

Islamic State group advances in central Syria, seizing town

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Beirut: The Islamic State militant group is advancing in central Syria, seizing control of a town that lies near a highway leading to the capital, Damascus, and attacking another, activists and the group said Sunday.

The capture of Mahin, in the central Homs province, and the push toward majority-Christian town of Sadad, marks a new advance of the Islamic State group beyond its strongholds in northern and eastern Syria. The militant group had seized control of the ancient city of Palmyra in May and a neighboring village.

The new IS expansion comes despite Russian airstrikes in Syria, which Moscow says target IS and other terrorist groups. For the most part, the Russian airstrikes, in their fifth week, have targeted Western-backed rebel groups and other Islamist groups.

IS militants have also made recent gains in Aleppo, seizing villages from other rebel groups and controlling a section of a strategic highway that serves as a supply route into government-controlled areas of Aleppo.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said after intensive clashes with government troops, IS forces captured Mahin and were now pushing their way northwest toward Sadad.

Mahin is 25 kilometers (15 miles) east of the highway that links the central province to Damascus.

The town also houses a large military complex and arms depots and was scene of intense clashes between government troops and al-Qaida's affiliate in Syria in 2013 before the government recaptured it.

Sadad is home to Syria's Assyrian Christian minority and the ancient language of Aramaic is still spoken there.

The Islamic State internet radio broadcast, Al-Bayan, said the group took control of large arms depots in Mahin after a suicide bomber blew himself up at a government checkpoint outside the town, opening the way for its fighters to advance.

The Observatory reported airstrikes on Mahin, following IS control of the town.

In its fifth year, the Syrian civil war has claimed more than 250,000 lives and caused half of the pre-war population to become displaced or refugees in the bloody violence that also left over a million injured.

What started out as protests against the government of President Bashar Assad in 2011 has turned into a bloody civil war that has also attracted militants from around the world, fanned by rising sectarianism in the region.

The violence has shattered the pre-war coexistence of sects and religions that Syria prided itself on, giving rise to radicals on all sides of the conflict, and pitted the country's majority Sunnis against the Alawites, the offshoot Shiite sect to which Assad belongs.

In a chilling reflection of this increasingly entrenched reality, rebels in a suburb of the Syrian capital which came under heavy bombings have paraded government loyalists in cages in the streets, using them as human shields against further attacks.

Videos of the metal cages mounted on pick-up trucks roaming the streets of Douma surfaced Sunday, with each carrying at least half a dozen government soldiers or women professing to be members of the Alawite minority.

The Shaam news agency, operated by anti-government activists, said at least 100 cages are deployed in residential areas of the rebel-suburb as a way to pressure the government to stop its bombing.

At least 70, mostly civilians, were killed after a government barrage of missiles hit a Douma market Friday.

A hashtag on social media, Cages of Protection, spread to highlight images of the caged prisoners. The Observatory said government troops have also used the practice in majority-Shiite villages in the northern rebel-held province of Idlib. The government-allied troops locked rebels and allied civilians in cages, putting them on building rooftops to prevent rebel shelling of the besieged villages, the Observatory said.

The IS group has also held foes in cages in public spaces, paraded them in the streets in orange jumpsuits, also in Iraq and Libya, and threatened to burn them alive.

Also on Sunday, Syria's foreign minister said "important" points were made during international talks seeking to revive a moribund political process and end his country's civil war.

But Walid al-Moallem said negotiators failed to convince his government's foes to curb their support for "terrorism." Syria's government refers to the entire armed opposition as "terrorists." It blames Saudi Arabia and Turkey of arming them and fuelling terrorism in Syria.

Al-Moallem's comments came after his meeting with U.N. special envoy Staffan de Mistura, who arrived in Damascus Sunday to brief him on the details of the international talks in Vienna.

The Vienna meeting, which ended Friday, brought together the United States, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, which back the Syrian opposition, and Assad's two key allies, Iran and Russia.

Neither the Syrian government nor the opposition was directly represented at the talks.

- AP