

Al-Hawl Camp and the Potential Resurgence of ISIS

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Brief Analysis

Even after the fall of the Islamic State's (ISIS) territorial control last March, the al-Hawl refugee camp of northern Syria remains the group's beating heart. Over the past five years, both ISIS and other extremist groups have spread extremist ideologies throughout the Syrian al-Hawl region, with the al-Hawl camp now concentrating and typifying this extremism. The poor infrastructure and overcrowding from which al-Hawl camp suffers is not new, but the global public health crisis is creating a greater urgency to address the endemic problems of the camp.

Al-Hawl camp was initially established around 30 years ago as a refugee camp for Iraqis who fled the border to Syria during the First Gulf War, and was later reopened following the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq as one of the three main camps at the Syria-Iraq border. As such, its position is along the remote area that makes up much of this border. Its isolated nature proved beneficial to ISIS, which during its years of territorial expansion focused on this porous border region. ISIS found the space safe to spread its extremist ideology among the Arab tribes inhabiting these areas.

Given its location, al-Hawl camp subsequently became a central area for housing captured ISIS fighters during the battle against ISIS. Current ISIS leadership sees the camp as its primary source of remaining supporters because of the large number who are detained in the camp, hailing from a variety of nationalities from around the world. Over the past few years, the [al-Hawl camp \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/al-hawl-camp-a-potential-incubator-of-the-next-generation-of-extremism\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/al-hawl-camp-a-potential-incubator-of-the-next-generation-of-extremism) has become [a collection point for more than 12,000 extremist \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/al-hawl-camp-a-potential-incubator-of-the-next-generation-of-extremism\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/al-hawl-camp-a-potential-incubator-of-the-next-generation-of-extremism) s [s \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/al-hawl-camp-a-potential-incubator-of-the-next-generation-of-extremism\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/al-hawl-camp-a-potential-incubator-of-the-next-generation-of-extremism), mostly women and children from ISIS families. As such, experts have repeatedly demonstrated that the situation in al-Hawl camp poses a greater to international and regional security.

Factors that fuel a resurgence at Al-Hawl

In recent years, a number of factors have made the conditions in al-Hawl camp favorable for its residents to help

spearhead a revival of ISIS.

While much of northeastern Syria is isolated, portions of al-Hawl camp have greater connectivity with the outside world. Individuals in the camp are separated into two sections. The members of the camp who enjoy a comparatively high freedom of movement live in the largest section, which houses Syrians and Iraqis. The smaller section, known as the ‘annex,’ is comprised of mostly foreigners. Syrians in particular, remain relatively connected to life outside the camp, either through the legal use of mobile devices and other communication mechanisms or financially, through transfer of funds through the hawala

(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyNote70-Zelin.pdf>) system. However, this openness could also enable ISIS communication between the organization’s cells inside the camp and its members abroad.

While it is difficult to assess how many women in al-Hawl are still loyal to ISIS, those who support the organization are not separated from the rest of the camp and, as a result, the populations within the camp have been imbibing the organization’s ideas for a number of years. The entire camp population still lives under a style of ISIS rule, though externally monitored by SDF forces. Terms such as “decapitation,” “infidels,” “raids,” “rebels,” and “caliphate” have become ingrained in the daily lives and discussions of ISIS families. Women loyal to ISIS have formed secret councils inside the camp to monitor the personal lives of camp residents to find out whether or not they are adhering to the group’s ideology. ISIS cells inside the camp have also formed a “Hisbah agency” or the Islamic police, mostly made up of foreign women.

Violent incidents are not uncommon in the camp; in August 2019, several foreign women killed a woman of Indonesian nationality inside her tent because she was not adhering to the rules of the camp enforced by women loyal to ISIS. There have also been repeated stabbings carried out by adolescents—also known as “cubs of the Caliphate”—against those who have ‘violated’ the organization’s rules inside the camp.

Despite the dire situation in the camp and the urgent need to rehabilitate the extremist elements there, a number of systemic factors have inhibited parties from taking greater action to address the violence and extremism that continues inside the camp. Like much of Syria at present, the area suffers from a weak and impoverished infrastructure of educational and vital services, as well as the lack of local and international support. As a result, al-Hawl lacks any comprehensive program to rehabilitate residents in the camp—especially children.

The latest Turkish military intervention in Syria has also created conditions in the past few months that are especially ripe for a resurgence of ISIS. Turkey began its incursion late last year with the hopes of establishing a “safe zone” on the border inside SDF territory, following the “go ahead” from U.S. president Trump. Since the offensive was launched in October 2019, the already dire conditions within the camp have deteriorated. While the Kurdish SDF maintains control of the camp, the incursion has led many to question whether they will be able to maintain control as SDF forces remain strapped for resources and under various sorts of pressure.

Since the incursion, the SDF has reduced the number of forces at the camp. The thinning of security and the camp’s proximity to ISIS loyal factions and other extremists groups who still operate in the area provides greater opportunity for extremist groups to maneuver in and out of the camp, smuggle goods, and potentially reenlist and recruit members.

Moreover, the situation is especially dire as the camp faces the potential of being affected by the coronavirus (<https://www.usip.org/publications/2020/05/coronavirus-and-isis-challenge-repatriation-al-hol>) pandemic, which would be catastrophic. While local authorities imposed a curfew and carried out necessary medical assessments of suspected infections to control the pandemic’s spread inside the camp, the overcrowded conditions of the camps combined with unprepared medical centers would result in a swift spread of the disease.

In al-Hawl, the questions of public health and countering extremism are intertwined. Overcrowded conditions in the camp cannot be effectively addressed until deradicalization programs are put in place. Containing the ISIS ideology continuing to foment inside al-Hawl camp requires a vigorous response and the initiation of a serious dialogue on next steps from the international coalition to defeat ISIS and the wider international community. Local authorities will not be able to handle this thorny issue without broader support; it is incumbent on any nation looking to prevent to resurgence of ISIS to help develop a rehabilitation program with a focus on educational and psychological programs targeting the women and children living in the camp. Military support for the SDF must also continue in order to maintain control over the camp and help provide basic services to the residents there.

While the pandemic has upended many international projects, the al-Hawl camp cannot be ignored. If the deteriorating situation in the camp is not addressed and controlled through joint efforts between the Self-Administration and the international community, it is almost certain that ISIS will have an effective platform to rise once again. ❖

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