

Al-Hawl Camp: A Potential Incubator of the Next Generation of Extremism

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Brief Analysis

Detention facilities for individuals affiliated with jihadist groups in the Middle East have a history of transforming into incubators for the creation and rise of new jihadist organizations, which have proved more dangerous and robust—both in terms of economic strength and manpower—than before. These organizations, which were founded from the remnants of other jihadist groups, have expanded their scope, goals, and areas of operation.

An early precedent occurred in 2003 (<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/02/opinion/how-america-helped-isis.html>), when American forces proceeded to establish Camp Bucca in southern Iraq near the city of Umm Qasr. It appears that there was little concern at the time that this prison would later transform into a **point of convergence** (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/aug/31/inside-al-hawl-camp-the-incubator-for-islamic-states-resurgence>) for jihadists from various radical Islamist jihadist groups in Iraq. The prison has housed all kinds of individuals associated with the numerous jihadist groups that had opposed the presence of coalition forces—and especially American forces—in Iraq, and thus became the ideal environment for incubating new jihadist organizations. It also became a meeting point for the leadership of these groups, such as Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who was arrested by the United States in Fallujah in February of 2004 (<https://www.businessinsider.com/heres-how-isis-leader-really-got-out-of-an-iraqi-prison-2018-2>) at 33 years old.

Camp Bucca should serve as a lesson of the dangers of not working to quickly close jihadist camps. However, the more recent al-Hawl camp for Iraqi refugees and displaced Syrians in the al-Hasakah Governorate of Syrian Kurdistan is close to becoming the Syrian version of Camp Bucca. It serves a point of convergence for more than **12,000 extremists** (<https://www.stripes.com/news/middle-east/eight-americans-including-six-children-detained-during-isis-battles-in-syria-are-sent-home-1.584627>), among them 4,000 women and 8,000 children from families of the Islamic State, or ISIS, who believe in its doctrines and way of life. The concentration of these individuals allows for easy exchange of information and is likely to lead to the eventual revitalization of the jihadist group and the indoctrination of a future generation. While a conversation regarding repatriation of foreign fighters is currently underway, this conversation should feature more prominently the dangers of not removing occupants from the al-Hawl camp as quickly as possible.

Some of the children of ISIS have lived in the camp for years, while others were born under the care and rule of the

Islamic State and raised on a legacy of Islamist jihadism. These children, according to reports, are prepared to carry out the grievances of their fathers and continue their legacy. The women of ISIS have continued extremist education within the camp—children study extremist religious doctrines and expectations from their mothers. There also exists a significant number of children residing in the camp whose parents were killed during operations carried out by the SDF and the international coalition against ISIS. The longer the children spend in the camp, the greater their desire for vengeance will be, developed within the environment to which they are being exposed.

The al-Hawl camp has witnessed a number of events that illustrate how extremist groups among prisoners and families continue to spread their ideology to the next generation within the camps. In June 2019, a woman from an ISIS family **murdered her granddaughter** (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/aug/31/inside-al-hawl-camp-the-incubator-for-islamic-states-resurgence>) in al-Hawl camp because of her refusal to wear Sharia-compliant clothing in accordance with the extremist group's rules and regulations. At the end of August of this year, a group of ISIS prisoners in the refugee camp raised the ISIS flag while chanting the group's slogans and dedicating themselves to serving the cause "until the end." Local Syrian media channels have **also reported videos** (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/aug/31/inside-al-hawl-camp-the-incubator-for-islamic-states-resurgence>) taken within the camps of young children belonging to ISIS families vowing to take revenge and threatening violence.

Practically speaking, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the international coalition forces have not succeeded in addressing the security situation within the al-Hawl camp, despite the ongoing violence within the camp itself. In light of this relative freedom, jihadists are able to gather, enter into agreements, foster dialogue, and make future plans. Even during the height of ISIS, there did not exist this number of jihadist-oriented individuals gathered in one geographic location. The al-Hawl camp brings together jihadists from across the former ISIS-controlled areas, while the SDF and the international coalition monitors them from afar, not taking adequate steps so far to safeguard against the fomenting extremism within the camp itself.

In light of these ongoing issues, the al-Hawl camp is in need of a number of precautionary measures in the coming period in order to contain this crisis and reduce the danger it poses as a area for development of jihadist ideology. International humanitarian organizations and the international coalition are beginning to launch centers and programs for rehabilitation, especially as it relates to children and young men who have, until this point, resided with their families in the camp. However, the international coalition should offer financial aid and provide expertise for the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, which should help administer these types of programs. Developing local expertise is crucial to effectively managing violence and deradicalization efforts on the ground.

However, the international community must also focus working to reduce the number of people housed in the camp itself. With Western and Arab states still refusing to receive ISIS fighters with their nationality, the coalition forces and the SDF could establish an international court in Syria similar to the courts established in Iraq. There are calls in Europe to adopt this approach, but the primary challenge in implementing a courts system remains the fact that this would required European and regional states to enter into negotiations and direct agreements with the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria to establish such a court system. Such an agreement would include international and regional recognition of Rojava, which Turkey, the Syrian regime, and the Syrian opposition currently refuse to do. While the issue of recognizing the Autonomous Administration is currently stalling discussions, all parties involved must realize that there are real issues of radicalization at stake in the al-Hawl camp, and so efforts to reduce its ability to serve as an incubator of radicalization should also be more prominently placed on the international agenda. ❖

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