



Syria Transition Challenges Project

Discussion Paper (6)

ISIS after the US repositioning in the Northeast of Syria: camps, women and children, and leadership revival

Jean-Pierre Keller, GCSP

The Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP) is an international foundation established in 1995, with 51 member states, for the primary purpose of promoting peace, security and international cooperation through executive education, applied policy research and dialogue. The GCSP trains government officials, diplomats, military officers, international civil servants and NGO and private sector staff in pertinent fields of international peace and security.

Syria Transition Challenges Project

A multilateral dialogue and research project that aims to build bridges between the EU, Russia, Turkey, and the US on the three issues of Reform, Refugees Return, and Reconstruction. The project is run by the GCSP in collaboration with European University Institute (EUI), Syrian Centre for Policy Research (SCPR), and swisspeace.

Editors:

Abdulla Ibrahim, Project Lead Researcher

Lorraine Charles, Research Associate

Author

Jean-Pierre Keller

Jean-Pierre Keller's research focuses on Swiss foreign terrorist networks, terrorism financing and related terrorism threats. He is currently an analyst within the Terrorism Joint Analysis Group (T-JAG), which delivers analysis to both the public and private sectors on the global manifestations of terror, and Senior Analyst at GCSP. Mr Keller has more than 25 years of banking experience and is a retired officer of the Swiss Army, specialising in disaster relief. He was also trained as a UN military observer. He has an MA on Global Security and Conflict Resolution from the University of Geneva.

The ideas expressed are of the author's not the publisher.

Published in April 2020

All rights reserved to GCSP

Introduction

Since the fall of Baghuz city in North East of Syria in March 2019, thousands of women, children and former IS fighters have been imprisoned in either camps or prisons. Following the Turkish military operation in October 2019, the security conditions have deteriorated, resulting in fewer guards as well as more instability and vulnerability for all those imprisoned. The worsening living conditions, the absence of adequate medical care and lack of access to education endanger the future of the children imprisoned in the camp. Moreover, the influence of the Muhajirats remains constant as a means for the spreading of propaganda inside and outside the camps.

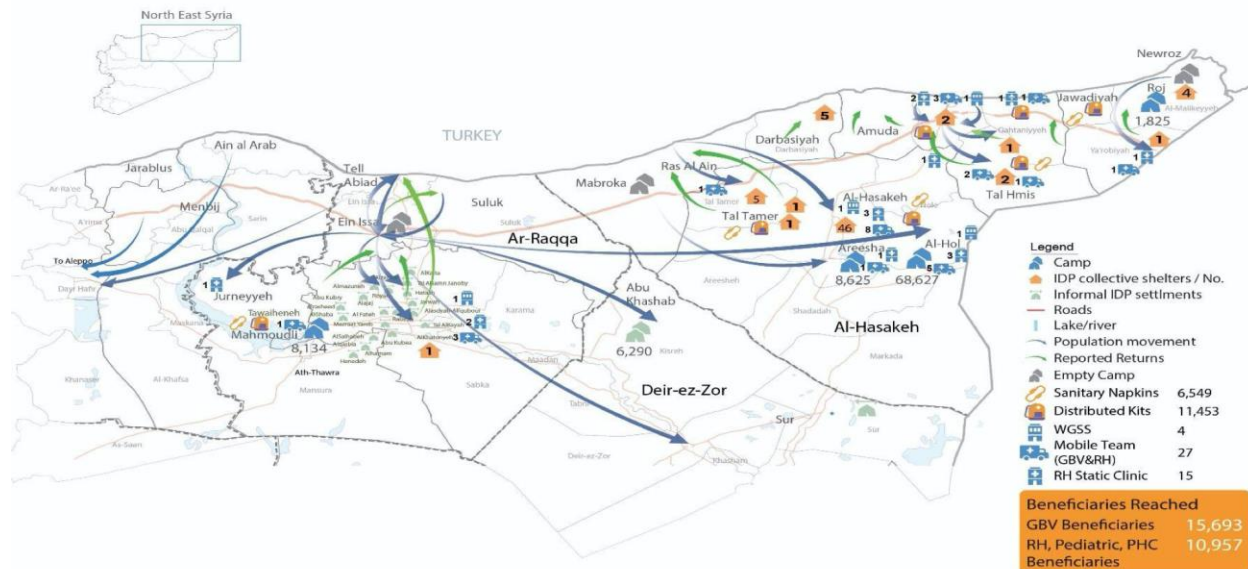
Status of ISIS prisoners and their families in the North East of Syria

Despite the multitude of reports, there is no certainty about the exact number of people detained by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in the northeast of Syria. The SDF is an umbrella force that includes Kurds and Arabs and led by the Kurdish People's Protection Units, (YPG). It is estimated that the SDF have captured 13,500 foreign women and children, detained in three makeshift camps in the northeast of Syria (al-Hawl, al-Roj and Ayn Issa camps). Their spouses and other male foreign fighters¹, numbering around 2,000, are detained in a separate prison network. Although no official list of the prisons exists, at least two have been clearly identified as detention centres for foreign terrorist fighters (FTF). One is the Malikkiyyah prison, in the vicinity of Derik, containing at least two dozen of European FTF. Another is the Gerewan prison in Hasakah, where approximately 4,000 Syrian and Iraqi fighters were detained with up to 1,000 FTF (Figure 1).

