

# ISIS Resurgence in *Al Hawl* Camp and Human Smuggling Enterprises in Syria: Crime and Terror Convergence?

by Christian Vianna de Azevedo

## Abstract

*Al Hawl camp remains the largest Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camp in Northeastern Syria. The camp holds people who fled ISIS as well as individuals and families connected to ISIS (members and supporters) who were displaced from its former territory. It currently holds around 68,000 people, 94% of whom are women and children. ISIS and its predecessor, Al Qaeda in Iraq, have benefited from prison contexts which were fundamental for both groups to grow. Prisons have proven to be breeding grounds for Jihadist indoctrination and networking. Al Hawl has been part of ISIS's strategy through crime and terror networks that have developed within the camp. ISIS residents in Al Hawl camp conduct terrorist indoctrination, radicalization, human smuggling, document fraud, forgery and financing. These criminal activities have aided ISIS in having the upper hand inside the camp while preparing its militants for a future role in case the caliphate is restored. In the meantime, since its territorial defeat two years ago, ISIS has benefited from the human smuggling networks that operate in Syria since 2011. Smuggling its fighters, facilitators and families out of the conflict zone has been an important strategy for ISIS future ambitions.*

**Keywords:** ISIS, Al Hawl, Insurgency, Crime, Terrorism, Facilitation, Smuggling.

## Introduction

*Al Hawl Camp* remains the largest IDP camp in Northeastern Syria. It is so huge that it can be seen from dozens of kilometers away. Its large matrix of tents spread as vast as a city. The camp sits on the outskirts of the Syrian town with the name *Al Hawl*, in Northeastern Syria, close to the Syria/Iraq border. Historically, *Al Hawl Camp* was established by the United Nations to hold refugees from Iraq in 1991. In 2016, the camp was reopened by US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to harbor civilians who were displaced in the course of operations against the Islamic State (ISIS/Daesh) in Eastern Syria. Nowadays the camp continues to hold individuals who fled ISIS, as well as individuals and families connected to ISIS, who were displaced from its former strongholds. It currently holds around 68,000 people, 94% of whom are women and children.<sup>[1]</sup> 86% of the residents are Iraqis and Syrians and 20,000 of the total population are children under the age of five. There is a section of the camp that holds more than 11,000 foreign women and children from up to 62 different countries. Out of this total 7,000 are children. The camp is run by the SDF, whose guarding personnel amount to only 300–400 men to cover the entire camp.<sup>[2]</sup>

The camp's demographics changed dramatically with the fall of Baghouz at the end of March 2018 (ISIS last stretch of territory that SDF and US backed forces recaptured). In December 2019 the camp population used to be of around 9,000 people. However, at the end of March 2019 it had grown to nearly 74,000.<sup>[3]</sup>

