



Wilayat al-Hawl

'Remaining' and Incubating the Next Islamic State Generation

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"What we did is we took Baghuz and we brought it here."

—Mahmoud Gadou, official responsible for displaced persons in northeast Syria

THE REFUGEE CAMP in northern Syria known as al-Hawl has been the cause of much hand-wringing since early 2019, especially regarding the women and children who make up 94 percent of its residents. These residents originate from dozens of countries, but mainly Syria and Iraq, and some are alleged to have ties to the Islamic State (IS). The exact number of supporters is difficult to assess, but the most extreme adherents come from the foreign contingent. With the October 2019 decision by U.S. president Donald Trump to allow a Turkish military operation in northeast Syria against the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF),



anxiety regarding the camp has turned to panic. But the United States, in retreating, is not the lone culprit. The larger international community also bears much responsibility for failing to resolve the future of al-Hawl's residents. This has allowed IS followers in the camp to "remain," a longtime rallying cry for the group in the face of its various enemies.

Since al-Hawl's population began to swell in early 2019, the SDF has been burdened with maintaining an unsustainable status quo at the camp without a long-term vision or the resources for reintegrating and repatriating the women and children housed there. The urgency of this task should have been underlined—including for U.S. officials—after President Trump first announced he would withdraw all U.S. troops from northeast Syria in December 2018, before reversing his decision.¹ Since early March 2019, the situation at al-Hawl has clearly been tenuous, and inappropriate handling of it appeared certain to lead to other problems.² Now, with the U.S. troop withdrawal, the potential for an IS breakout of the camp increases by the day as a consequence of these failures. Other dynamics, such as the likely return of the Assad regime and Iran's proxy network to northeast Syria, will introduce even greater instability that could be exploited by IS.

To better understand the scope of this humanitarian and burgeoning security disaster, one must look holistically at the situation at al-Hawl since the last holdouts from IS territory in Baghuz, Syria, arrived in late March 2019. In doing so, this paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics at play. This analysis is all the more pressing in light of IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's mid-September 2019 exhortation to IS fighters in Syria to support and break out residents of the camp:

On behalf of your brothers and sisters, act in order to save them, and destroy the gates that hold them. "Release the captive" is a command and advice from your prophet. Therefore, do not fall short in rescuing them, if you are determined to break their shackles by force. And lie in wait in every ambush for their butchers, the investigators and judges and those aggressors who afflicted them. How can a Muslim accept to live while Muslim women are suffering in the displacement camps and the prisons of humiliation...while they receive nothing from those who claim and profess to bear the issues of the *umma* but abandonment, slander, backstabbing,

defacement, and incitement against them! O God, free the captives...and grant the best deliverance to the prisoners...return them to their loved ones safe and sound, and keep for them their religion and make them steadfast on the truth.³

According to Amarnath Amarasingam, a researcher on extremism who had just returned in early October 2019 from a week at al-Hawl and northeast Syria, "al-Baghdadi's speech calling for a prison break had [a] profound impact inside [the] camps," leading to a rise in violence and testing of the security architecture.⁴

In this context, it should be recalled that the Islamic State gained momentum and filled its ranks in the pre-caliphate days through a "breaking the walls" campaign beginning in July 2012. This campaign culminated in a series of prison breaks in Iraq in July 2013 that helped bring former fighters back into the jihadist group's fold and continued to build its strength as it began taking territory in Iraq and Syria.

The al-Hawl context is of course different. A breakout there would not be used to replenish fighting ranks but rather to repopulate the broad-based caliphate project and society. Facilitating a breakout for this population would also help restart the Islamic State's multigenerational plan of socially engineering children by allowing them exposure only to life within the framework of its ideology. This scenario would be unprecedented in jihadist history. A core group among those at al-Hawl still effectively flies the banner of the caliphate as they await its resurrection with great hope.

Al-Hawl, finally, is the largest of the camps overseen by the SDF, making the project of understanding it even more imperative. The sections that follow will explore the demographics of the camp, camp conditions, and the dynamics both among the camp residents and between them and the Asayesh, as the Kurdish security services are known. It will also attempt to assess possible paths forward, taking into account the rapid changes on the ground.

CAMP DEMOGRAPHICS

According to Mahmoud Gadou, a Kurdish official responsible for internally displaced persons (IDPs) in northeast Syria, the camp's tenor changed dramatically with the March 2019 influx from Baghuz: "When people began to arrive at the camp from Baghuz, the

atmosphere changed 180 degrees. [Before that] women were not covering their faces. Now, you cannot see a girl older than 8 without a veil.”⁵ This makeover for the camp has led to a gang-like atmosphere, especially among the foreigners. Making matters worse is the fact that data on residents, especially among the foreigners, is limited. Those admitting individuals into the camp did not conduct the same type of intake information processing—fingerprinting and facial recognition—done for the male jihadists who had been arrested and imprisoned.⁶ Moreover, as the analyst Azadeh Moaveni explains, “Determining the precise number of children in the camp, along with their paternity and nationality, is also difficult. The camp prisoner lists are incomplete and do not align with governments’ lists of their citizens; there are people in the camp who are not on any list, and people on lists who do not appear in the camp at all.”⁷

