

## WORLD

## ISIS hanging on in Syria

AMMAN, JORDAN

The U.S.-backed assault sputters as the terror group stays a potent force globally

BY ERIC SCHMITT

An American-backed military offensive has stalled against the Islamic State's last vestige in eastern Syria.

Booby traps, land mines and a militant counterstrike during a fierce sandstorm after the campaign began in September have knocked the coalition back on its heels.

And last week, the Syrian Democratic Forces, the Kurdish-led militia that is fighting the Islamic State with American help, suspended operations after Kurdish positions farther north were shelled by Turkey — not far from United States advisers.

American diplomats and generals rushed to ease tensions with the Turks, who consider Kurdish fighters terrorists despite their partnership with the United States.

But the episode underscores the shifting nature of the fight against the Islamic State, also known as ISIS, a still-potent threat as it pivots from its battlefield losses in Iraq and Syria to directing guerrilla insurgencies in the Middle East and beyond.

"Although ISIS's safe haven in Iraq and Syria has largely collapsed, its global enterprise of almost two dozen branches and networks, each numbering in the hundreds to thousands of members, remains robust," Russell Travers, the acting head of the National Counterterrorism Center, told senators in Washington last month.

Last week, the Islamic State claimed responsibility for an attack on buses carrying Coptic Christians to a monastery in Egypt, which killed seven people and wounded 19 others. Dutch officials said in late September that they foiled a large, multisite terrorist Islamic State attack in the Netherlands.

In Jordan, state intelligence officials said they had worked closely with the Central Intelligence Agency to thwart more than a dozen terrorist plots in the past several months in the Middle East and Europe.

A classified American military program in Jordan, called Operation Galant Phoenix, is scooping up data collected in commando raids in Syria and Iraq and funneling it to law enforcement agencies in Europe and Southeast Asia, according to United States military and intelligence officials who described details of the initiative on condition of anonymity because of its secretive nature.

In Afghanistan, the Islamic State's local branch has conducted a spate of high-profile attacks against civilian and government targets in Kabul, the capital, while carving out a sanctuary in the country's east, Mr. Travers said. Other Islamic State affiliates in the Sinai Peninsula of Egypt; Libya; Yemen; and western Africa continue to mobilize fighters and execute attacks against local governments and group rivals, fomenting and leveraging instability in these already beleaguered areas.

"ISIS remains an adaptive and dangerous adversary, and is already tailoring its strategy to sustain operations amid mounting losses," he said.

Other networks that are less formally aligned with the Islamic State, including extremists in other parts of Africa, Southeast Asia and the Philippines, continue to conduct attacks that showcase the group's reach.

To be sure, thousands of Islamic State members — including senior leaders, veteran field commanders and foreign fighters — have been killed in United States airstrikes and partner actions. The extremist group now holds less than 1 percent of the territory it seized in Iraq and Syria in 2014.

But ISIS has reverted to its insurgent roots — an atomized, clandestine network of cells with a decentralized chain of command, Western and Middle Eastern counterterrorism officials said.

The move follows plans that the extremist network drew up in the months before its main strongholds in Mosul, Iraq, and Raqqa, Syria, fell to coalition forces last year.

"We've expected that as the physical



MAHMOUD ABO ELDAHAR/EPA, VIA SHUTTERSTOCK



DELLI SOULEIMAN/AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE — GETTY IMAGES

Top, mourners carrying the coffin of a victim killed in an attack in Egypt on Coptic Christians that was claimed by ISIS. Above, fighters with the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces at the funeral of a commander killed in Syria.

caliphate went away, the remnants of this would attempt to revive themselves and revive their networks, and take on these insurgent, guerrilla-like tactics," Gen. Joseph L. Votel, the commander of the United States Central Command, said in an interview in Bahrain last week.

"We're well prepared for that," said General Votel, who oversees the American military in the Middle East and Southwest Asia. "These organizations never go away in one fell swoop."