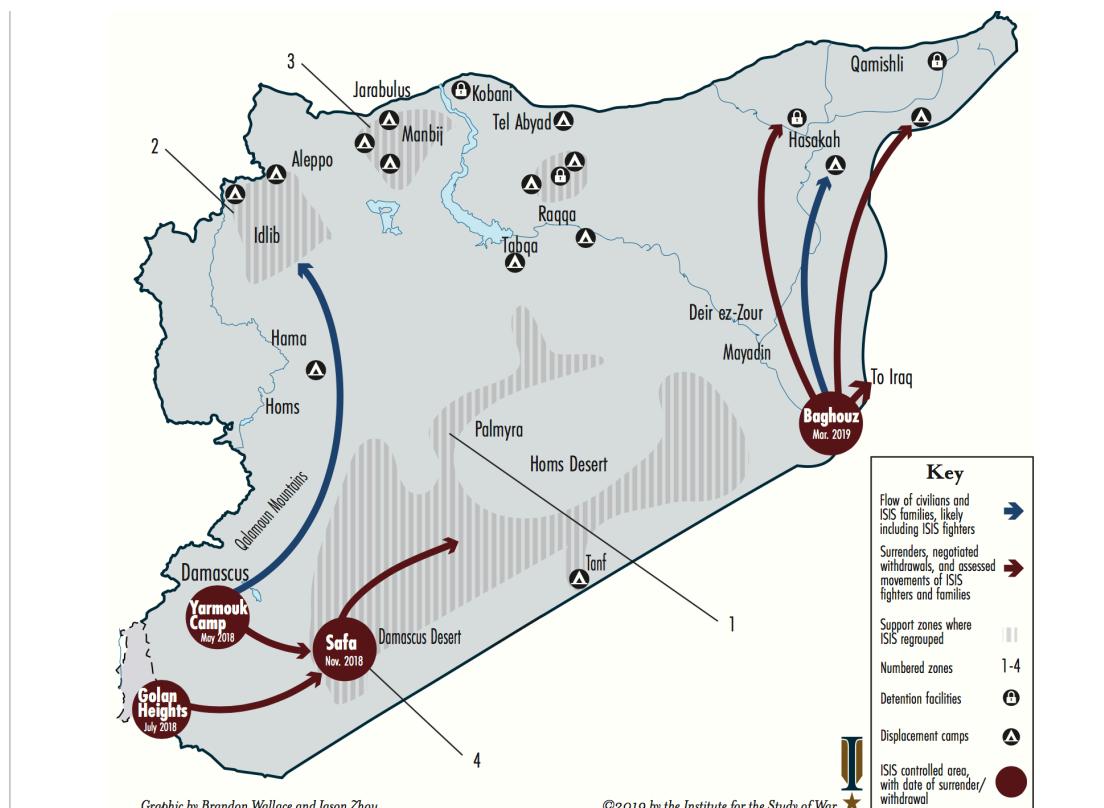


Figure 1: Main dispersal of ISIS forces in Syria. (May 2018 through April 2019). Source: Cafarella (2019).

However, between March and December 2019 the camp's population has slowly decreased. This is not only due to the dedicated efforts by the SDF and a few countries to repatriate some IDPs back home but also due to some escapes through smuggling schemes that have been set up.

*Al Hawl Camp*'s maximum capacity is 40,000 people. Thus, the overall conditions have worsened fairly quickly after the population was inflated with the fall of Baghouz. Even with the presence of international aid workers and agencies it was clear that after March 2019 the conditions for the women and children have become dire. Before the Turkish invasion of Northern Syria in October 2019, there used to be a solid presence of UNICEF, the ICRC, Doctors Without Borders and similar aid organizations to help SDF to take care of the residents. However, one of the consequences of the invasion was a growing instability and insecurity that forced these organizations to leave the camp for around two months, only resuming their assistance in December 2019.[4]

The precarious conditions observed in the camp since 2019 have not improved. On the contrary, its overall situation has gotten worse. At the height of the summer, in mid- 2019, scores of children died of malnutrition and diseases. Besides, there is no sewage system, there are not enough latrines, there is no regular food delivery, no potable water and the whole camp smells terribly due to these precarious conditions. There are sand flies in large quantities everywhere and they transmit leishmania and other diseases.

The weather in the region is also inclement: awfully hot and dry summers and severely cold winters. That also makes life in the *Al Hawl Camp* very uncomfortable. Additionally, the children are falling behind on their education as the camp authorities and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are not able to supply proper school services. Anger about the under-resourced and badly managed overall conditions has intensified. Thus, this extreme environment aggravates further the residents' grievances and makes it a fertile terrain for ISIS radicalization. Another point is that no attempt has ever been made to isolate ISIS extremists from IDPs and refugees—who are mainly Syrians and Iraqis—who were the original inhabitants of the camp before the fall of Baghouz.[5]

One of the immediate consequences of the appalling conditions at camp was a change in the environment. It developed into a rough and violent one, since attrition among the camp's residents became routine and the

atmosphere turned more violent as people and groups started to vie for the limited and scarce resources such as food, shelter and medical supplies. Soon, the residents started to act aggressively toward each other.[6] The foreigners have usually been more violent and more radical than the Iraqis and Syrians. By late March 2019 the radical foreigners connected to ISIS had already started to burn the tents of the other residents they deemed 'infidels' and they shouted at them.[7] The SDF guarding the camp decided it was time to divide the residents in two different geographical locations: a larger area for the Iraqis and Syrians, and a smaller area for the foreigners, nearly all of them with strong ties to ISIS.[8]

Furthermore, ISIS propaganda has always insisted that the women play a key role in educating and indoctrinating the children. Nowadays there is something new to ISIS's structure: women have been taking some leadership roles since they have been in charge of some fronts that in the recent past were almost exclusively run by men. ISIS's loss of territory has then introduced a new role for women in the group's framework since most residents in *Al Hawl* as well as in other Kurdish-run camps in Northeastern Syria are women and children. In the absence of male leadership, these women have been running ISIS activities within the camp. The current grip of ISIS within *Al Hawl* camp's residents has been enabled by several criminal enterprises that have helped the radicalized residents to foster ISIS's ideology inside the facility as well as mimic its former caliphate structure. This has become viable through a stream of funding, smuggling of all sorts and criminal activities.