Based on a triangulation of sources, the following details illustrate the acute challenge presented by the camp and its unsustainability over the long term:

- 73,000 total individuals were being held at al-Hawl at the camp’s peak in April 2019⁸
- 68,000 currently populate the camp, equating to around 19,000 households⁹
- 94% of the total population consists of women and children¹⁰
- 86% of the residents are either Iraqi (45%) or Syrian (41%)¹¹
- 20,000 of the total population is under age five, meaning they have only known life after the Islamic State’s caliphate announcement¹²
- 11,000-plus foreign women and children are based at the camp, from as many as sixty-two countries¹³
- 7,000 of the foreigners are children¹⁴
- 65% of the foreign-held individuals are under age twelve¹⁵
- 25% of the foreign-held individuals are under age five¹⁶
- 3,500 children do not have birth documents¹⁷
- 1,400 foreign women and children have been repatriated¹⁸

The camp was not originally divided but is now split into two sections (see figure 1). The large area houses the camp’s Iraqis and Syrians, while the small area holds the remaining foreigners. According to the camp’s head of relations, Mohammed Ibrahim, “We thought we could put [the foreigners] together with the Syrians and Iraqis and they would adapt. But some of them are very extreme and called them infidels and burned their tents.”¹⁹ Such comments reinforce the notion that the foreigners are more extreme.

Within the so-called foreigners’ annex is an even smaller subsection called Jabal al-Baghuz, where the most extreme elements are located, having self-segregated themselves. These residents have tried to control the rest of the annex to continue the rule of the Islamic State—a de facto Wilayat al-Hawl, in IS parlance. The name Jabal al-Baghuz refers to the Islamic State’s last stronghold in Syria before it relinquished control of territory in March 2019.

Surrounding the camp, a sand berm and trenches have been set up to deter Islamic State car bombings intended to break out those inside.²⁰ It is increasingly likely, with the Turkish campaign under way in northeast Syria, that IS sleeper cells will attempt to break people out of al-Hawl to test the camp’s more-vulnerable security infrastructure.



Figure 1: al-Hawl Camp, September 22

Source: Captured by Sentinel-2 L1C (developed and operated by the European Space Agency)

CAMP CONDITIONS

Health and safety conditions are so dire at al-Hawl that it bears the moniker “Camp of Death.”²¹ Part of this has to do with the camp’s maximum capacity, 40,000.²² Conditions were also significantly worsened after the population ballooned from 9,000 in December 2018 to 73,000 following the fall of the Islamic State’s last remaining territory in Baghuz (compare figure 2 against figure 3).²³ But no attempt has been made to separate the true IS believers from the camp’s previous inhabitants, mainly consisting of Syrian and Iraqi IDPs and refugees, let alone those whom IS ruled over.²⁴

On the humanitarian front, Heidi De Pauw, CEO of the nonprofit Child Focus, said in March 2019 that “there are insufficient resources to adequately feed and care for children.”²⁵ According to Human Rights Watch, dozens of aid agencies operate in al-Hawl,



Figure 2: al-Hawl Camp, January 5



Figure 3: al-Hawl Camp, April 15

Source: Figures 2 and 3 were both captured by Sentinel-2 L1C

with a health clinic and a mobile clinic run by Doctors Without Borders and the International Committee of the Red Cross, respectively, within the foreigners’ annex.²⁶ However, due to the growing instability in the camp even prior to the Turkish invasion, the hours for these clinics were becoming increasingly limited.²⁷ Moreover, much of the services are for basic illnesses and not specialty medical care.²⁸ The situation is likely to get worse following the Turkish incursion. On October 15, 2019, Doctors Without Borders and the International Rescue Committee announced they were suspending their services.²⁹ Others could follow.

As a consequence of the limited resources and security dynamics, from January 2019 through the beginning of September 2019, 409 children died at al-Hawl, 35 of them as a result of malnutrition and diseases spread in the Islamic State’s last stronghold.³⁰ Children have been known to defecate publicly on the ground because there are not enough toilets.³¹ Latrines overflow, leaving sewage to trickle into individuals’ tents, causing a stench on top of the litter strewn in parts of the camp.³² The camp’s water supplies are also not sanitary. The drinking water lacks enough chlorine, and children were observed drinking from a tank of wash water with worms in it.³³ According to the World Health Organization, cases of E. coli have even surfaced.³⁴ These various humanitarian problems have led to the spread of a number of diseases, including cholera, respiratory tract infections, and pneumonia, along with diarrhea.³⁵ Due to the desert-like conditions and inadequate food situation, children are also developing skin rashes from leishmaniasis (a sand fly-borne parasite), swollen bellies, and dirt-caked bodies that attract multitudes of flies.³⁶ Reports of sexual assault against children have also appeared, exacerbated by the status of many as orphans.³⁷

