-aligned Houthi rebels in Sweden last month.

The two parties, who have been at war for four years, agreed at the talks to a mass prisoner swap and an ambitious ceasefire pact in Hodeida, the Red Sea city home to the impoverished country's most valuable port. Griffiths, who arrived Monday in Sanaa on his third trip to Yemen this month, said there had been "changes in timelines" for both deals.

"That momentum is still there, even if we have seen the timelines for implementation extended, both in Hodeida and with regard to the prisoner exchange agreement," he told Saudi-owned newspaper Asharq Al-Awsat. "Yet such changes in

timelines are expected, in light of the facts that the timelines were rather ambitious and we are dealing with a complex situation on the ground."

Griffiths also confirmed reports of plans to replace retired Dutch general Patrick Cammaert, who heads the monitoring team tasked with overseeing the Hodeida truce. "General Cammaert's plan was to stay in Yemen for a rather short period of time to... lay the ground for establishing the Hodeida mission," he said. "All the speculations about other reasons for General Patrick's departure are not accurate." Cammaert arrived Saturday in Yemen.

The Houthis, who control Hodeida, have accused Cammaert of not being up to the task and of pursuing "other agendas". Hodeida was for months the main front line in the Yemen war after government forces supported by Saudi Arabia and its allies launched an offensive to capture it in June. But a precarious calm has largely held in the city since the ceasefire agreement came into force on December 18.

The Hodeida agreement stipulates a full ceasefire, followed by the withdrawal and redeployment of rival forces from the city — two clauses that have yet to be fulfilled. Griffiths said yesterday another round of consultations was temporarily on hold pending progress on the current agreements. Earlier this month he had said that planned talks had been postponed until



**HODEIDA:** Soldiers with a military coalition in Yemen backed by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates stand guard at a facility of Yemen's Red sea mills company in the port city of Hodeida. — AFP

February. "We are all on the same page that we need to see progress in implementing what was agreed in Sweden before convening the next round of consultations," Griffiths said.

The Yemen conflict has killed some 10,000 people since a Saudi-led military coalition intervened in support of the

beleaguered government in March 2015, according to the World Health Organization. Human rights groups say the real death toll could be five times as high. The war has pushed 14 million Yemenis to the brink of famine in what the United Nations describes as the world's worst humanitarian crisis. — AFP

## Armed gang snatches jailed criminal outside French courthouse

**TARASCON:** Three heavily armed men attacked a van carrying a jailed criminal on his way to court yesterday, firing shots outside the courthouse and striking a guard before making their getaway in the southern French town of Tarascon, officials said. The spectacular escape took place at around 8:30 am as the prisoner was being transferred from a prison to be presented before a judge. The guards "had left the van to ring the doorbell to the courthouse when the armed men fell upon them," said Nicolas Burtz, a local prison guard union representative.

The gang shot out the van's tyres and knocked to the ground a female guard who had refused to let the prisoner go, according to the justice ministry and the local prosecutor. The guards, who had escorted the prisoner from a jail in Beziers, 150 kilometers away, did not fire their

weapons. "It was very violent. It's been a long time since we've seen a van attacked with automatic weapons. It was really shocking for the guards, who reacted well," an official in France's prison administration agency said.

The 27-year-old prisoner, who was not immediately identified, had been jailed since September 2017 awaiting trial for armed robbery and criminal gang activity, prison officials said. "The prisoner had already attempted to escape while previously in jail," according to Karim Terki, another prison guard union representative. Authorities "are really naive: he played nice for several months in order to try to escape again," Terki added.

The last spectacular jailbreak in France took place in late December when a prisoner at the Fresnes prison south of Paris managed to escape from an exercise yard by climbing over a wall with a rope made of bedsheets. Guards in the watchtowers fired three shots but the prisoner got away. In July 2018 the notorious gangster Redoine Faïd made a Hollywood-style prison break when two heavily armed accomplices hijacked a helicopter and used smoke bombs and angle grinders to whisk him away from the prison in Reau, 50 kilometers southeast of Paris. Faïd, a career criminal with multiple convictions for armed robbery, was caught after three months on the run. — AFP



**TARASCON:** A forensic police officer searches for evidences yesterday outside the Courthouse of Tarascon. — AFP

## Bashir vows to bring peace as demos called in war zones

**KHARTOUM:** President Omar Al-Bashir vowed yesterday to bring peace in the state of South Kordofan where Sudanese forces are fighting rebels, as protesters planned to hold anti-government rallies in the country's conflict zones. Deadly protests triggered by a government decision to raise the price of bread have rocked the east African country for weeks.

The demonstrations have spiraled into nationwide rallies against the government of Bashir, who swept to power in an Islamist-backed coup in 1989. Officials say 30 people have died in the violence since the protests first erupted on December 19 in the farming town of Atbara, before spreading to Khartoum and other regions. Rights groups say more than 40 people have been killed.

Yesterday, Bashir vowed to work to bring peace in South Kordofan, a region ravaged by a deadly conflict between government forces and rebels since 2011. "Our top priority is to bring peace to this area," Bashir, dressed in military uniform, told a crowd of cheering supporters at a televised rally in Kadguli, the capital of South Kordofan. "We are ready to go to any length to bring peace to this area. We will undertake all efforts that will bring peace to this area."

In 2011, fighting erupted in the states of South Kordofan and Blue Nile, both bordering South Sudan, eight years after a brutal conflict broke out in the country's western region of Darfur. Tens of thousands of people have been killed in the three conflicts and millions displaced over the years after ethnic minority rebels took up arms against Khartoum, accusing it of economic and political marginalization.

Bashir is wanted by the Hague-based International Criminal Court on charges of war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide related to the war in Darfur. He denies the charges.