The women taken to *Al Hawl* are now some of the most fanatical and stern enforcers of ISIS's ideology. These women are the ones who stood loyal to the group as it retreated to Baghouz and endured defeat after several weeks of fierce battle. They are probably ISIS's most hardcore defenders. Therefore, they have harbored the same resentment and grievances derived from the sectarian tensions during the conflict and thus they are fundamentally connected to the ISIS insurgents, many of whom have families, relatives, or friends' families housed in *Al Hawl*. Hence, since ISIS insurgents are aware of these circumstances, they have been funneling money—among other things—to the women in *Al Hawl* and are in constant communication with them in order to assure them that they are not forgotten and they have a task to undertake: prepare for ISIS's future resurgence.[9]

In late 2019 US military officials evaluated that ISIS has been militarily defeated but not eliminated.[10] The terror organization remains cohesive and still maintains an intact command structure as well as running an insurgency in parts of rural Syria.[11] Knowing that under certain conditions prison environments are ripe for terrorism radicalization, *Al Hawl* has become part of a plan for the future territorial resurgence of ISIS. In particular, *Al Hawl*'s tens of thousands of interned children are a vital part in ISIS's strategy. Consequently, those children have been undergoing intense indoctrination within the camp, since they are expected to be the next generation of ISIS cadres. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi had most likely thought of it. In interviews, some of the more radical ISIS residents have admitted that their coming to *Al Hawl* happened on Baghdadi's orders after the fall of Baghouz. Also, in September 2019, Baghdadi addressed his constituencies stating that all means should be taken by ISIS militants to free the women and children at *Al Hawl*. Ever since, it has been noticeable that there have been efforts in smuggling women and children out of *Al Hawl*. Funds have been channeled to residents through criminal ways. Likewise, smugglers have been able to move their clients out of the camp. In the meantime, with money in their pockets, the women have been able to get more resources and even weapons inside the barbed wire.[12] Once more it is possible to envision a terrorist organization using the prison environment to make inroads and establish roots to grow and spread. Meanwhile, ISIS has benefited from the services provided by human smuggling networks not only for its women and children in *Al Hawl* but also to move fighters and facilitators who are spread across the desert to those areas where the insurgency remains strong.

Ever since its inception, ISIS and its predecessor AQI have benefited from prison contexts. In fact, prisons were fundamental for both groups at various moments in time. Abu Zarqawi, AQI founder and the ideological godfather of ISIS had been incarcerated from 1994 to 1999. He was convicted for being involved in terrorist plots in Jordan. Dreadful prison conditions changed his life forever and his grievances only grew stronger. In the meantime, he had time to strengthen his extreme Islamist ideological convictions and develop his leadership in a conducive environment where he found a number of inmates willing to listen to his 'message'. Years later,

after being released from prison, several of his former prison mates would end up joining his terrorist network and form the embryo of ISIS in Iraq.[13]

Besides, terrorist groups frequently partner or merge with criminal organizations to advance their objectives. Criminal organizations often have competences that are useful for terror groups and vice-versa. Terrorist groups, for instance, usually take advantage of human smuggling networks to move their fighters, to assist them in plot and execute attacks, extract fighters after attacks have been carried out, infiltrate terrorists' cells overseas, hide key facilitators in safe places, to name their main uses. Some terrorist organizations have established long-standing partnerships with human smuggling networks. Others resort to them only when needed, while yet others develop 'in-house' capabilities for human smuggling and document forgery in order to keep their profile as low as possible.

This article aims to provide some insights on how crime and terror interplay within *Al Hawl Camp* and how this may contribute to ISIS's territorial resurgence in Syria and Iraq. The camp has become a breeding ground for the radical Islamist ideology and ISIS has been taking full advantage of this. Additionally, this article aims to shed some light on how the human smuggling networks that operate in the region are structured and what role these play for ISIS since ISIS takes advantage of the existing smuggling routes to move its militants across the region and beyond.

The next section will briefly discuss the role of prisons in shaping jihadists and in particular those from ISIS. Then some reflections on ISIS's insurgency after the loss of its former territory will be offered. In addition, some insights on the dynamics of *Al Hawl Camp* and the role of ISIS women are provided. Criminal activities have aided ISIS to gain the upper hand inside the camp and militants prepare for the time when the caliphate will be reborn. The article also provides an outline—based mostly on fieldwork—of how the human smuggling enterprises in Syria are handled and how they might serve ISIS in its long-term strategy.

### ***Prisons and Their Role in the Shaping of ISIS***

Prisons are known for being important breeding grounds for jihadist ideology. Looking back at history, it is possible to identify a number of jihadist leaders that were radicalized at least in part within prison systems. This is especially true in Muslim-majority countries where Islamist extremists also take advantage of the prison environment to recruit and indoctrinate new followers, restructure networks of radicals, reinforce their extremist ideology, share ideas and learn from likeminded people.[14]

It is important to note that not everyone actually becomes radicalized with extreme Islamist beliefs solely as a result of time spent in prison. However, prison time can potentially accelerate radicalization as a result of isolation from mainstream society and also by exposing the inmate to ideologies to which certain persons are highly susceptible.