Unsurprisingly, the children are quickly falling behind in their education. According to the United Nations, around 11,000 children between ages six and eighteen have not previously received proper education, with many reported as illiterate.³⁸ The lack of schools in the camp has worsened the situation.³⁹ Considering that some of the women, especially in the foreign contingent, remain loyal to IS, certain children are likely being taught the Islamic State’s radical curriculum and broader ideas by their mothers or other women in private tents. As Simon Cottee and Mia Bloom rightly argue with regard to the movement’s future and women at this camp, “The chief risk that these women pose lies not

in their activation as combatants, it's as incubators of the next generation of IS fighters."⁴⁰ Therefore, it is no surprise that an IS woman interviewed by a journalist within al-Hawl explained that "with the will of God, we will bring up this generation—the youngest to the oldest."⁴¹ More troubling still, according to Aylül, as the camp's head of security was identified, the women "tell [their children the SDF] killed their fathers and destroyed their homes."⁴² Similarly, Jaber Mustafa, who is part of al-Hawl's management, said that "at first the kids were okay, friendly even, since then they have been told to keep away from us or face punishment by the *hisba* [moral police]."⁴³

Evidence of this influence of the women increasingly became clear beginning in mid-July 2019, when a number of videos were released online by Islamic State supporters in the camp. In one, a group of children raise a homemade IS flag to a lamppost while chanting "Allahu akbar" (God is the greatest) and "baqiya" (remaining)—the latter an infamous IS slogan—while their mothers watch and take videos and pictures.⁴⁴ About a week after this particular incident, another video was uploaded online that showed five preteen boys in the camp giving *baya* (a religious oath of allegiance) to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, stating, "God willing, we will step on the heads of apostates," and also chanting "Dawlat al-Islam baqiya" (the Islamic State remains).⁴⁵ In late September 2019, Mahmud Shikhibra, an NBC News producer, uploaded a video on Twitter in which he asked a young boy in the camp if he wanted to be an *inghimasi* (a fighter until the end who blows himself up before being caught). He then asked whom he would kill, to which the boy answered, "You, if you were not a Muslim."⁴⁶ These three videos highlight some of the challenges ahead.

With no playgrounds, the children have few outlets to be children.⁴⁷ At most, they create toy guns out of water pipes and duct tape as well as custom IS-style swag.⁴⁸ At this juncture, no psychological services are available for these children who have been exposed to all levels of violence, let alone deradicalization programs for those educated in the Islamic State's system from 2013 to 2019. The children, of course, had no choice regarding their upbringing. But their exposure to a radical worldview alone will make reintegrating them—or just integrating them—into society all the more difficult. The longer these children remain under the influence of IS-supporting mothers, or, for the orphans, other women,

the higher the likelihood they will fulfill these women's promise to rear a new generation of jihadists.

The section of the camp for Syrians and Iraqis is different from the foreigners' annex. Residents in the former have a lot more freedom of movement within the camp as well as access to the outside world via financial transactions through the hawala system, and are allowed legally to secure mobile technology to communicate with those outside the camp.⁴⁹ Residents of the foreigners' annex generally lack such freedoms. Based on this two-tier system, in which the Syrians and Iraqis also receive better healthcare, the Syrian and Iraqi women and children could theoretically have fewer grievances in the future, and their potential for reintegration is likely stronger. Some of the women and possibly some of the children in the foreigners' annex, by contrast, have likely become even more strident in their beliefs based on what they see as injustices affecting them at al-Hawl. Moreover, the communal experience has likely strengthened some of their bonds, which could augur for an even more committed movement if they are released or broken out.

Of course, among this camp's residents are Syrians who were coerced into marrying IS male members, as well as foreign fighters who have become disillusioned by the experience. Yet another category no longer believes in Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as the caliph but still believes in the general idea of the caliphate, as an Egyptian woman notes.⁵⁰ Among the most tragic stories involves still another group at the camp: Yazidis who were enslaved by the Islamic State, with many IS women having partaken in this practice. Reports in August 2019 indicated that a missing Yazidi girl had been killed inside al-Hawl.⁵¹ Why the enslavers and the enslaved would be housed together raises serious questions about the system at the camp.

Those running the camps are well aware of these shortcomings. The manager of al-Hawl, Hamrin al-Hassan, notes that if "we do not fulfill their needs, they will rise up against us."⁵² Yet due to inadequate resources from international donors and a general lack of planning by the U.S.-led coalition that helped eject the Islamic State, coupled with the American withdrawal from northern Syria, the likelihood of an IS resurgence has spiked. As of mid-September 2019, according to Tohidan Raman, a commander in the Kurdish Women's Protection Units, it costs in the millions of dollars per day to run the camp.⁵³

REMAINING SUPPORT FOR THE ISLAMIC STATE

It is difficult to know exactly how many women at al-Hawl continue to support the Islamic State's goals. According to Maj. Gen. Alex Grynkewich, the deputy commander of the U.S.-led military coalition to defeat IS, there are allegedly "20,000 suspected 'hardcore IS' members in the camp."⁵⁴ The lack of an intake process or census makes this guesswork, to an extent. Yet it is not totally unsurprising that some would still cling to the Islamic State dream, since most in the camp did not flee IS territory until the final battle in Baghuz.