There have been conflicting reports about the fate of the al-Malikiyyah prison after the October 2019 Turkish military offensive. At the beginning of the Turkish operations, Kurdish sources belonging to the Asayish stated that European prisoners were still being held in the al-Malikiyyah prison. After the death of the IS leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, Asayish sources reported that transfers of the al-Malikiyyah detainees were being organised and, ultimately, all would be moved to the Gerewan prison.

Figure 1: ISIS prisoners and families camps in the northeast of Syria

¹ Foreign fighters are defined in this paper as non Iraqi, non Syrian fighters



Map derived from OCHA Flash Update 24th October 2019. Edited to include UNFPA response

Since the beginning of the latest Turkish military operations, SDF and the YPG have repeatedly claimed that guarding both camps and prisons was not a priority and have in fact deployed very few resources to control them. It is estimated that between 400 and 500 SDF soldiers have been deployed to secure these camps and prisons. Their mission is to guard and control the al-Hawl and guard the 70,000 refugees and detainees. UNOCHA and other humanitarian actors have reported that the population of the al-Hawl camp was 68,744², which included 19,030 households³. This represents a slight increase in the camp’s population since the launch of the Turkish military operations in northeast Syria. Of the camp’s population, it is estimated that 94% are women and children and up to 20,000 are under the age of five⁴. There are 11,000 foreign women and children from sixty-two countries. Of the foreigners detained, 7,000 are children, 65% under the age of twelve and 25% under age five. It is also estimated that 3,500 children do not have birth documents and hence no official nationality.

In November 2019, around 220 people arrived in the camp, including 41 households relocated from Mahmoudli camp south of Ainessa. Since the beginning of June 2019, almost 2,990

² 45 per cent (30,897) Iraqi; 40 per cent (27,813) Syrians; 15 per cent (10,029) third country nationals

³ Data as of November the 19th, 2019

⁴ There is no certainty about the children detained in al-Hawl. However, it can be assumed that the majority of those children have been initiated to the IS ideology (including military training) with the so-called “Cubs of the Caliphate” (Ashbal al-Khilafah”, (اشبال الخلافة).

residents have departed the camp, including more than 1,440 Syrians and 1,450 foreign women and children. On 21 November 2019, the United Kingdom announced that arrangements had been made to facilitate the repatriation of several British orphaned children. In addition, on 2 October 2019, two Austrian children were repatriated. In early November 2019, an Albanian child and one Danish child were also repatriated. Irregular departures from Al Hawl continue to be reported with 45 Iraqi residents (25 women and 20 children) entering Iraq on 6 November 2019 apparently via an informal crossing close to the Rabeea border point.

The impact of the US withdrawal and Turkish operations

ISIS's capacity to regroup has increased following the US decision to withdraw from Syria. The chaos that ensued could provide ISIS with the opportunity to reshape and resupply its organisation with new recruits, ex-detained members and material, as well as to extend its networks throughout the Middle East. With the Kurds focused on survival, both SDF and YPG forces devote fewer resources to combating ISIS. In order to defend their positions against Turkish troops and Turkish-backed militias, the Kurds are being called to the front line. This means that they lack the capacity to guard the camps, leaving the prisons and detainment camps more vulnerable. This might have potential implications for regional stability, including a substantial reduction the counterterrorism actions against ISIS.

In his last statement before being killed, Abu Baker al-Baghdadi called all IS supporters to initiate a new "Break the Walls" campaign. The campaign was endorsed by Abu Ibrahim al-Hashemi al-Qurayshi, the new leader of the group, resulting in raids on detainee camps and prison breaks. The shelling of the Ayn Issa camp by the Turkish military led to the "escape" of more than 700 people with some links to ISIS. The SDF also reported the escape of several fighters from Qamishli after Turkey had bombed it. Rumours reported that several high-profile ISIS fighters from Europe were among those who had escaped, thus exacerbating the fear of their potential return to their countries of origin to plot future attacks. Similar alerts had been raised by East Asian countries and also from the Iraqi government.

Conditions in prisons

Health conditions in the camps are poor and significantly deteriorated after the fall of the Islamic State's last remaining territory. There are insufficient resources to adequately feed and care for the children, including a lack of specialised medical care. The situation has been exasperated by the Turkish incursion causing some medical teams to suspend their services. Malnutrition and diseases including cholera, respiratory tract infection, pneumonia and diarrhoea are widespread, resulting of the death of many children.

