

Islamic State suffers blows in Iraq, Syria but still launches attacks

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Baghdad: After months of losing ground in Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State group is showing signs of wear and tear, and its opponents say they have seen an increase in desertions among the extremists. But the jihadis appear to be lashing back with more terrorist and chemical attacks.

Under a stepped-up campaign of U.S.-led and Russian airstrikes, as well as ground assaults by multiple forces in each country, the jihadis are estimated to have lost about 40 per cent of their territory in Iraq and more than 20 per cent in Syria.

At their highest point in the summer of 2014, the group had overrun nearly a third of each country, declaring a "caliphate" spanning from northwestern Syria to the outskirts of Baghdad.

At that time, the extremists were riding high, known for their courage, experience, readiness to die and brutality.

Now, those battling them on the ground say they appear to be flagging.

"What we are witnessing is that Daesh are not as determined as they used to be," Lt. Col. Fares al-Bayoush, commander of a Syrian rebel faction, said, using an Arabic acronym to refer to IS.

His 1,300-strong Fursan al-Haq Brigade has been fighting against IS and Syrian government forces for more than a year.

"Now there are members who surrender, there are some who defect. In the past they used to come blow themselves up," he said.

A Palestinian-American member of IS recently gave himself up to Kurdish forces in northern Iraq, but so far, the reports of desertions are mostly anecdotal. Brett McGurk, President Barack Obama's envoy to the U.S.-led coalition fighting IS, said this week at a conference in northern Iraq that IS desertions have increased recently and more are expected, but he did not provide figures.

Clint Watts, a fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute, said IS is experiencing a phenomenon he's witnessed in other extremist groups that begin to lose territory.

"You've seen more and more reports of defectors just broadly, and you've also seen more reports of internal killings of so-called spies," Mr. Watts said. "As they lose ground and retract you start to see these fractures emerge in the organization."

The IS setbacks began over a year ago, when the fighters were forced out of the northern Syrian Kurdish town of Kobani by local Kurdish forces backed by U.S.-led airstrikes.

In December, the predominantly Kurdish U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces, or SDF, under cover of intense coalition airstrikes seized the Tishrin Dam, which supplies much of northern Syria with electricity. In the weeks that followed the forces gained control of more areas.

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