Women like Ghalia Ali from Tunisia, who joined the Islamic State in 2014 after quitting school, claims she has no regrets about her decision.⁵⁵ Similarly, Lamia, who is from Manbij, Syria, says that "we remain with *al-dawla* [IS]."⁵⁶ The Chechen Salimah Athilayabah felt the same way, saying, "Still, there's a caliphate in our hearts."⁵⁷ Part of this continued support could be due to the rules, order, and structure created by IS, which some might crave. For instance, the twenty-two-year-old Iraqi Umm Aisha explains that "[IS] told us what was right and what was wrong. It was better. Here, people wear whatever they want."⁵⁸ Others like Umm Safia from Marseille, France, enjoyed life under IS rule: "To live in the Caliphate, it was such a beautiful thing."⁵⁹ The Finnish woman Minna concurs, "I'd rather live in a sharia state than in Finland."⁶⁰

For those who still believe in IS leader Baghdadi and the group's broader ideology, the al-Hawl camp allows old associations to flourish. Therefore, unofficially some camp inhabitants have continued to act as if they are part of the al-Khansa Brigade, the women-led *hisba* patrol when IS controlled territory.⁶¹ These women have also been running secret courts within the foreigners' annex to exert control over the rest of the population.⁶² Two sisters were allegedly beaten by Russian enforcers for not appearing at the court in late September 2019.⁶³

According to various accounts, British, Egyptian, Indonesian, Kazakh, Moroccan, Russian (Chechen and Dagestani), Somali, Tunisian, Turkish, and Uzbek women are viewed as the most ardent in continuing this trend and way of life.⁶⁴ However, of all nationalities, the Tunisian women seem to rank highest in their steadfastness in supporting the IS cause within the camp.⁶⁵ This is likely the case because the founder of the al-Khansa

Brigade was a Tunisian woman who went by Umm Rayan al-Tunisi, and also because a number of Tunisian women took on leadership roles within IS while it had a governance structure.⁶⁶

This dynamic has led female IS adherents to punish other individuals' children for dancing and singing as well as to enforce strict prayer times.⁶⁷ There are cases of pro-IS women whipping other women for smoking in the camp.⁶⁸ These pro-IS women have also spread fear and violence in trying to maintain control and push people to keep following the jihadist group. This faction has, in turn, called those not following the caliphal rules *kuffar* (infidels), such as the Guyanese convert Vanessa.⁶⁹ An unnamed Belgian woman explains that "these people scare me...talking to the guards, or requesting to go to the market, can make us infidels."⁷⁰ Reports also suggest that this *hisba* force within the camp is threatening individuals if they seek medical care outside al-Hawl, despite the inadequate medical care within the camp.⁷¹ The women themselves, as noted, cannot freely leave the camp of their own accord.

Beyond verbal threats, the extremists have set fire to other women's tents as punishment for allegedly speaking to men or unveiling.⁷² According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), in just the first three weeks of September 2019, 128 tents were burned.⁷³ The lack of fire extinguishers or a fire department within the camp makes this all the worse.⁷⁴ Even the teen Shamima Begum, who married an IS fighter before publicly seeking to return home to Britain and whose case has drawn much press attention, has been threatened by the camp's true believers because she showed her face in television interviews.⁷⁵ Because of this, Begum had to be moved to the much smaller al-Roj camp for her own safety.

Others have resorted to violence. For example, the Belgians Tatiana Wielandt and Bouchra Aboualal physically attacked another woman who spoke out against IS chief Baghdadi. They were imprisoned for a few days by the Asayesh in response.⁷⁶ In another case, an Iraqi boy bled to death after a group infiltrated his tent and beat him with a sharp object.⁷⁷ More prominently, in late July 2019, an Indonesian woman in her thirties named Sodermini, who had three children and was six months' pregnant, was beaten and tortured to death by *hisba* true believers.⁷⁸ Even more inconceivable, perhaps, are reports that an Azeri woman smothered her fourteen-year-old granddaughter, Gulsun, for failing to cover her hair.⁷⁹ Similarly, a young

boy from al-Bab, Syria, named Abdullah Ahmad, was allegedly stabbed to death because he rejected the Islamic State's ideology.⁸⁰ More recently, a Uyghur woman was charged by the *hisba* patrol for allegedly having an affair with an Iraqi refugee, and as punishment was beaten to death. She was found a month after the incident in a septic tank with sixteen stab wounds.⁸¹

Although these female enforcers try to give their actions legitimacy through ideological and religious justifications, some are pure retribution based on long-running personal disputes that originated during the Islamic State's rule.⁸² Either way, these women will feel empowered to engage in similar acts if they escape or are broken out of al-Hawl. The scenarios also illustrate the continuing rise of women and their roles within jihadist groups and IS in particular. Beyond events in the camp, these true-believing women have likely mulled lessons learned from the caliphate years, with hopes to implement them in the future.