Prison life is indeed something that terrifies the newcomers. New convicts, Muslims and non-Muslims alike, usually arrive in a prison feeling insecure, confused, unsettled and afraid. Quite a few reports indicate that some imprisoned Islamists have used a proactive strategy of taking advantage of this confusion and anxiety by offering food, help, friendship, protection and spiritual guidance for the new arrivals. Prison radicalization generally begins through personal relationships and not through radical ranting and brainwashing speeches to large audiences. The best potential for radicalization in a prison context lies in a one-to-one approach.[15]

However, prison administrations worldwide face a dilemma: to separate or not to separate extremists from ordinary criminals. More often than not, prison authorities tend to not separate them from ordinary inmates because they are afraid to keep all the extremists together. Nonetheless, there is not enough evidence proving that separating the extremists and blending them with ordinary people is a better decision in terms of countering radicalization. Experiences in a variety of prisons in different countries have shown the danger of putting together ordinary criminals with terrorists or insurgents. There are a number of cases showing that they have learned from each other and that the ideologically driven prisoners were successful in recruiting new

members for their cause. This is particularly the case when either charismatic and well-spoken extremists come in contact with ordinary prisoners and, knowing their grievances, gradually talk them into their extremist beliefs, or, on the other hand, when the extremists are powerful within a specific prison and coerce ordinary inmates to join their cause by fear or by offering them some form of material assistance. In the Muslim world this has happened particularly with ordinary Muslim prisoners or new converts who have limited knowledge of Islam and are not very educated.

While in prison, extremists often assume a leadership role in the same way they try to in wider society. They usually try to become representatives of other prisoners in one way or the other. First, they do so by directly opposing the prison authorities, leading hunger strikes, riots and rebellions. In these situations, they are eager to show to other prisoners that they do not crack under pressure. Second, they do so via a more indirect approach, living a pious and humble routine in prison, seeking, thus, to radiate confidence, peace of mind and faith in order to impress other prisoners whose beliefs are not yet established. Furthermore, terrorists and extremists often take advantage from hostile and aggressive prison cultures where moderate speeches and tolerant messages are frequently eclipsed in an environment that usually respects violence and moral power. [16]

Accordingly, what has been unfolding in *Al Hawl Camp* for about a year and a half is not unique and new to ISIS or to the jihadist prison scene. We can draw an interesting parallel between *Al Hawl Camp* and a prison for jihadists in Iraq which more than a decade ago was dubbed the “Jihadist University” and become well known for its role as a breeding ground for the predecessor of ISIS. *Camp Bucca* was one among a number of US detention centers in Iraq that were set up after the US invasion in 2003. Often heavily populated and inadequately managed, this overcrowded prison germinated what was then the next generation of jihadists. Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi was the most infamous of *Bucca*’s detainees. An untold number of future ISIS’s members did prison time at this camp, including nine of ISIS top leaders. [17]

Since its inception, *Camp Bucca* became overwhelmed by large quantities of detainees following the crisis in the *Abu Ghraib* prison in 2003. Additionally, after the scandals at *Abu Ghraib*, the rules regarding prisoners’ routine in *Bucca* had become laxer. Therefore, *Camp Bucca* had a grim start and soon after a lot of problems began to surface. Detainee assault on US guards became routine. Detainee-on-detainee violence between detainees also soared, and riots became commonplace. In this context, detainees were divided among sectarian lines to ease the tension within the prison (around 85% of the detainees were Sunni Arabs). Additionally, extremists were mixed with moderates within each compound. Soon, the inmates were enforcing Sharia Law and disputes were being settled according to these laws and harsh Sharia courts became routine within the prison system. Islamist extremists would maim and kill fellow inmates for behavior they considered un-Islamic. This situation led to a growing fanaticism since there was an enormous collective pressure on the detainees to become more radical in their beliefs. To make matters worse, there was very little communication between US guards and the US camp administration on the one hand and the detainees on the other. Consequently, most inmates did not know why they were there or when they would be released. This fact aggravated the already-delicate situation within the camp and drove many moderate Sunnis into the hands of radical Islamists. Some reports by US soldiers who served in *Bucca* state that most of the inmates were not angry young men looking for revenge at any cost. They were mostly driven into joining the extremists for their need of physical or financial self-preservation. Others were coerced into radicalizing under the threat of being harmed or even by fears for the wellbeing of their families outside. [18]

Hence, *Al Hawl*’s chaotic environment has much in common with *Camp Bucca*: overpopulation, lack of rules for its residents, ongoing violence among residents, frequent assaults on SDF guards, constant riots, extremists mixed with moderates in each of the compounds, strict enforcement of Sharia Law by the more radical residents, lack of proper and effective communication between the SDF personnel and the residents, intimidation and fear. This complex and hectic environment of *Camp Bucca* created a boiling pot for jihadists and the insurgency. The extremists were able to recruit other captured Iraqis through coercion, affinities or by addressing their grievances. The recruitment was followed by intense indoctrination using structured training programs based on a perverted Sharia law interpretation that involved harsh physical sentences to any opposition.

