

# International

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Gandhi vows 'final assault on poverty'

## Chinese investment in Europe: A story of cash and concerns

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**BAGHOUZ:** Photo shows destroyed vehicles and damaged buildings in the village of Baghouz in Syria's eastern Deir Ezzor province near the Iraqi border after the Islamic State (IS) group's 'caliphate' was declared defeated by the US-backed Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). —AFP

# Harsh rules, violent punishments under IS rule

## Girls enslaved, music banned; homosexuality punishable by death

**BAGHDAD:** For the millions forced to endure the Islamic State group's brutal rule, life in the "caliphate" was a living hell where girls were enslaved, music was banned and homosexuality was punishable by death. The jihadists applied an ultra-conservative interpretation of Islamic law across the swathes of Syria and Iraq that they captured in 2014, torturing or executing anyone who disobeyed.

The fall of the last sliver of IS territory in eastern Syria marks the end of their proto-state, once the size of the United Kingdom and home to more than seven million people. The fate of prisoners used by the jihadists as human shields remains unknown, but more than 3,000 Yazidis are still missing. The jihadists singled out the minority, followers of an ancient religion, for particularly harsh treatment which the UN has said may amount to genocide. They slaughtered thousands of Yazidi men and boys, abducting women and girls then selling them at slave markets.

Many suffered years of sexual abuse. "We did everything they demanded," said Bessa Hamad, an Iraqi Yazidi sold six times by jihadists before escaping their

last redoubt in Syria. "We couldn't say no." Yazidi boys who were not killed were forced to fight and indoctrinated to hate their community, leaving families struggling to reconnect with those who were rescued. Children who went to IS-run schools learnt to count with maths books featuring guns and grenades, but pictures of people were banned.

As well as frontline fighters, IS ran its own police force, whose officers could impose fines or lashes on men whose breath smelt of cigarettes or alcohol. Books were burned, while dancing and music were banned. Instead the jihadists broadcast propaganda via their own radio station. The jihadists used sledgehammers to destroy priceless ancient artefacts they deemed idolatrous. A strict dress code forced even young girls to wear a full black

Islamic veil. Beards and traditional robes were compulsory for men.



### Yazidi men, boys slaughtered; girls, women sold at slave markets

now keep as trophies. Jail terms were imposed on those unable to pay IS taxes. Iraq's major northern city of Mosul and Raqa in Syria were transformed into the twin de facto capitals of the "caliphate". Raqa became a byword for atrocities carried out by the jihadists, and it was from there that IS organized devastating over-

#### Thrown from rooftops

The extremists ran their own courts, sentencing people to death by beheading and hanging. Men and women accused of adultery were stoned to death. Men were shot or thrown from rooftops for the "crime" of being gay. The jihadists even introduced their own currency, minting coins that veterans of the battle against IS introduced their own currentcy, minting coins that veterans of the battle against IS

seas attacks. Human heads were displayed on spikes in the city along with crucified bodies, to sow terror.

IS initially won support from some residents who felt abandoned and abused by corrupt state authorities. But today, those who survived its rule accuse the jihadists themselves of graft - as well as extreme acts of violence. IS left more than 200 mass graves in Iraq and thousands of bodies are expected to be uncovered in Syria. Numerous women interviewed by AFP said they received IS-stamped death certificates for their executed husbands, but the jihadists would not return their bodies.

It could take years to discover what happened to some of their victims. Some IS members leaving the group's last redoubt of Baghouz in eastern Syria have criticized the group's leadership. "God's law was applied," said Abdel Moneim Najia, a jihadist who stayed in what was left of the "caliphate" until its final days. But he voiced the same grievances as Iraqis and Syrians expressed about their governments ahead of the IS takeover. "There were injustices," he said. "Officials stole money and abandoned the people." — AFP

## After school, Yemen children seek work at the cemetery

**SANAA:** Barefoot in a blue striped shirt, Ahmed al-Hamadi walks from school to a cemetery in the Yemeni capital where he works to help his family survive. The 13-year-old makes his way through the cemetery, where graves are cramped together and overgrown with weeds.