ATTACKS AGAINST SECURITY AND AID OFFICIALS

Alongside attempts to enforce strictures for camp inhabitants, hardliners have sometimes verbally or physically attacked outside actors. To this end, aid workers have also been called *kuffar*.⁸³ Some women have thrown feces at those attempting to clean their bathrooms.⁸⁴ According to the Iraqi Umm Suhaib, a female supporter of IS in the camp, these incidents and the more serious attacks detailed later have happened "because [the Asayesh] allow injustice to prevail."⁸⁵ A Syrian female IS supporter, Umm Abdelaziz, explains that "for us, death is more valuable than this humiliating life."⁸⁶ Some of the attacks may indeed be part of a strategy implemented between IS leadership and women who had roles within the proto-state before their arrival at al-Hawl. Umm Suhaib admits that "we only came to the camp because of Baghdadi's orders."⁸⁷

Although the Asayesh is attempting to maintain some level of security within the camp, its forces are, in reality, outnumbered and unable to protect everyone. This is especially the case for the foreigners' annex. As context, until recently, only 400 guards were covering the entire camp of some 68,000 individuals.⁸⁸ Following the Turkish incursion in October 2019, this number dropped to

300 and will likely fall further since most in the SDF are Kurds and see the incursion as an existential threat to their community.⁸⁹ On October 7, SDF spokesperson Mustafa Bali said that "we are forced to withdraw some of our guarding forces of IS terrorist detentions to face the Turkish invasion."⁹⁰ The next day, Mazloum Kobani Abdi, SDF commander-in-chief, said that "monitoring IS prisoners is secondary for his forces."⁹¹

Even before the Turkish military campaign in northeast Syria, the security environment in al-Hawl was deteriorating. For example, on October 4, only five days before the Turkish incursion, Abdi warned that "there is a serious risk in al-Hawl. Right now, our people are able to guard it. But because we lack [the] resources, IS regrouping and reorganizing in the camp. We cannot control them 100 percent, and the situation is grave."⁹² Incidents within the camp began as early as March 21, 2019, a couple of days before the complete fall of Baghuz, and increased significantly in the summer and early fall. These incidents have been abetted by corruption among NGO workers and Asayesh forces who have helped smuggle weapons and rudimentary objects usable as weapons into the camp to earn side money.⁹³ Smuggled items include small handguns, knives, scissors, razor blades, and nail clippers.⁹⁴

The following are the most noteworthy attacks, all of them occurring in 2019:

- March 21: After a Syrian man within the camp allegedly attempted to molest a female IS member from Iraq, a riot broke out. This led to an attempt by Iraqi female IS members to lynch the man. According to an Asayesh figure attempting to break up the situation, "The women were shouting that if I was in their hands, they would behead me." Afterward, a number of the women besieged the Asayesh base within the camp, throwing rocks and smashing its windows.⁹⁵
- April 11: Guards in the foreigners' annex were attacked with rocks, and suffered head bruises.⁹⁶
- July 3: A female foreign IS member stabbed an Asayesh security guard in the back.⁹⁷ On the same day, two boys, ages ten and twelve, threw rocks at the guards.⁹⁸
- August: A female Asayesh soldier was stabbed to death.⁹⁹

- September 30: A riot broke out after the Asayesh discovered that the female *hisba* patrol was conducting secret courts in the foreigners' annex. This led to one IS woman being killed and seven others being injured.¹⁰⁰
- October 6: A burial worker's throat was slit.¹⁰¹
- October 9: Women IS members attacked the Asayesh and started fires, on the same day the Turkish incursion into northeast Syria began.¹⁰²
- October 11: Women IS sympathizers attacked the Asayesh and pelted them with sticks and stones, leading five of the women to be arrested.¹⁰³

Many other attacks have likely occurred without being publicized. Ahmad, an Asayesh member in the camp, notes, "Every two or three days, something happens, some kind of attack...we haven't caught them because we don't have enough police."¹⁰⁴ As a consequence of these various incidents, beginning in late August 2019, structures at least thirty-feet high were built to allow guards to watch over the camp without being harassed from the extremists on the ground.¹⁰⁵ The researcher Elizabeth Tsurkov notes that the increased attacks have made it more difficult for the Asayesh to distinguish true believers from inhabitants following the extremists based on fear of retribution.¹⁰⁶ The full-body black niqab worn by most residents complicates matters further, making it nearly impossible to distinguish between individuals.¹⁰⁷

ESCAPING AND HOPING FOR BREAKOUT

Another dynamic that has increasingly played out within al-Hawl involves attempts by women to escape or smuggle their way out of the camp. As early as May 2019, reports emerged of women attempting to flee al-Hawl, such as in the case of six Belgian women.¹⁰⁸ More recently, in early October 2019, dozens of foreigners escaped al-Hawl with smugglers wearing SDF uniforms.¹⁰⁹ Two Belgians on October 15, 2019, were even arrested in Belgium for raising 8,000 euros to fund the smuggling of women out of the camp.¹¹⁰

Parts of the escape plans have been pursued by raising money online to fund smuggling efforts. As early as January 6, 2019, an online fundraising campaign called *fakak al-ani* (freeing detainees) was started by

al-Qaeda supporters based in Idlib province, Syria, on the encrypted application Telegram.¹¹¹ These same supporters followed up with a newer Telegram campaign beginning January 28, 2019, called *fukku al-asirat* (free the female prisoners).¹¹² They claim it takes up to \$8,000 to free someone from al-Hawl.¹¹³ The effort has garnered the support of influential jihadist ideologue Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi and has been promoted via his Telegram channel in Arabic and English.¹¹⁴ In the aftermath of Turkey's campaign in northeast Syria, Maqdisi exhorted, "O God, prepare for the men who avenge them and free them from captivity, for this is of the greatest jihad for whoever seeks it."¹¹⁵