Another event that brings similarities to the current overall situation in IDP camps and prisons in Northeastern Syria and most notably in *Al Hawl Camp* is the earlier “breaking the walls” campaign unleashed by Al Baghdadi in Iraq between 2012 and 2013. This campaign was aimed at freeing jihadists incarcerated in Iraqi prisons. At that time the US forces had already withdrawn from controlling these prisons and they were more vulnerable to prison breaks from the outside. In those years ISIS conducted a series of surprise attacks on the major penitentiaries in the country and was successful in releasing a number of important ISIS members as well as a large number of potential volunteers for joining its ranks. In the *Abu Ghraib* prison attack alone more than 500 detainees were released.[19] More recently, a few months before being killed, Al Baghdadi exhorted ISIS militants to free the women and children held in *Al Hawl*. The call holds a great deal of similarity with the ‘breaking the walls’ campaign.

The answer to the question of how to counter prison radicalization is never easy. After all, prisons are environments in which disgruntled (and often violent) individuals are kept in order to be punished by the state. Correspondingly, IDP and refugee camps also provide an environment of lawlessness, despair and abandonment. Prisons and IDP camps in Muslim countries as well as in other parts of the world are often overcrowded, unhealthy and uncomfortable places. Individuals confined in such places tend to be receptive to ideologies that praise anti-social and anti-state violence and offers simple but fanatical answers to their grievances.

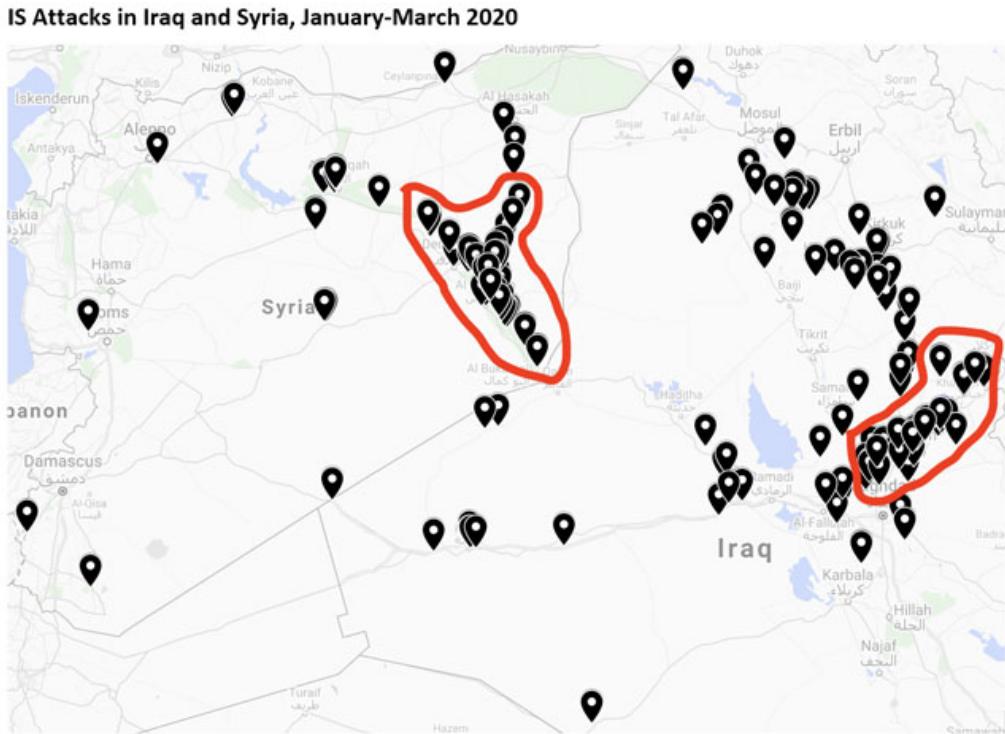
Certainly, the history of ISIS can be traced back to prison systems in the Middle East. Prisons have had a key importance in several critical moments for this terrorist organization. As will be described in the next section, despite its territorial losses, ISIS is actually far from being defeated in Syria and Iraq. ISIS still counts on its extensive experience as an insurgent force to keep in check the ability of Syrian and Iraqi governments to effectively fight back. As it has aptly done in the past, the group relies on local Sunni Arabs’ grievances against the current rulers of Iraq and Syria and also relies on its constituencies, family members and militants detained in many prisons and IDP camps across the two countries.