Education services have also suffered. Thousands of children have not received proper education (11,000 according to the United Nations), and many are reported to be illiterate. As some foreign women have remained loyal to ISIS and have played the role of teachers, it is likely that children are being taught ISIS's ideology. With no playgrounds, children have few opportunities to play. Instead they are encouraged to create toy guns, as well as custom ISIS-style swag, thereby reinforcing the cycle of violence. No psychological services are available for children who have been exposed to all levels of violence, and there are no de-radicalisation programs for those educated in the ISIS system.

The “Muhajirat” and the new operational communication channels

For several months the strengthening of connections between the wives of the fighters involved in the community have been observed. Analysis of one Swiss Muhajirat's debriefings and the review of the multiple interviews of three other female foreign fighters in the camp have provided a clearer understanding of their role inside of the Muhajirat's community in the camps and illustrate the complexity of the operation.

Interviews of four Muhajirat have revealed that they played a central role in their family's departure to Syria. All four women had been the driving force behind the decision to join the Caliphate. They were instrumental in shaping their husbands' careers, agreeing when their partners proposed to join the ISIS security service apparatus. They helped facilitate their husbands' religious evolution, supporting –if not encouraging– their husbands when they distanced themselves from the IS religious “mainstream” group to join ranks with the “Hazimi”, the so-called “hardliners” who adopted an even more radical approach of their religion. With the exception of the Swiss Muhajira, all others were arrested at the outskirts of Baghûz, and placed in the al-Roj

and al-Hawl camps. The decision to “send their wives out first” was the result of a carefully thought-out plan. The first objective was to preserve their families. The second was to allow the females to recreate and reinvigorate the operational continuity of the community.

The four women acquired smart phones, although officially smartphones are forbidden to the families of IS fighters⁵. The women quickly developed an “overt” communication network, allowing them to communicate with their families and journalists. They also created “covert” communication networks, to exchange information, instructions and orders with the support networks of their detained husbands.

During the summer of 2019, three new Telegram channels emerged. The first one was KAVEL, written in Arabic. The second was KAFEL, an English-speaking channel. The third was KAVEL, a French-speaking channel. The Muhajirat’s group was active on both the French-speaking KAVEL and the Arabic-speaking KAFEL channels. Both KAVEL and KAFEL had been (structurally) constructed with two levels of accessibility. The first level was accessible by most and its main purpose was to communicate to the public messages/propaganda, calls for funds, and “evidence” gathered by the Muhajirat against the SDF. The second level was a private/secret chat that allowed for operational exchanges between the Muhajirat and the support/logistic networks of their detained husbands. By the end of September 2019, all “public” KAVEL / KAFEL channels were closed and only their “private” counterparts remained. After the EUROPOL/European Law Enforcement Agencies action in November 2019, all traces of the private channels were lost. Muhajirat went even deeper underground and started using @Telegram secret chat rooms to communicate with IS support/logistic networks both locally (Syria, Iraq) and internationally.

Issues to consider with ISIS prisoners and their families

- *Repatriation of children is a necessity:* As the situation in the northeast of Syria evolves, countries, such as France and Germany, whose nationals are in the camps should repatriate as many as seems feasible. They should prioritise the repatriation of children, whether orphans or minors even if they are attached to ISIS-affiliated mothers who may represent

⁵ Evidence collected demonstrated this statement to be false; there is a filmed interview the Swiss muhajirat where her daughter is playing with her mother’s phone

a security concern. The reluctance of some States to engage in the repatriation of children appears to have been driven by security concerns. These include uncertainty regarding the State's own ability to adequately conduct risk assessments or provide appropriate reintegration and rehabilitation assistance on the children's return. Some approaches—including separating children from their parents for repatriation—have also resulted in domestic legal challenges and expressions of concern by civil society organisations, which have emphasised States' obligations under international law (including international human rights law, international humanitarian law and international refugee law), particularly Article 3 and Article 9 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

- *SDF corruption is a threat:* Due to the rapid increase in the number of SDF members, there has been an increase in the levels of corruption, including bribery, to facilitate prisoner release. The SDF is likely to face future security and longer-term challenges over the control of a consolidated territory outside central government control.
- *The threat of ISIS women is real:* Women joined ISIS for a variety of reasons and performed different roles during their time with the group. Some may have been involved in violence, others have played important non-combative roles such as enforcers of ISIS's gender norms, recruiters and propagandists and, crucially, as mothers to the next generation of supporters. In many cases, the distinction between victims and perpetrators is non-binary, and the degree of the women's agency, and thus criminal responsibility, is unclear and their roles and motivations remain poorly understood.
- *A comprehensive risk assessment is needed:* There is uncertainty about adequate risk assessment and screening processes for women; challenges in investigations and prosecutions linked to the particular difficulties in obtaining sufficient and admissible evidence of a crime; and a limited understanding of best practices and the most effective methods for the rehabilitation and reintegration of women.

Conclusion:

To conclude, the fight against ISIS did not end after the fall of Baghuz. Instead, the group has resurged as terrorist organisation and a collection of guerrilla entities. As this threat most likely would remain, the issue of women and children would need to be tackled in a comprehensive and coherent manner, involving cooperation of all international actors.