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COVID-19 as a Green Light for the Regeneration of ISIS' Forces in North-East Syria

Abstract: Following the fall of the so-called Islamic State in March 2019, tens of thousands of its fighters, along with their wives and children, were captured and detained in facilities controlled by Syrian Democratic Forces in northeast Syria. Many of which were European. Based on the information provided by scientific institutes and journalists, the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic had had a significant impact on the functioning of those facilities. Not only did it aggravate an already severe humanitarian crisis, pushing the detainees to reinforce their attempts of escaping and rioting against the guards, but it also lowered the security level in the controlled facilities, allowing a flourishing of criminal activities. Furthermore, the detainment of ISIS followers turned into a political game between the Kurdish coalition and the United States. The global health crisis put to the test the strategy of many Western governments of keeping European ISIS fighters in the Middle East while pressuring the international community to rethink its approach towards this crescent problem.

Keywords: *Islamic State, COVID-19 pandemic, humanitarian crisis, foreign terrorist fighters, Syrian Democratic Forces*

The offensive of 80 unified global armies against the last bastion of the so-called Islamic State in the Syrian city of Baghouz that took place on March 19, 2019, led to the territorial demise of that terrorist organization. It might then seem that this day would mark the end of ISIS. The organization, however, kept on being active, and in October 2019, the United States of America conducted yet another military operation against it, killing its leader – the self-proclaimed caliph Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi. Once more, one could expect that such a debilitated ISIS would not be able to regenerate its forces. The facts on the ground state, however, that since the fall of Baghouz, ISIS has conducted hundreds of attacks in Iraq and Syria (Cruickshank, 2020; Vohra, 2021; von Hein, 2020), intending to reclaim its former

territories, especially in the disputed territories in Iraq (Mokhtar Qandil, 2020). Since then, terror attacks have also been reported in Europe, Afghanistan, the Sahel region of Africa, and elsewhere (Dearden, 2020; Agha & Davies, 2021, *Le Figaro*, 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic has shifted the whole world's attention, pushing the problem of the Islamic State aside and thus neglecting the long-term global security. Despite significant losses, the Islamic State has not yet been eliminated and what we might be observing is actually an opposite process – ISIS had managed to reorganize and return to the underground, which partly resembles its state from 2006, when the organization was created, and may now be regaining its strength taking advantage of the omnipresent chaos created by the pandemic.

The reason why ISIS poses a bigger threat than any other terrorist organization and thus needs to be closely observed, especially in times of the pandemic, is three-fold. First of all, no other terrorist organization than the so-called Islamic State has been able to create what was a quasi-state. At its peak, ISIS held control over 10 million people who lived on a territory of 45 thousand square kilometers (Nebehay, 2015). Its administration system, which had started to be developed soon after the foundation of the terror organization, was at that point quite advanced and made the management of the self-proclaimed caliphate effective enough to extract 900 million dollars in taxes from the millions of people living under its control while receiving private donations from abroad (Engel 2015). Ackerman and Hayley argue that the pandemic has created new opportunities for terrorist organizations to maintain their financial support (Ackerman & Hayley, 2020). The second part of IS's unprecedented nature is the high level of recruitment of tens of thousands of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) worldwide, also from European countries. Despite the territorial demise of ISIS and the loss of prominent leaders, many of its members survived, and along with them, so did the organization's fundamentalist ideology. Tens of thousands of captured fighters and their wives and children have been kept captive in camps and prisons in northeast Syria and Iraq. In facilities controlled by the Kurdish-led coalition of Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and Iraq's authorities are 4 thousand Europeans, coming mostly from Belgium, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom. European governments had been reluctant to the idea of repatriating their citizens, and the pandemic furtherly disrupted that process (Kajjo, 2020; Christien et al., 2020). Because of that, the responsibility for the detainees has fallen mainly on the internally turmoiled Syria and Iraq. Thirdly, unlike other terrorist groups, ISIS has been very vocal about using the pandemic to its advantage by encouraging followers through online propaganda to step up terror attacks and free ISIS members imprisoned in Syria and Iraq (al-Lami, 2020).

When the World Health Organization's (WHO) Director-General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus announced on March 12 that COVID-19 was global, ISIS did not take long to react. Through its weekly news outlet *Al-Naba'* published online, IS leaders set forward a set of recommendations named "Shari'i directives to deal with epidemics" (*Al-Naba'*, 2020). They called on their followers to frequently wash their hands, cover their mouth when yawning or sneezing, as well as covering food with a cloth so that the virus would not

get into it (sic!). The early recommendations stated that one should do anything to avoid contracting the virus, and so travels to regions with coronavirus outbreaks were prohibited, which concerned especially Europe, the “land of the pandemic” as they called it, suggesting that the sanitary situation in the Middle East was then much safer (*Business Insider US*, 2020; Hernández, 2020).

IS narrative, however, quickly changed course. In the 226th edition of the *Al-Naba'* newsletter published on March 19 entitled “Crusaders’ worst nightmare,” ISIS called the virus “God’s ire” or “God’s smallest soldier sent by him on the nations of crusaders”. Then, it set forth a new set of orders directed toward its imprisoned followers in Syria and Iraq and its supporters living in Europe and other parts of the world (*Al-Naba'*, 2020). The message to the ones being kept captive was that they should take advantage of the global chaos caused by the pandemic to try to escape. Soon after, however, caused rather by an opportunity than leaderships’ calling, in May 2020, IS prisoners rioted and temporarily took control over the prison in Hassakah until the intervention of SDF forces, which got hold of the situation (*Xinhua*, 2020).