### ***The Increasing Power of ISIS’s Insurgency Campaign in Iraq and Syria***

In August 2014 the US began its bombing campaign against ISIS in Iraq and Syria and set up a coalition of countries to fight the self-proclaimed caliphate. The military campaign was named ‘*Operation Inherent Resolve*’. Following that, Russia also stepped in and began fighting ISIS, but it targeted mostly other insurgent groups that threatened the power of Bashar al Assad. In 2015 ISIS faced some key losses in the border areas with Turkey and Iraq. In 2016 ISIS lost ground as fast as it had captured it. Iraqi security forces backed by the US military forces inflicted heavy damages on ISIS infrastructure and troops. Iraqi forces retook Mosul by mid-2017 and at the end of that year ISIS was considered defeated in that country. In Syria, US-backed Kurdish forces regained territory, including Raqqa in October 2017. However, ISIS was still propping up attacks through its use of social media as well as spreading its ideology while also admonishing militants to conduct attacks worldwide. In 2018, ISIS had already lost 95% of its territory in Iraq and Syria and by the end of the year the only strip of territory the group held was the town of Baghouz at the Iraqi/Syrian border. In March 2019, ISIS finally lost that too and its territorial caliphate was gone.

Nevertheless, ISIS has been proving that it was actually never defeated.[20] The group has never lost its will to fight. As early as in the summer of 2016, ISIS had begun to articulate a post-caliphate strategy, falling back on a insurgency that now seems increasingly difficult to be decisively crushed. ISIS’s well-planned and long-term strategy focuses on a rural insurgency based on hit-and-run tactics against government structures and other targets. This tactic is designed to demonstrate that nothing is out of ISIS reach. It also employs targeted assassinations directed at Sunnis who collaborate with government forces. In fact, ISIS has systematically eliminated village leaders and other civilians who have collaborated with other insurgent groups or anti-ISIS forces in both Syria and Iraq. These actions are aimed at preventing the consolidation of opposition to ISIS’s rule that might appeal to local people, villages and tribes. ISIS also targets Shia and Kurdish militias.

These attacks are not a sign of desperation. On the contrary, they actually are part of a sophisticated defense strategy of 'low-intensity conflict' which ISIS has adopted ever since it realized as early as 2016 that it would lose its territorial domain. At the time of this writing, ISIS's command and control framework appears to be intact.[21]



**Figure 2:** The areas of Deir Al Zour (Syria) and Diyala (Iraq) have seen most of the attacks since the fall of Baghouz in 2019. This map shows the attacks between January and March 2020. Source: Zelin (2020).

From the fall of Baghouz in March 2019 until March 2020, ISIS has claimed around 2,000 attacks in Iraq and Syria. Two governorates, one in Iraq and one in Syria, saw most of the attacks: Deir Al Zour (Syria) with 580 attacks and Diyala (Iraq) with 452 attacks. These statistics demonstrate that ISIS has a solid presence in these areas where its forces appear to be stronger and very capable.[22] Moreover, ISIS has benefited from its strategic depth in the desert areas in Southeastern Syria (especially to the south of highway M20). There the group has been recently able to hide, structure and launch bold attacks against Syrian military and security forces (albeit Syria's regime claims that this area is under its government control). A few months ago (April 2020) ISIS's attacks against Syrian military and pro-regime forces near Al Sukhnah have left many dead. Also, in the province of Deir Al Zour, ISIS has recently (July 2020) started to target tribal leaders and elders in a series of ambushes. The frequently successful attacks carried out by ISIS have shown it has stepped up its operations in the past few months. These territories are valuable for its insurgency, as they contain important gas fields as well as the highway M20 that connects Deir Al Zour to Homs and Damascus. Equally important, the desert itself provides the insurgents with a perfect spot to hide in and operate. Besides, ISIS has been taking advantage of the COVID-19 outbreak in Syria and the consequent quarantines and curfews imposed by the regime to contain the virus. ISIS has recently launched bolder operations, taking advantage of the fact that the government's forces have been recently depleted due to the quarantine measures.[23]

ISIS's insurgency campaign has aimed at both degrading governance structures and slowing reconstruction efforts. It contributes, thus, to the perpetuation of state failure and violence in war-torn Syria as well as in troubled and politically fragile Iraq. It also takes into account that, at some point in the future, ISIS will seek to regain territorial control in Iraq and Syria. Meanwhile, another key component of its insurgency and long-term strategy lies in the IDP camps and prisons across Syria and Iraq. Thousands of ISIS fighters and their family members as well as other people that lived within former ISIS territories were rounded up in ISIS last stronghold and taken to IDP camps and prisons within the conflict zone, mostly in the Northeastern part of Syria, which is still under SDF control.[24]