The number of foreign terrorist fighters, once pouring into Iraq and Syria at about 1,500 a month, has dropped sharply. But the Islamic State still attracts about 100 new foreign fighters to the region each month, Gen. Joseph L. Dunford Jr., the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told a meeting of military chiefs in October.

"On its current trajectory, ISIS could regain sufficient strength to mount a renewed insurgency that once again threatens to overmatch local security forces in both Iraq and Syria," the Institute for the Study of War in Washington concluded in a recent analysis.

In Iraq, Islamic State sleeper cells in recent months have carried out raids and ambushes against Iraqi security forces and civilians, particularly in the provinces of Anbar, Kirkuk and Salahuddin.

And as the Islamic State hunkers down in Syria, including in caves and fortified tunnels in Hajin and a few surrounding villages in the Euphrates

River Valley, it wields a diminished but still formidable social media prowess to rally its followers on the ground and on the internet.

"It is displaying its wins on its official online channels, including the alleged capture of enemy fighters and the killing and wounding of many others," said Laith Alkhouri, a senior director at Flashpoint, a business risk intelligence company in New York that assesses the global terrorist threat.

Mr. Travers, the American counterterrorism official, agreed. "Its propaganda fronts still produce a range of high-quality content, including foreign-language products that promote its evolving narrative of enduring resistance and vitality," he said.

The fighting in Hajin and nearby villages, where militants hide amid some 60,000 residents, is some of the most intense since the coalition pushed the Islamic State out of Raqqa and Mosul, allied officials said.

The Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces has lost 327 fighters since the beginning of the military operation in September, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a group based in Britain that monitors the war through contacts on the ground.

The Islamic State "has been avoiding direct clashes with our forces, relying on targeting with artillery and heavy weapons the obvious routes our fighters are forced to take in order to advance," said Mustafa Bali, a militia spokesman. In the last several days, hardened Is-

lamic State fighters using small arms and mortars, and relying on a sandstorm as cover, counterattacked. They killed several militia troops and regained territory the extremist group had lost to the American-backed coalition a few days earlier.

The storm had grounded American and allied warplanes that support the militia on the battlefield — a vulnerability United States officials said ISIS fighters were keenly aware of and exploited. The militia rushed 1,000 more troops from northern Syria to the combat zone, joining the several thousand already there, a senior American official said.

Now, American and coalition officials said, the military offensive that was planned to be wrapped up by December looks like it will drag into early next year. And that was before Turkey, a NATO ally, attacked Kurdish positions in northern Syria, prompting Kurdish commanders to suspend their offensive against the Islamic State. Mr. Bali said the pause would continue until the United States and its allies "stop the Turkish hostility and remove its threat."

American officials said they were taking the long view of the fight against the Islamic State.

"We still are putting great pressure on them," General Dunford said last month. "We're denying them sanctuary from which to plan attacks."

Karam Shoumali contributed reporting from Beirut, and Hwaida Saad from Beirut, Lebanon.

## As famine looms, war in Yemen intensifies

HUDAYDAH, YEMEN

Saudi-led coalition redoubles attacks as U.N. warns of mass starvation

BY MOHAMMED ALI KALFOOD AND DECLAN WALSH

The fight in Yemen has escalated drastically over the past week, exacerbating a dire humanitarian crisis that the United Nations has said could spiral into famine — despite, or because of, a diplomatic push by the United States to get both sides to the peace table.

The Saudi-led coalition, which the United States has armed and supported, has conducted a punishing wave of airstrikes against the rebel Houthis. Warplanes have hit targets in the capital, Sana; in the mountainous northern provinces; and in the Red Sea port of Hodaydah where, aid workers warn, the country's main humanitarian lifeline hangs by a thread.

A senior aid worker and two Western officials, who asked not to be identified so they could speak openly about Hodaydah, said in interviews that the coalition, commanded locally by the United Arab Emirates, had redoubled its five-month offensive to snatch the city from Houthi control.

