

Iraq celebrates Islamic State victory with parade

Baghdad

An Iraqi military parade in Baghdad's heavily fortified Green Zone celebrated final victory over Islamic State on Sunday, with Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi looking on as troops marched in formation, their bodies spelling "victory day" in Arabic.

Abadi, who is also commander-in-chief of the armed forces, listened solemnly to Quranic verses from a chapter titled al-Nasr, meaning victory.

Iraqi forces recaptured the last areas still under Islamic State control along the border with Syria on Saturday and secured the western desert, marking the end of the war against the militants three years after they had captured about a third of Iraq's territory.

The forces fighting Islamic State in Iraq and Syria now expect a new phase of guerrilla warfare.

Watching the parade on Sunday, state television showed Abadi sat on a throne-like chair placed between two Iraqi flags with the country's official seal behind him, and with all other officials sat at a distance from him.

Abadi declared Dec. 10 would be an annual national holiday. Fighter jets were seen and heard flying over Baghdad's skies.

An announcer introduced various factions who took on Islamic State as troops marched, tanks rolled by and helicopters hovered, all brandishing Iraqi flags as Abadi stood up and waved.

Those who fought were drawn



Tanks of Iraqi army are seen during an Iraqi military parade in Baghdad's fortified Green Zone, Iraq

from the army, air force, federal and local police, elite counter-terrorism forces, as well as Shi'ite and Sunni paramilitaries and Kurdish Peshmerga fighters. They received key air support from a U.S.-led global coalition.

In his victory speech, delivered on Saturday, Abadi did not mention the Peshmerga, who played a big part in the fight against Islamic State.

The central government in Baghdad is in conflict with the

semi-autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government after the latter unilaterally held an independence referendum in September.

Instead Abadi hailed the Iranian-trained and backed Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF), a group of Shi'ite militias, many of whom are loyal to Iran.

He also said that the state should have a legitimate monopoly on arms, however. Disarming the PMF is seen

as Abadi's greatest challenge after Islamic State's defeat.

The man who many saw as weak and ineffectual when he took over in 2014 from a predecessor who was blamed for the Islamic State takeover now heads towards an election next year as the commander who freed Iraqi lands.

Or as one Western diplomat described him - "the most popular man in Iraq." (Reuters)

Pakistan says over 300 Baloch militants surrender

Islamabad

More than 300 Baloch separatist militants have surrendered over the past few months, Pakistani government officials said, after a ceremony to mark the downing of guns and militants' return to civilian life.

The surrenders are part of government efforts to end a decade-long insurgency in the southwestern Baluchistan province by offering amnesties and financial rewards to soldiers and commanders to help them re-integrate into the society.

In a high-profile ceremony on the lawn of the Baluchistan provincial assembly in the western city of Quetta, the regional capital, some 313 militants handed over weapons to Nawab Sanaullah Zehri, the Chief Minister of the province.

"I will hug all that who believe in integrity and sovereignty of Pakistan but will not tolerate (those) who will challenge the writ of the State," Zehri said at the ceremony on Saturday.

Pakistani government officials say about 2,000 militants have surrendered over the past 18 months. In April, the government held a similar ceremony where about 400 militants handed over their guns.

The latest ceremony saw surrenders by 143 militants from the Baloch Republican Army (BRA), 125 fighters from the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) and 17 from Baloch Liberation Front (BLF), according to officials.

Under the agreement, foot soldiers are given 500,000 rupees (\$4,700) and the top-level commanders receive about 1 million rupees (\$9,500) to help them and their families build a life after militancy. (Reuters)

China calls for caution on issues concerning status of Jerusalem

Beijing

China said that the status of Jerusalem is sensitive and complicated, and urged all parties concerned to exercise caution for peace and tranquillity in the Middle East.

Foreign Ministry spokesperson Geng Shuang made the remarks when asked to comment on U.S. intention to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital.

A senior U.S. administration official said President Donald Trump is expected to announce that the United States recognizes Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and will move its embassy there.

"We pay close attention to the developments of the situation and are concerned about the possible intensification of regional conflicts," Geng told a routine press briefing.

He said all parties concerned should exercise caution and



Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Geng Shuang

avoid rocking the basis for the settlement of the Palestinian issue, which may trigger new regional confrontation.

China firmly supports the Middle East peace process and the just cause of the Palestinian people to restore their legitimate rights and interests, said Geng.

He said China supports the establishment of a Palestinian

state with full sovereignty and independence on the basis of the 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as its capital.

China calls on all parties concerned to abide by relevant UN resolutions and commit themselves to resolving differences through negotiations and promoting regional peace and stability, said Geng. (Xinhua)

UK's Johnson lobbies for jailed aid worker

Dubai

British Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson held almost an hour of talks with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani yesterday after flying to Tehran to seek the release of a jailed British-Iranian aid worker.

"Both spoke forthrightly about the obstacles in the relationship and agreed on the need to make progress in all areas," said a spokeswoman for Britain's Foreign Office after Johnson concluded what was only the third visit to Iran by a British foreign minister in the past 14 years.

The Foreign Office confirmed Johnson had raised "consular cases of dual nationals" during talks. These cases include Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, who Britain says was visiting family on holiday in April 2016 when she was jailed by Iran for attempting to overthrow the government.

The woman's husband later told Sky News that a court appearance scheduled



Britain's Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson meets with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, in Tehran, Iran

in Iran for Sunday had been postponed. "I think I am very optimistic today," Richard Ratcliffe said.

He added that he hoped his wife would be home before Christmas but cautioned that there could still be setbacks.

"Without doubt having the foreign secretary there was a big thing. Without doubt the court case not happening is a big thing. There may be a number of big things that have to happen before she's home, but ... as I sit here I am a lot more optimistic than I was."

Iranian state TV reported that "bilateral relations, the nuclear deal and regional developments made up the axis of the talks", between the president and Johnson.

The case of Zaghari-Ratcliffe has taken on domestic political importance after Johnson said last month that she had been teaching journalists in Iran, which her employer denies. Johnson later apologized. Opponents have called for him to resign if his comments lead to her serving longer in prison. (Reuters)