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# The Islamic State Threat in Syria Two Years After the Caliphate

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Brief Analysis

## Since losing its territorial base, the group has shown troubling signs of recovery amid a deteriorating situation at al-Hawl refugee camp.

On March 28, the U.S.-backed, Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) sent 5,000 fighters into al-Hawl refugee camp to apprehend over thirty people suspected of links to the Islamic State (IS). Housing 61,000 people—mostly women and children, and also [a significant portion of IS supporters](#)—al-Hawl first gained notoriety for absorbing thousands of foreigners and families who stayed with the IS “caliphate” until its last stand at Baghuz two years ago. Marking the anniversary of the March 23, 2019, liberation of Baghuz, SDF commander-in-chief Mazloum Abdi tweeted, “The war isn’t over, reconstruction efforts are vital to prevent ISIS resurgence”—a statement that rings true as the situation at al-Hawl deteriorates, echoing Abdi’s warning last month that the jihadist group “is trying to revive itself” in Syria.

## The IS Role in East Syria

IS has been operating mostly in the vast Badia desert region spanning central and east Syria, waging an insurgent campaign against the SDF and forces loyal to dictator Bashar al-Assad. About 900 American Special Forces personnel remain in Syria to support the SDF, while Russia has carried out a heavy air campaign [to support Assad](#) against IS and various rebel groups. Iran, another Assad ally, [has sent proxy militias](#) such as Liwa Fatemiyoun and Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba to the regime’s aid. In the north, Turkey makes periodic incursions into SDF territory,

and although its aggressive posture has stoked tensions with the United States, it also hampers IS recruitment through improved [policing of the border](#).

IS has nonetheless persevered in Syria, a testament to its ability to preserve itself in the mountains and caves of the Badia and evade superior firepower. Historically, many of the group's best foreign fighters have operated in Syria, with members from North Africa and post-Soviet republics participating in major battles against the regime and SDF in Manbij, Aleppo, Deir al-Zour, Palmyra, Kobane, and Baghuz. Since then, these hardened foreign veterans and their local counterparts have gained two more years of valuable experience as insurgents.

The fact that more IS attacks are occurring in Iraq and West/Central Africa suggests that the group's main focus is currently on other theaters, but it has maintained its interest in Syria and the threat is rising. Following a successful operation last summer to break IS inmates out of prison in Jalalabad, Afghanistan, the August 6 edition of the group's official *al-Naba* newsletter urged other "provinces" to follow suit. Syria is a prime objective here because of the high concentration of IS supporters in both al-Hawl camp and Hasaka Central Prison (containing 5,000 inmates).

## Indicators of Rising Threat

**T**hree factors suggest that the risk of an IS resurgence in Syria is growing:

**Robust attack capability.** The number of IS-claimed attacks in Syria did not change significantly over the past several months—this year, 106 have occurred as of March 17, compared to 101 in the last quarter of 2020. Yet the numbers by themselves can be misleading because the group's attack capability remains quite strong, forcing regime military units and their allies to stay on their toes by inflicting heavy casualties.

On December 30, IS attacked a bus convoy in Deir al-Zour province carrying pro-regime forces, killing up to thirty-nine according to U.S. Defense Department estimates. On February 2, it attacked several regime positions, killing nineteen soldiers and militiamen. In response, Russia conducted further heavy bombing of IS positions in the Badia, including 100 airstrikes on February 4-5. Yet the group was unperturbed, killing twenty-six fighters from the pro-regime militia Liwa al-Quds during operations in Deir al-Zour three days later. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, IS launched another series of deadly attacks on February 19-20. This time, fifteen soldiers went missing (likely captured or executed) after the group torched a troop bus, and fifteen militiamen were killed in separate operations.

**Demoralized adversaries.** In both regime and SDF territories, security forces have been spooked by the string of IS attacks, even abandoning certain towns in the middle of the night for fear of being unable to protect them—essentially ceding them to at least partial IS control. This demonstrates that neither party is willing to sustain significant casualties in order to retain areas where IS operates. In contrast, IS fighters in Syria and their supporters in detention centers remain highly committed to their cause, making for a precarious situation.

**Increasing control over local populations.** When infiltrating regime and SDF territories, IS employs various tactics to increase its influence over as many residents as possible. In rural areas of the Badia, it often imposes mafia-like governance by extorting businesses, shepherds, and other locals. Those who do not comply face death, abduction, or confiscation of their property, and neither the regime nor the SDF has done much to prevent these abuses. Assad's forces are barely keeping control in some areas (Sukhna, Salamiya), while SDF control has been eroded by IS attacks on local "collaborators." Among the many tribal and community leaders who have been targeted for working with the SDF, an elder of the Ougaidat tribe was killed in January. And on March 13, IS released a list of inhabitants in the Deir al-Zour village of Jadid Ougaidat, threatening to kill them and destroy their homes if they did not "repent."

IS tactics are particularly worrisome in al-Hawl and Hasaka Prison. Beheadings, point-blank executions with silenced pistols, and other killings have become increasingly common in al-Hawl (forty-one murders this year alone, compared to thirty-three documented incidents in all of 2020). Connections to the outside are growing as well—camp

residents now have easier access to weapons and smugglers to move people in and out, and some Hasaka inmates can readily obtain cellphones.

## How the United States Can Mitigate the Threat

IS has been laying the groundwork for a full resurgence by weakening regime and SDF units, exerting greater influence in their territories, and improving its position in al-Hawl and Hasaka Prison. With the Assad regime in survival mode and the SDF more worried about Turkish aggression than an IS surge, the United States needs to pay greater attention to this issue before it explodes into something even more dangerous.

For starters, Washington should reassure the SDF—its only partner in Syria—by addressing its areas of concern in order to free up more manpower for fighting IS. Moving U.S. troops to the SDF’s northern territories would help deter major Turkish incursions, further reassuring local commanders. Meanwhile, U.S. officials can try to build confidence between Ankara and the SDF by mediating their disputes and setting up mechanisms to improve transparency. As mentioned previously, the March 28 raid in al-Hawl involved 5,000 personnel, but sustaining this kind of manpower and proactive operational footing in the long term will require American assurances about other major SDF concerns.

In particular, the SDF needs substantial air and intelligence support if it is to sustain effective counter-IS operations and bring a semblance of security to its territories—all of which requires a continued U.S. presence on the ground. Financial support is also needed to improve conditions at al-Hawl and manage inmates at Hasaka. The SDF cannot manage these tasks alone while still concentrating sufficiently on security. In addition, U.S. forces should continue helping the SDF establish local civil councils and develop closer relationships with communities that are under threat of IS extortion. Given the precarious positions of the regime and SDF alike, a U.S. force reduction now would be tantamount to ceding Deir al-Zour province to IS.

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