Columns of Yemeni militias fighting under the coalition flag have burst across a major front line and swept through the desert on the eastern edge of the city, threatening to encircle it, they said. Warplanes and attack helicopters have pummeled Houthi positions in the city in what aid workers called a near-continuous barrage of air attacks.

Inside the city, residents reported that Houthi fighters had entrenched themselves, taking up positions in apartment buildings, hospitals and homes. At least 150 fighters from both sides have been reported dead so far.

Tens of thousands of civilians, including some who only recently returned to the city during a lull in fighting, are sheltering in their homes, anxiously waiting. As the front lines have shifted, some have been forced to flee. A handful have been killed by stray gunfire.

Even with the clashes, the port of Hodaydah, which lies just north of the city, is still working. On Tuesday, seven ships were at berth, with an additional eight waiting to dock, including one vessel containing 10,000 tons of grain, the Western officials said.

Strikingly, they added, the relief shipment was financed by the United Arab Emirates — the same power that was sending warplanes screaming over the city as its officers commanded the assault on Hodaydah from the south.

The surge in fighting started days after the United States defense secretary, Jim Mattis, called for the Saudi-led coalition and the Houthis to start peace talks within 30 days. His statement came amid growing questions over whether the United States military was doing enough to reduce civilian deaths.

Yemen's crisis, already grave for years, has recently deteriorated so rapidly that the United Nations has warned that 14 million people, or half the population, could soon be on the brink of starvation. This week, the chief humanitarian coordinator, Mark Lowcock, called that prospect the "apocalyptic scenario."

The surge in fighting may stem from a Saudi desire to achieve territorial gains before any talks. But analysts said it could just as easily plunge the country deeper into war.

"Any military escalation does not help efforts to relaunch the political process," Martin Griffiths, the United Nations

peace envoy, said in a text message. "No one wants to see a catastrophe in Hodaydah."

During an offensive a year ago, the Houthis retaliated by firing missiles that came close to the Saudi capital, Riyadh, prompting the Saudis to impose an air and sea blockade on Houthi-controlled ports that lasted for seven weeks. This time, at the urging of United Nations officials, the Houthis have not fired any missiles over the border. But as fighting escalates, officials warn it is unclear how long that restraint will last.

For now, the main concern is keeping Yemen's chief gateway for humanitarian supplies open.

About 75 percent of all international relief passes through Hodaydah, and the city's population has swelled in recent weeks as refugees who fled in June filtered home. Radhwan Shujaihi, a father of four, said he could no longer stand the cramped, desperate conditions his family had endured in Sana.

"Now, here we are in our home," he said. "We live with dignity, we die with dignity."

In the city center, Houthi fighters riding motorbikes circulate through the largely empty streets, carrying sniper rifles and rocket launchers. Some ousted residents from their homes, which they used for sniper positions. The Houthis have been preparing for a battle inside the city for months, digging trenches in streets and laying land mines.

An American push for peace talks could cause the crisis to deepen.

Residents said there was a steady drumbeat of explosions from artillery or strikes by coalition warplanes and Apache attack helicopters. Early Monday, mortar shells hit a printing plant on the city outskirts, killing at least one worker and wounding three, according to plant officials.

Aid workers said that 90 percent of patients had fled the city's main hospital, which now lies within half a mile of the front line. Unicef reported that 59 children, including 25 in the hospital's intensive care unit, were at imminent risk of death.

Over the weekend, the United Nations intervened to stop the Saudi-led coalition from bombing the hospital, where Houthi fighters had taken up positions on the roof.

That is a frequent problem in Hodaydah, where Houthi fighters often fight near humanitarian buildings that are protected by a "no-strike" list drawn up by the coalition, the United States and the United Nations. Houthi fighters cache weapons or station troops beside such buildings in the hope of protecting them from airstrikes — but in so doing, can turn the buildings into legitimate military targets.

