

The Islamic State in Syria After the U.S. Withdrawal

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Oct 23, 2019

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Brief Analysis

Recent U.S. decisions have seemingly ignored the degree to which the group is continuing its insurgent attacks and reorganizing its supporters inside increasingly vulnerable detention facilities.

In contrast to President Trump's statements over the past half-year, the Islamic State has yet to be defeated outright. True, the group is nowhere near as capable as it was in 2015, but it is steadily rebuilding its capacities and attempting to break thousands of its supporters out of detainment. The vacuum created by the U.S. withdrawal and Turkish invasion will create more space for those efforts, while compounding the original problem of states being unwilling to deal with their citizens who joined IS and remain in Syria. To avoid becoming known as the administration that allowed IS to reemerge and, perhaps, conduct mass-casualty attacks in Europe or elsewhere, President Trump and his cabinet should take urgent action to salvage and mobilize their surviving ties with Washington's longtime partner against IS, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

PREVIOUS BOUNCE-BACK

In an April 2007 speech, Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, the leader of IS predecessor group the Islamic State of Iraq, extolled his movement's adeptness at "remaining" even after suffering setbacks—the origin of the famous IS slogan *baqiya*. In his view, this trait allowed the group to embed itself in a given society, regain strength, and repeatedly resurface to strike back at its enemies. Indeed, while the subsequent Sunni tribal "awakening" and U.S. troop surge would lead to his death and the group's tactical defeat in Iraq, Washington and its allies eventually learned that such victories could be misleading. When the last American forces left Iraq in December 2011, few imagined they would have to return less than three years later, after the group reemerged as IS and conquered large swaths of Iraq and Syria. Although more recent military and territorial losses are much larger in scale than what IS suffered the previous decade, the two experiences are quite similar for its members. The group had a plan for

enduring then, and it has one now as well: to be patient and nimble and pick the right opportunities to reassert itself.

This mindset is perhaps best illustrated in a speech by the late IS spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, who was preparing the group's supporters to endure another tactical defeat as early as May 2016—nearly three years before IS lost the last of its territorial control in Syria. “Victory is the defeat of one's opponent,” he noted, then asked listeners, “Were we defeated when we lost the cities in Iraq and were in the desert without any city or land? And would we be defeated [if we lost] Mosul or Sirte or Raqqa? Certainly not! True defeat is the loss of willpower and desire to fight.” Notwithstanding local and geopolitical differences between the two situations, the Trump administration does not appear to see current dynamics in Syria for what they are: an apparent replay of what occurred between 2011 and 2014.

ISLAMIC STATE ACTIVITY IN SYRIA SINCE THE FALL OF BAGHUZ

Well before losing its final sliver of territory in Baghuz, Syria, this March, IS took active measures to consolidate its organizational structure and position itself to survive as an underground terrorist and insurgent group. Unlike in the past when it would operate as a series of *wilayat* (provinces) within a particular country, IS has streamlined its decisionmaking and operations by melding all of its Syrian “provinces” into a single entity, Wilayat al-Sham.

Meanwhile, the group has conducted a rash of insurgent attacks in various territories controlled by either the SDF, the Assad regime, or Iran's proxy network. From March through mid-October, it claims to have carried out such strikes in multiple provinces: 321 in Deir al-Zour, 100 in Hasaka, 98 in Raqqa, 32 in Homs, 9 in Aleppo, 8 in Deraa, and 3 in Damascus.

In line with these operations, a core vanguard of female IS supporters have been keeping the movement alive within camps housing the families who left Baghuz. The most notable of these supporters can be found at al-Hawl (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/wilayat-al-hawl-remaining-and-incubating-the-next-islamic-state-generation>), a camp in northeast Syria with 68,000 residents. There, foreigners are separated from Iraqis and Syrians, and within this foreign annex is a section called “Jabal al-Baghuz,” where true believers have sought to preserve the group's territorial aspirations and brutal methods of governance. As with past IS female institutions like the Khansa Brigade, these women act primarily as a *hisba* (moral policing) force. They also run a secret court from within their tents. This vigilantism has led to the killing of many women and children over the past half year. At the same time, they are educating children in the hope of producing future jihadists.

What makes the situation at al-Hawl and other Syrian camps so pressing is the fact that current IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi exhorted his fighters in mid-September to break supporters out whenever possible—a scenario that has become much more likely in the aftermath of Turkey's recent cross-border incursion (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/turkeys-syria-incursion-what-spurred-it-and-whats-next>). To defend their fighters and families against this operation, the Kurdish groups that lead the SDF have reallocated some resources that would normally be dedicated to guarding the camps. On October 13, just days after the incursion began, more than 700 foreign women and children left the Ain Issa camp once its guards were withdrawn; three of these women, originally from France, have reportedly rejoined the ranks of active IS operatives. The group will likely keep testing the security of detention facilities, not only women's camps, but also prisons holding male members.

The U.S. troop removal threatens to bolster the IS narrative driving these trends, further convincing the group's supporters that what is happening is “divine will.” When IS was losing Baghuz in March, spokesman Abu al-Hasan al-Muhajir declared, “By God's grace, the sons of the Caliphate continue to prove that they are the firm and solid rock

on which will break the alliance of infidels...They will retreat...in disgrace and shame.” He said this in the context of explaining that the loss was just a test from God to help purify the group’s ranks: “Victory comes with patience, comfort comes with suffering...With patience comes certainty in the promise.” The White House’s withdrawal decision will not only strengthen this resolve, but also help IS recruiters, who can now point to recent developments as “proof” that God is behind them.

AVOIDING THE WORST OUTCOMES

The precise scope and speed of the IS resurgence is difficult to predict given the rapidly changing dynamics on the ground in east Syria. Yet the chief dilemma is already clear: with American troops having left most of their positions, and the SDF still preoccupied with Turkey’s incursion, who exactly will be countering the very active insurgency and rebuilding campaign IS has been conducting for months now? If Turkey was willing to assume that role, the United States would have helped it do so five years ago—instead, Washington decided to create a partnership with the Kurdish-led SDF that Ankara finds so objectionable. The Turkish incursion has now set off cascading events that are helping IS, further indicating that Ankara is not serious when it pledges it will counter the group.

So what role can the United States play now that it has evacuated? For one thing, it should attempt to salvage what it can of the ground and air campaigns it conducted against IS via Iraq and Jordan. An even bigger concern is the prison and camp populations inside Syria, since they include many Westerners. The U.S. government should do more to identify those who fled the Ain Issa camp, while also making sure that other facilities do not suffer similar security breakdowns and mass breakouts.

The latter task requires an international solution, and only the United States can provide the leadership needed to convince European and Arab countries that they must repatriate their citizens and either prosecute or rehabilitate them. Such collective effort would lessen the resources needed to continue running the prisons and camps, ease the pressure on those guarding them, and limit the potential for the most extreme IS elements to replenish the group’s ranks. Only then can the Trump administration rally back from its unforced error of withdrawing troops in chaotic fashion just months after achieving a landmark military victory against IS.

Aaron Zelin is the Richard Borow Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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