Currently the total population interned in the camps and prisons in Northeastern Syria surpasses 100,000 people. From these, about 92,000, mostly women and children, have been held in IDP camps. Another approximately 10,000 ISIS male fighters are detained in prisons. There are no good data on how deeply these detainees and IDP camp residents have been ideologically indoctrinated by ISIS. However, radicalization efforts by ISIS have been stronger for about a year.[25] The prisons and camps can potentially provide the insurgency with fighters, facilitators, supporters and a future generation (the children) for their state-building project. If the ISIS insurgency eventually gains the upper hand in the desert and in the small settlements in East Syria in the near future, the women and children housed in *Al Hawl*, once freed, will most likely become a core element for achieving ISIS's territorial objectives.

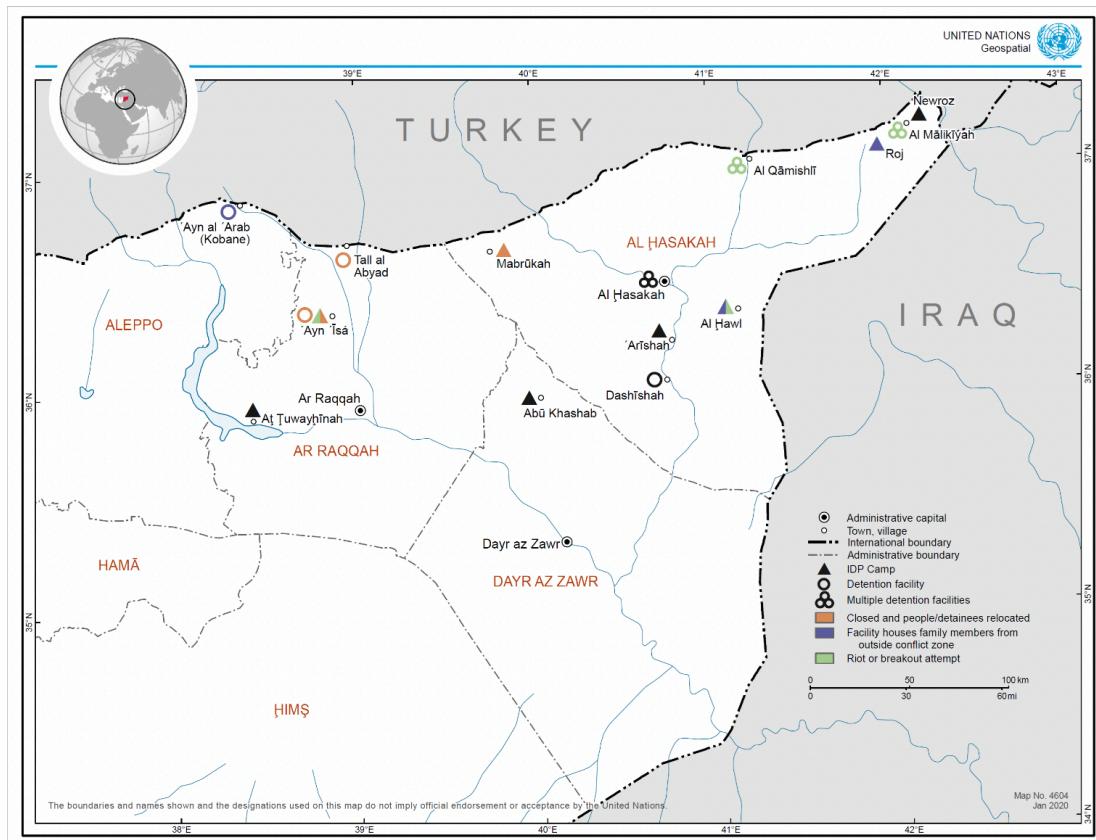


Figure 3: Map of detention facilities and IDP camps Northeastern Syria. 2020. Source: UN S2020/53 (2020).