Regarding orders issued to IS supporters living freely, the terrorist organization called on them to spread the virus, e.g., by joining protests, because as they explained, “every brother and sister, even children, can contribute to Allah’s cause by becoming the carriers of this disease and striking the colonies of the disbelievers”, and that IS supporters would not run any risk as “no disease can harm even a hair of a believer” (*Al-Naba'*, 2020). Probably the most preoccupying argument given was that by killing “infidels”, believers might protect one from contracting the virus. However, the effectiveness of those orders stays unclear. It had already happened before that ISIS urged its followers to action, but to no avail (*Meduza*, 2021). However, it might happen that “lone wolves” will choose to act upon the leadership’s orders. The pandemic might have then provided terrorists with a new tool to spread fear and conduct terror attacks, to which ISIS has kept on urging on the Internet (Kruglanski et al., 2020).

The outbreak of the pandemic has also impacted the conditions present in camps and prisons in the Middle East, where IS fighters are being kept and their wives and children. The pandemic has impacted them in two significant ways: firstly, it deepened the humanitarian crisis that started in March 2019 after the fall of ISIS, and secondly, it weakened the security level in facilities controlled by SDF (Alexander, 2020). The worsening of the humanitarian crisis is a direct effect of the limitations imposed on humanitarian organizations, which are fundamental to medical aid for people in the camps. The global restrictions forced NGOs to pull out many of their workers from the Middle East and obstructed the logistics by closing borders and drastically limiting flights to and from the region (*Médecin Sans Frontières*, 2020). According to some humanitarian organizations, provisions provided by WHO do not arrive at their destiny in northeast Syria and are instead kept by the Syrian government (*ReliefWeb*, 2021). The level of sanitary conditions dropped further because of restricted access to clean water and basic sanitation facilities. One of the World Health Organization

reports on the sanitary situation in Al-Hol camp in Syria from 2019 indicated more than 800 cases of acute diarrhea and other illnesses, such as measles or scabies (WHO, 2019). Al-Hol is estimated to host around 65,000 detainees making it extremely overcrowded (Al-Monitor, 2020). The mortality in that camp tripled throughout the first half of 2020 for some age groups, especially children (ReliefWeb, 2020). Women and children interviewed by Human Rights Watch in another camp in the Hasakah governorate in Syria, Al-Roj, confirmed the worsening sanitary conditions. One of them talked about 'water tanks containing worms' and complained about the lack of clean, sanitary facilities. Another spoke of tents being set on fire by children who could no longer stand inhumane living conditions (HRW, 2021).

Yet another impact of the pandemic on the security level was the SDF's decision to enforce preventive sanitary restrictions to prepare for the arrival of the novel coronavirus to the camps. Consequently, the number of guard rotations and that of the personnel were reduced to preempt the spread of coronavirus. SDF furtherly limited the mobility of the detainees and forbade them from physical contact. Ahead of the pandemic outbreak, fighters had tried to escape, attacked guards, or led group riots, but the introduced restrictions furtherly escalated their attempts to break free from such horrid conditions. The restrictions imposed by the SDF also facilitated the development of criminal activities, in particular, that of smuggling money, products, and people into and from the camps (Alexander, 2020).

Moreover, because of the pandemic, military training of the United Kingdom, France, and Spain was put on hold, and many soldiers were pulled out from the region, allowing ISIS to regroup and conduct irregular cross-border attacks between Iraq and Syria (Al-Omari, 2020; *International Crisis Group*, 2020; *UN News*, 2021). Simultaneously, the Americans left their military bases at Mosul, Al-Qaim, Qayyarah, Kirkuk, and Taqaddum in March 2020, which furtherly debilitated regional security (Knights, 2020). The diversion of resources away from the fight against jihadism, followed by the pandemic outbreak, may have long-lasting security consequences in the region.

When the world's attention is focused on the fight against the new coronavirus, the international community seems to have neglected the ISIS problem. Despite global efforts to strengthen border control, manage firearms trade, combat global terrorism and terrorist financing, the international community must act directly in the region to stop the resurrection of ISIS. The humanitarian crisis in detention camps and prisons in Syria and Iraq that is forcing ISIS members to escape must be addressed to prevent an uncontrolled return of Foreign Terrorist Fighters to Europe and other parts of the world. By repatriating foreign nationals, the number of people in the overcrowded camps will fall, which improve the living conditions of the remainder. To counter the remnants of ISIS on the ground, the international coalition, the same one that ended the territorial expansion of the terror group in the first place, should now try to restore the security level from before the pandemic by redirecting resources back into the area while tackling the economic challenges of Iraq and Syria and repatriating foreign nationals from detention camps back to their countries of origin to offer them a fair trial.

Furthermore, the United States should reinforce its military presence in Iraq and Syria to deter ISIS activities in the area. Suppose the problem of ISIS resurgence does not become a priority for policy-makers. In that case, lowered regional security and global chaos created by the novel coronavirus will give ISIS the green light to slowly regenerate its deadly forces and get back on track of building a physical ‘caliphate’.

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