

# End of Caliphate in sight

In east Syria, IS in last stand to defend dying 'caliphate'



Women and children who fled the Islamic State (IS) group's embattled holdout of Baghouz

AFP | Omar Oil Field, Syria

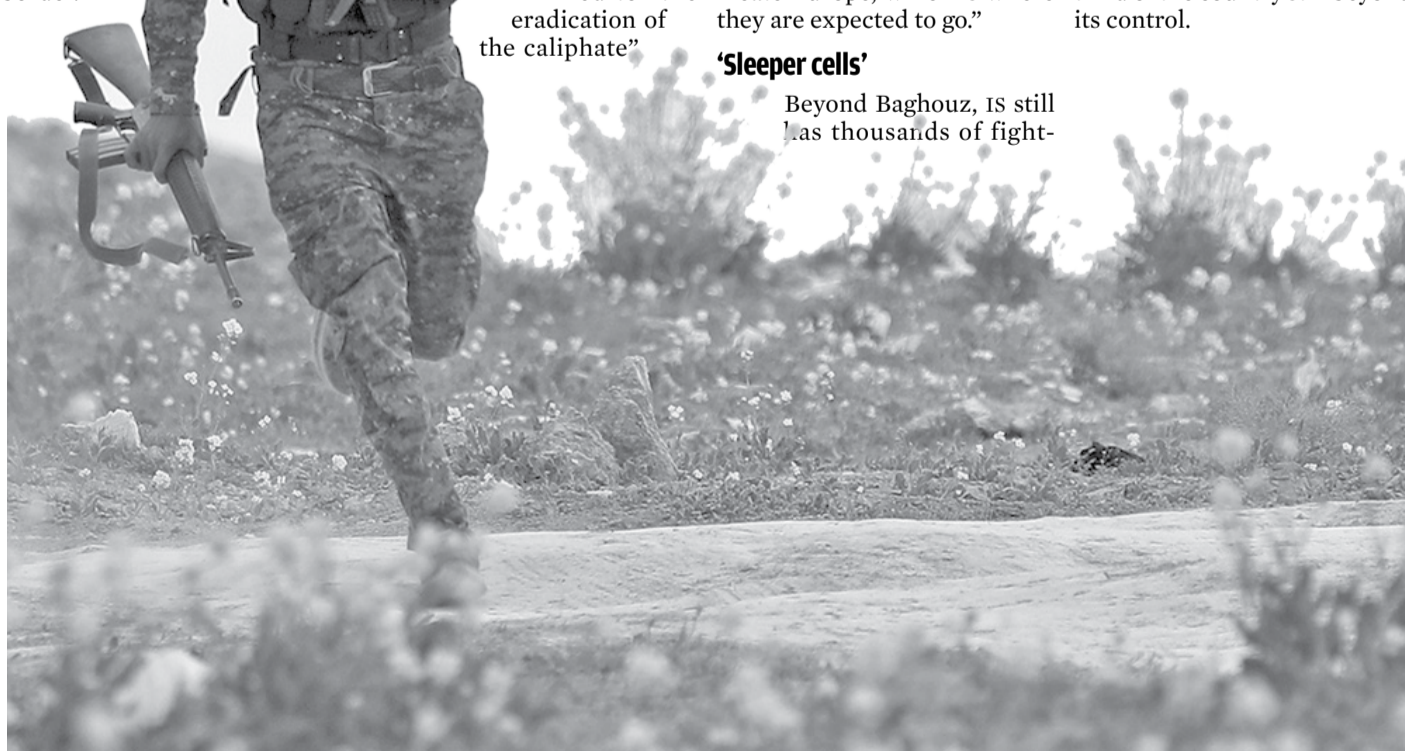
Diehard jihadists have blocked roads out of the last scrap of their Islamic State group "caliphate" in Syria, US-backed forces fighting them said yesterday, preventing hundreds of civilians from fleeing.

Ahead of a victory declaration expected within days and a subsequent US military pullout, US President Donald Trump called on his European allies to take back hundreds of alleged jihadists captured in Syria.

At a base for the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces behind the frontline in eastern Syria, a reporter heard airplanes darting in the sky.

The jihadists declared a "caliphate" across large parts of Syria and neighbouring Iraq in 2014, implementing their brutal interpretation of Islam on millions.

But several offensives have expelled them from all of it, except a tiny patch of less than half a kilometre square on the banks of the Euphrates river near the Iraqi border.