The *fukku al-asirat* fundraising campaign continues to solicit funds as of this writing. Here, al-Qaeda's support might raise eyebrows given the IS affiliation of aspiring escapees and the history of antagonism between the two jihadist groups. One explanation is that al-Qaeda may be trying to use its efforts to sway the women to its side once they are smuggled out. Al-Qaeda may also have been seeking to exploit the Islamic State's political and military weakness, outbidding its rival by better serving its al-Hawl constituency. Yet another possibility is the money motive. As to successes, the *fukku al-asirat* campaign claimed on February 13, 2019, that it had freed three foreign women, and one more on July 23, 2019.¹¹⁶ The manager of the campaign's Telegram channel, in an interview with Aymenn al-Tamimi, recently disclosed that in total thirty women, along with their children, have been freed.¹¹⁷

Within al-Hawl, some women IS supporters have put out statements and video testimonials on their poor treatment and their desire to be broken out. For example, according to BBC Monitoring, on June 22, 2019, a group of four women within the camp released a video calling for IS to help them.¹¹⁸ Similarly, another group of women on July 7, 2019, released a video calling for action to release them and highlighting to Baghdadi in particular the presence of IS supporters in the camp.¹¹⁹

More notable, however, is the Telegram campaign called *majmuah mashrua kafil* (sponsor project group; *kafil* for short), in existence since at least late May 2019 and allegedly run directly out of al-Hawl.¹²⁰ *Kafil's* main charge is "to seek [help for] the prisoners, martyrs, and injured in Wilayat al-Sham." For a short period, the project also maintained English and French Telegram channels.¹²¹ Besides seeking help, it serves as a propaganda outlet to illustrate the continued steadfastness of

IS supporters within the camp, especially children. For instance, on August 13, 2019, it featured a group of at least forty children conducting prayers for the Muslim holiday of Eid al-Adha, as well as receiving gifts from campaign leaders.¹²² Of course, there is nothing inherently problematic about prayer and receiving presents on a holiday, but *kafil's* online framing of the children as *ashbal al-tawhid* (cubs of monotheism) signifies common symbolism and phraseology used by IS and jihadists in general.

As this paper has shown, the potential for an IS breakout is increasing by the day as a consequence of the destabilization wreaked by the Turkish invasion of northeast Syria and the precipitous U.S. troop withdrawal from the area. Even before Turkey's invasion, in the period after the fall of IS territorial control in March 2019, the group was still conducting insurgent attacks, with some around al-Hawl. For instance, on May 5, 2019, IS carried out an attack against SDF forces on the road between al-Hawl and Tal Barak.¹²³ IS followed this up with two attacks on May 13 in the same vicinity.¹²⁴ This suggests that the group's network could reach the camp if it wanted to, especially given the recent thinning out of security. The Islamic State may even be able to break everyone out.

In summer 2019, IS conducted attacks against SDF forces in solidarity with al-Hawl detainees and in response to the conditions there. In particular, on July 11, the group published a report about a series of attacks in the city of Hasaka that had killed ten SDF forces over the previous two days. The report noted that the attacks were "in response to the continued detention of Muslim women and continued abuses by the elements [in the camp] against female detainees in their prisons."¹²⁵ A couple of weeks later, an official auxiliary media outlet for IS called al-Batar, released a video titled "Revenge for the Chaste Women" as a way to rally support online for the women.¹²⁶ The media group, however, may also have been trying to compensate for the lack of official interest in al-Hawl, particularly by Baghdadi, who failed to mention the camp in his April 2019 video message.¹²⁷

This would be remedied by the release of a video by Wilayat al-Sham, the Islamic State's Syria province, in late August 2019, in which the speaker, Abu Abdullah al-Shami, talks directly to the women in the camp, stating that "we have not forgotten" your plight.¹²⁸ Furthermore, as mentioned at the beginning of this paper, Baghdadi

would eventually comment on the situation at al-Hawl in mid-September 2019 and call for the release of women and children by any means necessary. This latter message encouraged remaining IS followers within the camp, evidenced by *kafil's* release of a series of handwritten letters online of exuberant women waiting to be released through breakout.¹²⁹ Baghdadi's "release by any means necessary" message appears to have spurred a new phase in IS propaganda, including in the *al-Naba* editorial released three days later.¹³⁰

SLOW-BURN POLICY

As the journalist Bethan McKernan notes, "Nothing quite like al-Hawl has ever existed before,"¹³¹ a reality that has confounded policymakers locally and internationally. The U.S. government has not taken an active role in securing the camp or in resolving the future of its residents. Generally, Congress has provisioned assistance for "temporary detention and repatriation" of foreign fighters "in accordance with international law," which amounts to "a maximum of \$4 million per project and \$12 million per year."¹³² Beyond that, much of the policy has focused on reintegrating individuals into their communities in Iraq and Syria and repatriating foreign fighters currently in the camps to their home countries. However, on all fronts, little progress has been made. That is why the population at al-Hawl has barely decreased in the past seven months, since the fall of Baghuz.

