Syria Crisis Leaves Islamic State Prisons and Detention Camps Vulnerable

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Brief Analysis

Even as global attention is turned toward major transition questions in Damascus, the international community cannot lose focus on the fight against the Islamic State—an essential part of which is ensuring the security of northeastern detention facilities.

The lightning offensive led by rebel group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) has created power vacuums in large parts of Syria, with many actors jostling for influence in already undergoverned spaces. While most eyes are now on Damascus and the rubble of Bashar al-Assad's regime, U.S. and allied attention is urgently needed in the northeast, where detention camps and prisons holding thousands of men, women, and children affiliated with the Islamic State (IS) remain extremely vulnerable.

Key Actors and Spheres of Influence

Since the start of Syria's long civil war, the country has been divided into multiple spheres of influence (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/turkey-wants-stitch-iraq-and-syria-back-together-part-1) and control. In addition to the Assad-controlled zone, various state and nonstate actors have jostled for local power or other interests:

- Russia and Iran, which sought to bolster Assad and extend their own influence

- Turkey, which has carried out military incursions and sponsored militias along the northern border to push back Kurdish influence

- The U.S.-led coalition, which continues the fight against IS

- IS itself, which is once again seeking to resurge

- HTS, which controlled Idlib province and held off regime and Russian pressure for years before launching its latest

offensive

- The Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA), which operates in northwestern areas where Turkey has conducted incursions
- The U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the Kurdish-led group that controls most of the northeast and oversees the detention facilities in question

Since 2019, when IS lost its last bit of territorial control and Turkey intervened militarily in the north, the operating environment in Syria and the actors involved have remained mostly consistent—until this week. Clearly, this stability was hanging by just a thin thread. Now that it has been cut, sweeping changes are putting security at risk across the entire country.

This includes the northeastern zone where the SDF and allied forces control more than twenty-six camps and prisons holding approximately 50,000 IS-affiliated individuals (41,000 in camps, 9,000 in prisons). For years, IS has encouraged supporters to attack these facilities and free the detainees, whom the group views as vital to spreading its ideology, improving its operational success, and facilitating its resurgence. Despite longstanding international pressure to ease this risk by repatriating these individuals to their countries of origin, progress remains dangerously slow (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/five-years-after-caliphate-too-much-remains-same-northeast-syria) five years after the IS "caliphate" collapsed.

SNA-SDF Clashes, Tribal Tensions, and IS Opportunities

After days of fighting, SNA forces have taken advantage of the HTS assault (https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/08/world/middleeast/syria-turkey-kurds.html) by seizing long-held SDF territory in Manbij, located nineteen miles from the Turkish border. Although the U.S.-led coalition has long supported and worked with the SDF, both the SNA and its Turkish patron view the force as an offshoot of Ankara's nemesis the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a NATO-designated terrorist group. Accordingly, they have long sought to diminish the SDF's influence by controlling more territory along the Turkish border.

The SDF has been dealing with numerous challenges and internal weaknesses over the past few years, including increased tensions with local Arab tribes (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/countering-iran-east-syria-means-moderating-sdf) frustrated with its governance platform. Turkey and other actors have actively tried to exploit these vulnerabilities, including through direct attacks on Kurdish forces. As such, the SDF has essentially fought a two-front war since 2019—against IS, and against Turkey and the SNA.

In response to the latest SNA clashes, the SDF has called for a massive mobilization (https://manage.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/011220243) . As experts and the SDF itself have long warned (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/future-repatriation-northeast-syria) , however, increased Turkish pressure inside Syria often compels the SDF to pause essential training and divert forces responsible for overseeing detention facilities, making these prisons and camps more vulnerable to IS plots. Amid the chaos of the past week, the United States has reaffirmed its goal (https://www.voanews.com/a/white-house-on-guard-against-islamic-state-resurgence-in-syria/7891348.html) of ensuring that IS does not resurge, but the group has not given up its ambition (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/islamic-states-shadow-governance-eastern-syria-fall-baghuz) to retake territory, free detainees, and return to its past heights.

Policy Recommendations

Even as global attention is understandably turned toward major transition questions in Damascus, the international community cannot lose focus on the fight against IS—an essential part of which is ensuring the security of northeastern prisons and detention camps. These facilities remain vulnerable to major IS attacks like the

2022 al-Sinaa prison break. The United States and other actors must therefore do what is needed to bolster the external defenses of these facilities and the security of the detainees inside them—which means making sure the SDF has the resources it needs to continue this mission.

Moreover, the current Syria crisis should be used as an opportunity to reemphasize the fact that the de facto policy of indefinite detention is not sustainable. The risk of breakouts is rising, and any IS operatives or supporters who escape could wind up returning to their countries of origin outside the formal repatriation process, thereby posing potential security risks at home. Many countries have been reluctant to repatriate their citizens, but reminding them of the growing risks of inaction could spur them to take the necessary steps. In this regard, the United States should continue leading by example, emphasizing the need for proactive repatriation, accountability, and reintegration in order to combat the threat of IS resurgence in Syria and abroad.

Finally, as shown by U.S. involvement this week in an **operation against IS (https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/3989696/us-central-command-conducts-dozens-of-airstrikes-to-eliminate-isis-camps-in-cen/)** in central Syria, Washington and its partners must take steps to counter the group's insurgency throughout the country, not just in the northeast. This entails a proactive rather than reactive approach to combatting the group, preventing it from resurging and retaking territory in the first place.

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