A fighter with the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) runs with a weapon during an operation to expel Islamic State group (IS) jihadists from the Baghouz area in the eastern Syrian province of Deir Ezzor

Thousands of people have streamed out of the so-called "Baghouz pocket" in recent weeks, but hundreds of civilians -- including IS family members -- are believed to still be inside.

SDF spokesman Mustefa Bali said IS had blocked roads out of their holdout, preventing those remaining from escaping to safety.

"Daesh has sealed off all the streets," he said, adding up to 2,000 civilians could still be inside.

IS is confined to "a few hundred metres square in... Baghouz with a number of civilians they hold hostage and refuse to release", he earlier said.

## 'Human shields'

A spokesman for the US coalition, which has been backing the SDF with air strikes, said IS was using these women and children as "human shields".

"Civilians who have escaped are reporting ISIS is using them as human shields and killing innocent civilians in order to intimidate others from trying to leave," Sean Ryan said.

Trump on Friday promised announcements linked to "the eradication of the caliphate"

within 24 hours, but a top SDF commander then warned the battle would take a few more days.

The US president in December shocked allies when he announced he would withdraw all 2,000 US troops from Syria because IS had been "beaten".

That plan is set to be accelerated after a victory announcement.

Since 2015, the SDF have been battling IS with backing from the international coalition, retaking one major town after another until reaching Baghouz.

They have detained hundreds of foreigners accused of fighting for IS and repeatedly called on their countries to repatriate them, but Western nations have been reluctant.

Trump early Sunday called on his European allies to bring their nationals home.

"The Caliphate is ready to fall," he said on Twitter.

"The United States is asking Britain, France, Germany and other European allies to take back over 800 ISIS fighters that we captured in Syria and put them on trial," he said, using an alternative acronym for IS.

"The alternative is not a good one in that we will be forced to release them."

"The US does not want to watch as these ISIS fighters permeate Europe, which is where they are expected to go."

## ' Sleeper cells'

Beyond Baghouz, IS still has thousands of fighters

and sleeper cells scattered across several countries.

In Syria, it retains a presence in the vast Badia desert, and has claimed deadly attacks in SDF-held territory.

The US Department of Defence has warned that without sustained counterterrorism pressure, IS could resurge within months.

"Over the past month, more than one foreign sleeper cell was arrested in multiple areas in Syria," spokesman Bali said Sunday.

Acting Pentagon chief Patrick Shanahan has struggled to convince sceptical allies in the international coalition to help secure Syria once US soldiers pull out.

Any withdrawal would leave Syria's Kurds exposed to a long-threatened attack by neighbouring Turkey, which views Kurdish fighters as "terrorists".

To prevent this, they have scrambled to seek a new ally in the Damascus government after spending most of Syria's civil war working towards self-rule.

Eight years into the conflict that has killed more than 360,000 people, President Bashar al-Assad's government controls nearly two-thirds of the country.

But the SDF hold around a third of the country still beyond its control.

## Putin's Judo moves



Russian President Vladimir Putin takes part in a training session with members of the Russian national judo team in Sochi

## NY museum says ancient Egypt coffin was looted

New York, United States

The Metropolitan Museum of Art will return an ancient gilded coffin to Egypt after New York prosecutors determined that it had been looted from that country, the museum said.

The museum had purchased the prized coffin, dating from the first century BCE, in July 2017 from a Paris art dealer for a price of nearly four million dollars.

But the Manhattan district attorney's office determined that the mummy-shaped golden coffin had been sold with fake documentation, including a forged 1971 Egyptian export license.

The statement Friday quoted Met CEO Daniel Weiss as apologizing to the Egyptian people and specifically to Antiquities Minister Khaled El-Enany.

"After we learned that the Museum was a victim of fraud and unwittingly participated in the illegal trade of antiquities, we worked with the DA's office for its return to Egypt," Weiss said.

The museum said it would "consider all available remedies to recoup the purchase price of the coffin" and would commit itself "to identifying how justice can be served, and how we can help to deter future offenses against cultural property."

MoMA vowed to "review and revise its acquisitions process."

The elaborately decorated coffin, viewed by nearly a half-million visitors since it was made the centerpiece of a major exhibition in July, is sheathed in gold, which the ancient Egyptians associated with the gods.



Prosecutors say this 1st Century BCE coffin of Nedjemankh, a high-ranking priest of the ram-headed god Heryshef of Herakleopolis, was looted from Egypt (Daily Mail)

It is inscribed with the name of Nedjemankh, a high-ranking priest of the ram-headed god Heryshef of Herakleopolis.

The Met took the coffin off view this week to deliver it to the district attorney's office for its eventual return to Egypt.