The Saudi-led coalition has assured the United Nations that it does not intend to bring the fight into Hodaydah or to capture the port.

But the Saudi-led forces are now a few miles from the city's northern gates. Should they capture that area, they could encircle the city and impose a siege that would trap tens of thousands of civilians.

The United Nations has positioned a ship offshore to evacuate its staff should fighting spread to the streets. For civilians, a siege would even further limit access to food or clean water, and could lead to a deadly cholera epidemic. As the fighting nears, many are making difficult calculations.

Mohammed Ali Kalfood reported from Hodaydah, Yemen, and Declan Walsh from Cairo.



TYLER HICKS/THE NEW YORK TIMES

An 11-month-old boy with severe malnutrition arriving at a Unicef-run mobile clinic in Aslam, Yemen. The child died eight hours later.

## Suicides among Japanese children rise

TOKYO

BY MOTOKO RICH AND MAKIKO INOUE

Suicides by young people in Japan rose to their highest level in three decades in 2017, the government has reported.

Japan has a persistent problem with suicides, although the number has been declining over all. Child suicides have risen recently, with experts pointing to school pressures and bullying as likely factors.

Last year 250 children in elementary, middle and high schools committed suicide, the highest number since 1986, according to data released last month by the Education Ministry.

According to a survey of schools by the ministry, most of the students did not leave any explanation for why they

"You're most likely to get bullied and less likely to get support services and understanding from your parents."

decided to take their own lives. Of those who did, the most frequently cited reason was worries over what path to take after graduation. Other reasons included family problems and bullying.

A survey by the Cabinet Office in 2015 found that suicides among children tended to spike on Sept. 1, speculating that students felt school pressures more intensely after the summer break. According to the Welfare Ministry, suicide was the leading cause of death last year among 15- to 19-year-olds.

Although child suicide is not a problem unique to Japan, mental illness is still not an open topic of discussion in the

country, and it is difficult for children and teenagers who are depressed or anxious to seek help.

"In Japan, your biggest problem is that there is a greater stigma about mental health problems than in other countries," said Vickie Skorji, director of the crisis hotline at TELL, a counseling and crisis intervention service in Tokyo. "You're most likely to get bullied and less likely to get support services and understanding from your parents."

Some experts say that children do not receive as much support from family as they might have in the past. While several generations of a family used to live together, such arrangements are less common now.

"I think support networks for children have been weakening," said Yoshitomo Takahashi, a professor and psychiatrist at Tsukuba University. "Now, we cannot expect the same thing from families that

we used to expect. We can't expect parents or grandparents to provide the support they used to. And in this situation, children remain alone."

Experts say that schools are generally not well equipped to cope with mental illness among students and, in general, education about mental illness is lacking.

"Teachers are busy, and they cannot respond to each individual student in many cases," said Yuki Kubota, professor of clinical psychology at Kyushu Sangyo University.

Over the summer, a junior high school in Aomori, in northern Japan, said that bullying had provoked the 2016 suicide of a 13-year-old girl, Rima Kasai. In a report about the suicide, the school said that it had relied on individual teachers to respond to the bullying but that the situation "reached its limit as no organized action was taken."

## CORRECTIONS

• An article on Friday about a neurological study linking even mild exercise to improved memory function misstated the exercise level performed by the study participants. The exercise was performed at about 30 percent of each volunteer's heart rate reserve, or the difference between a person's maximum heart rate and their resting heart rate, not at 30 percent of their maximum heart rate.

• An obituary on Oct. 24 about Joachim Ronneberg, who in World War II led a group of Norwegian saboteurs that thwarted Germany's plans to develop an atomic bomb, misstated the name of the forested mountain plateau on which the members of the group had a rendezvous at a cabin. It is the Hardangervidda, not the Telemark. (Telemark is the county in Norway where the plateau is situated.)