The most organized process thus far has been locally, where the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), the official name for SDF-controlled areas, has conducted "tribal sponsorships" for those camp inhabitants originally from Deir al-Zour, Hasaka, and Raqqqa governorates.¹³³ By the end of July 2019, 1,122 Syrian women and children—800 to Tal Abyad, 196 to Deir al-Zour, and 126 to Manbij—had been returned home as a result of this process.¹³⁴ Another round of forty families was returned to their homes in various parts of the Euphrates Valley on September 30, 2019.¹³⁵

According to the "tribal sponsorships" process, beyond the requirement that the resettled people show evidence they were born in one of those three governorates, the SDF apparently vets them for prior incidents of criminality.¹³⁶ Individuals must also, through their tribe, show proof of a property deed and a utility bill prior to

2011 to confirm former residency.¹³⁷ For those not originally from a tribe, this process may be followed through a local council under SDF administrative control in the three governorates.¹³⁸ Some worry that this process could lead to corruption and therefore not provide the greatest safeguards against remaining IS sympathizers lying low for a time, since tribal sheikhs might induce release in return for large sums of money.¹³⁹ Illustrating this concern, Um Mahmoud, who returned to Raqqa, stated in an interview that “[the Islamic State] is gone, but we are still implementing God’s laws.”¹⁴⁰

Even for those released and cleared of wrongdoing, complications could well prevail. For instance, those forced into IS marriages or into joining the group could carry a stigma, leaving them open to discrimination and abuse.¹⁴¹ For example, a Syrian named Mona, who is from al-Shamiya in eastern Deir al-Zour and who left the camp as part of this process, explains that “society’s view is very difficult and I have suffered from it.”¹⁴²

Unlike these Syrians, the Iraqi women and children have by and large remained in al-Hawl, despite preparations by the Iraqi government to transfer them to Jadah 5, a camp located forty miles south of Mosul.¹⁴³ Relocating 30,000 Iraqis would alleviate much pressure on al-Hawl, almost cutting its population in half, but local Iraqis in Nineveh province worry this would just move the problem closer to home and produce the same unsustainable dynamics at Jadah 5,¹⁴⁴ which already holds about 16,000 individuals. After much delay, on October 17, 2019, Iraq’s foreign minister, Mohamed Ali al-Hakim, announced that Iraq would take back its citizens from al-Hawl and those in prisons, but not those from other countries.¹⁴⁵

According to OCHA, as of late September 2019, 1,400 foreign women and children have been repatriated to their home countries from al-Hawl.¹⁴⁶ However, data is spotty on the particular countries. The Syrian media organization Enab Baladi, also as of late September 2019, identified 291 women or children that have been repatriated to their home countries from al-Hawl, listing these countries as follows: Kazakhstan, 130 (women and children), Uzbekistan, 88 (children), Sudan, 17 (children), France, 17 (children), Sweden, 7 (children), United States, 6 (children), Australia, 6 (children), Russia, 5 (children), Norway, 5 (children), Nigeria, 3 (children), Belgium, 2 (children), Netherlands, 2 (children), Trinidad and Tobago, 2 (children), and Denmark, 1 (children).¹⁴⁷ While helpful, this accounting leaves out some 1,100 returnees.

EMERGING COMPLICATIONS

The Turkish military operation in northeast Syria vastly complicates the process of repatriation for a variety of reasons. As mentioned earlier, the SDF now prioritizes its own defense and the safety of members’ families over guarding the various prisons and camps holding Islamic State fighters or relatives. Because of this, the fight against remnants of the Islamic State in northeast Syria has been put on hold as of October 9, 2019.¹⁴⁸ Moreover, since the United States is withdrawing its troops from northeast Syria, the whole anti-IS operation could be ending.¹⁴⁹

Also, as this paper has noted, the cessation of IS territorial control in March 2019 did not end its campaign of insurgent attacks. Through October 17, the group claimed to have carried out 321 such strikes in Deir al-Zour, 100 in Hasaka, and 98 in Raqqa governorates, comprising the areas of SDF control.¹⁵⁰ With the campaign on hold to fight IS and disrupt its sleeper cells, these jihadist attacks will likely rise, meaning the SDF will be fighting against both the Turkish-led intervention and an unencumbered Islamic State. On October 10, for example, IS claimed a revenge attack in al-Shuhail, Deir al-Zour, against two alleged Kurdish smugglers, Kassar al-Raja and Ahmad al-Karin, who previously handed over Muslim women to the SDF to be detained.¹⁵¹ Similarly, IS claimed responsibility for a car bomb attack against SDF forces in Qamishli on October 11, “in response to the escalating attacks in prisons and camps.” Furthermore, on October 17, the Islamic State claimed it had “liberated” a number of female Muslims being held by the SDF west of Raqqa.¹⁵²

Recent events also make the al-Hawl camp more susceptible to falling. Specifically, the SDF-run al-Hawl military council, which protects the town of al-Hawl and the camp environs, redeployed its forces to the border area to fight the Turkish invasion.¹⁵³ Therefore, in light of the messaging from Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and IS propaganda in general, IS could well take advantage of a weakened SDF presence to “liberate” camp residents. This scenario might resemble what happened with foreigners at Ain Issa, a much smaller camp that held IS women and children, on October 13.¹⁵⁴ According to local reports, “The SDF announced [that] morning through loudspeakers to the families of IS that the SDF is no longer responsible for their prison or protection and that they are free to leave the camp at their own risk.”¹⁵⁵