Hauling gallons of water on his tiny shoulders, he waters plants and sprinkles tombstones to rid them of the Sanaa dust for a modest payment from the families of the deceased. "We usually wait for funeral processions to work," Ahmed said. "If no one has died, we just hang around the graves and play around here." Ahmed is among millions of children struggling to stay in school in Yemen, where war, poverty and disease have brought the Arab world's poorest country to its knees.

The Yemen conflict, which pits the government against northern rebels linked to Iran, took a turn for the worse when Saudi Arabia and its allies intervened on behalf of embattled President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi. March 26 marks four years since the Saudi-led coalition launched the military campaign to oust the Houthi rebels who occupied most of Yemen several months earlier, triggering what the United Nations calls the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

#### Children most at risk

Yemen has the highest level of child labor in the Arab world, both as a percentage and in sheer numbers, according to the International Labor Organization. And in the chaos of war children are the most at risk, with girls facing forced marriage and boys recruited as fighters. UNICEF, the UN children's fund, called Yemen a "living hell for children" in 2018, with a whopping 80 percent of minors in need of aid. The agency estimates that



**SANAA:** A Yemeni boy waters plants and cleans tombstones in a cemetery in the capital Sanaa yesterday. Yemen has the highest level of child labor in the Arab world, both as a percentage and in sheer numbers, according to the International Labor Organization. — AFP

two million Yemeni children, out of an eligible seven million, are out of school as the war grinds into its fifth year.

Alongside the violence, Yemen's already-fragile economy has contracted by over 50 percent since the escalation of conflict in 2015, according to the World Bank. The currency has plummeted, and with it purchasing power. Yemen's private sector is all but dead and the government-run central bank has struggled to pay civil servants' salaries despite over \$2 billion of cash injections by Saudi Arabia.

Many families have had no choice but to rely on their children for income - sometimes as little as a few dollars a month. Three years ago, Atiqah Mohammed was an officer in the Yemeni military. Today, she runs a little grocery store and more often than not her shelves are empty. She had to turn a group of children away one March

afternoon, with neither bread nor milk to sell them. "The war has devoured everything," she said. "I don't want much. Bread and tea would be enough, as long as it's an honest living."

#### 'Crowded with visitors'

Three-quarters of Yemen's population of 29 million are in need of humanitarian aid, with upwards of 10 million on the brink of mass starvation, according to the UN. And in some areas, both government- and rebel-held, teachers have not been paid their wages since 2016. UNICEF stepped in this month, disbursing the equivalent of \$50 per month to some 100,000 educators. Ahmed is one of the luckier ones. His school still opens its doors to pupils in Sanaa, controlled by the Houthis since the rebels staged a takeover of Yemeni territory in 2014. — AFP

## Suicide bombers, rockets: Last days of IS 'caliphate'

**BAGHOUZ:** Suicide bombers, snipers, rockets - Islamic State group fighters did everything they could to defend their last scrap of territory in eastern Syria, but their diminished resources were not enough. The US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces on Saturday declared victory over the jihadists in the remote village of Baghouz, after reducing their once terrifying proto-state to a ghostly riverside camp.

From the top of an abandoned building overlooking the devastated encampment, SDF fighter Hamid Abdel Aal pointed to an earth berm half way to the Euphrates River. "We arrived at night. We were there at that barricade," says the man in his thirties, a checkered green scarf wrapped around his jet black hair. "In the morning, they attacked. They had snipers shooting at us," he says, a large yellow flag of the Kurdish-led SDF billowing behind him after their victory.

For four hours, the jihadists fought back, he said. But in the end, they retreated to the reedy river edges. "Eight of them blew themselves up. Others handed themselves over," says Abdel Aal, who has been fighting with the Kurdish-led SDF since 2016. Abdel Aal, who hails from the northeastern Kurdish province of Hassakeh, shows off war scars acquired in years of battle. On his right side is a gunshot wound sustained during the battle for the jihadists' former de-facto Syrian capital of Raqa, on his neck a scar from a mine explosion.

Another fighter named Omar, a slim 31-year-old wearing a mismatching uniform, also recalls the past days of battle. Even as SDF forces advanced backed by the air strikes of a US-led coalition, the jihadists "would attack sporadically", he says. "Suicide bombers would leap out of tunnels. Most were foreigners - from Kazakhstan, France, Saudi Arabia and Iraq." There was a time when the jihadists injected fear and claimed deadly attacks across the Middle East and beyond. — AFP