As a consequence, more than 750 women and children left, with some of their current whereabouts unknown at the time of this writing.¹⁵⁶ Rumors, however, indicate that three French female supporters of IS have already rejoined the group.¹⁵⁷ In total, governments have reported so far identifying nine French, eight Belgian, fifty Indonesian, and twenty-five Kosovar women and children who have left the camp. Some of the women who left Ain Issa have since been arrested after crossing the border into Iraq. Others are being held by the Turkish-backed Syrian extremist group Ahrar al-Sharqiya, which is allegedly ransoming the women to their families.¹⁵⁸

As for al-Hawl, according to Western intelligence officials, the true believers in the camp have been in contact with IS leadership via Telegram and WhatsApp,¹⁵⁹ suggesting plans are under way for a breakout now that the opportunity has grown ripe. With that potential ever greater, those still under the jihadist group's sway have begun to instigate violence more, such as in the attacks against guards on October 9 and 11, 2019.¹⁶⁰ Reports on the same day indicated that a Syrian and Russian, respectively, escaped.¹⁶¹ Some in the camp hope, meanwhile, that Turkey might help them indirectly. One resident told the journalist Josie Ensor that "Turkey let us into Syria. *Mashallah* [God has willed it], Turkey will let us out."¹⁶² Likewise, there are reports that women are packing their bags and awaiting release, breakout, or escape opportunities.¹⁶³ This is the case for the nonradical individuals in the camp, too, as one of them explains: "Everyone is happy, definitely. People who are not radical like me are happy because we obviously will go home soon or at least get better living conditions [hopefully]."¹⁶⁴

Now What?

As the extremism researcher Amarasingam has rightly assessed of the al-Hawl residents, "Not all of these women are hardcore. Some are genuinely exhausted and disillusioned and just want to go home."¹⁶⁵ A breakout, therefore, could mirror the experience on October 13 at the smaller Ain Issa camp, where reports unsurprisingly depicted some departees as "simply sitting outside the camp on their phones, talking to their families back home and waiting."¹⁶⁶ This suggests strongly that countries—especially Western ones where fears are high over the potential domestic risks posed by returnees—should

prepare for the prospect that many citizens seeking to return home, from Ain Issa or another camp, are disillusioned with jihadism. These countries would be wise to prepare specifically to deal with requests from women and children who have reached their consulate or embassy in Turkey, seeking help. It is well past time for these governments to plan for such an eventuality. Not to do so is counterproductive and indeed negligent.

What happens next will depend on who—or whether anyone—gains control of the camps in the coming days, weeks, and months. They may also simply be emptied. But the massive failure of the Trump administration, and the international community, cannot be overstated here. Even prior to the U.S. announcement in October 2019, all international players had dithered on how to address the future of these women and children, especially those from outside Syria and Iraq. This broader failure to act ensured that when the United States broke its alliance with the SDF, escapes and breakouts from camps and prisons would follow—rather than paths to a better life for the camp's orphans and children, or justice for women who had joined the Islamic State or committed crimes under its aegis. And if the camps are emptied, the true believers will no doubt return to the Islamic State, bring their children with them, and likely attempt alongside still-active IS fighters to enlist the orphans and rebuild the caliphate project. One can expect revenge to be on their minds as well—not only against the SDF and those who worked with the SDF locally, but also against their own countries, which left them to languish in the squalor of the al-Hawl camp.

If, for whatever reason, some semblance of security continues at al-Hawl, whether via the SDF or Turkey, a useful reset could become possible. Western governments, for their part, could reform their legal codes to make joining and participating in IS or broader jihadist activity subject to prosecution. Jihadist groups, after all, engage in destructive activities far beyond terrorism. The U.S. material support statute could provide a useful model in this area, having successfully secured the prosecution of many jihadists within the U.S. court system. Regarding al-Hawl specifically, the United States and its allies should pour the necessary resources into providing greater educational, health, and psychological services within the camp. This could open up space for better understanding the camp's population and who remains loyal to the IS cause, in

turn helping facilitate a smarter process of reintegration, repatriation, or jailing of local and foreign individuals currently at the camp.

No matter what happens next, the case of al-Hawl illustrates yet again—as at Guantanamo Bay after the Afghanistan invasion and Camp Bucca in Iraq after 2003—that Washington and its allies have yet to figure out how to properly manage the transition between a fighting endeavor and rollback of a jihadist group’s successes, including how to deal with prisoner, detainee, and camp populations. This task involves garnering intelligence on the individuals and their previous activities; separating true believers from the disillusioned; and finally bringing the former to justice, in a courtroom

under the law, while implementing proper rehabilitation and reintegration programming for the latter. This necessity transcends purely military and law enforcement responses, and will remain one of the greater future challenges with the jihadist movement.

At the very least, the assessments in this paper can serve as a warning on how not to handle similar situations in the future. But to withdraw U.S. troops without a plan, creating a vacuum, and act as if everything at al-Hawl and other camps will work itself out without consequence, is beyond incomprehensible. It is an abrogation of American leadership, and absent a course correction, it will come back later to hurt the United States and its allies.

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