Correspondingly, a rural insurgency enables ISIS to not only degrade its adversaries, but also to recruit new members and prepare the ground for its long-term survival. This is especially true in the areas of Syria's and Iraq's contiguous borders. Some authors dub it 'Syraq' (mimicking the 'Afghanistan' expression). The 'Syraq' landscape extends deep into Syria and Iraq, with favorable geographical and sociopolitical conditions to help jihadists survive and linger on. Additionally, ISIS considers both countries to be a single front, thus dispersing its militants and fighters (including die-hard foreign and local fighters as well as important commanders who were preserved for future actions) in the area spreading from Al Sukhnah/Central Syria and Deir Al Zor/Eastern Syria to Anbar and Diyala provinces in Iraq. There is an estimate that the ISIS insurgent force comprises of between 10,000 and 14,000 fighters plus 3,000 foreign fighters in both Iraq and Syria. The 'Syraq' desert has been vital for ISIS's survival strategy since it provides a number of excellent spots for fuel and water depots as well as transportation routes. It also allows ISIS to establish alliances with nomads and smugglers. Thus, ISIS has been able to regroup, coordinate sleeper cells, reorganize its funding, hide money in caches and make more money through extortions. Consequently, the group has remained capable of planning and executing attacks such as roadside IED attacks, mortar strikes, raids on military and police outposts, attacks on infrastructure, and so on.[26]

The governments of Syria and Iraq recognize that these border regions are their soft underbellies and a source

of vulnerability. They know their outreach is limited in this part of their countries. In these areas where Sunni Arabs form the majority of the population, the US-led anti-ISIS coalition has not partnered with any viable local forces to fight against ISIS and capture towns previously governed by them. Rather, it has partnered mainly with Kurdish forces which are alien to that battle space. Currently, this landscape sees a lot of Shia and Kurdish militias. Most of this region has seen heavy fighting and now lies in ruins. Furthermore, the presence of Shia and Kurdish militias increase the sectarian tension in this whole area.[27]

In the meantime, ISIS has devised a strategy to evade the US precision air strikes that have depleted its forces over the years due to overwhelming US air power. As a result, ISIS progressively began refraining from engaging in urban combats, costly battles and conventional assaults and raids. ISIS has made its chain of command and control partially flexible by allowing small groups of fighters to make their operational decisions autonomously, based on local circumstances and needs. Therefore, most of its small cells have avoided direct engagement with their adversaries in order to minimize losses.[28]

Another important feature in ISIS post-caliphate strategy is the use of the cyberspace through local and international networks. This move helped them to reorganize its chain of command and keep its finances, logistical support, intelligence, security, indoctrination and media capabilities still functional, albeit depleted. ISIS has been investing more resources in the cyberspace since its territorial defeat. The cyber realm allows ISIS to work on its funding, indoctrination, spread of propaganda and coordination of its cells. Thanks in part to its cyber capabilities, ISIS networks in Iraq have received in 2019 a constant flow of combatants who were fleeing from the conflict zone in Syria. In fact, ISIS networks in Syria are now reduced if compared to the ones the group has in Iraq. Besides, the Iraqi networks have been providing key material support for ISIS comeback in Syria.[29] The cyberspace has also provided ISIS with the adequate tools to be in touch with the women and children housed in *Al Hawl*. Therefore, the residents have been able to access and create propaganda, text messaging, receive money, and contact facilitators, among others. ISIS solid cyber presence has allowed the group's leadership to sync its current objectives with its fighters, followers and supporters across the prisons and IDP camps in Syria.

Additionally, as mentioned above, Al Baghdadi released an audio clip in September 2019, urging ISIS militants to focus on freeing its detainees and dependents from IDP camps and prisons in Syria and Iraq. Thanks to its cyber capabilities, this message reached *Al Hawl*'s residents and greatly boosted their motivation. Even though ISIS in Northeastern Syria might be currently impaired and unable to take in scores of militants and their family members in case of a prison break, it has already made arrangements to eventually direct them to Idlib province where the group has resources and facilities. In fact, ISIS has been smuggling women and children out of *Al Hawl* for about a year and directing many of them to Idlib. Alternatively, ISIS has also successfully relocated a number of women and children smuggled out of *Al Hawl* to the towns of Deir Al Zor and Raqqa. In the future, if a large prison break happens in ISIS core area, it could be another version of the 'breaking the walls' campaign waged on Baghdadi's orders during 2012 and 2013 in Iraq. An action such as this would be particularly beneficial for ISIS insurgency but catastrophic for the fragile region of Northeastern Syria whose delicate stability has been already eroded during the last year. Moreover, 'Operation Peace Spring' launched by Turkey in Northern Syria in October 2019 has exposed the precariousness of the current security management configuration within camps and prisons manned by SDF in the area.[30]

Given the ongoing critical conditions of the internment camps, if the window of opportunity to process the women and children justly and humanely is missed, the rehabilitation attempt may come too late and many of them may end up as obstinate extremists. ISIS counts on the ineffectiveness of its adversaries in dealing with this situation to go on with its indoctrination campaigns within camps like *Al Hawl*. As a consequence, ISIS might be able to reach one of its core objectives: to prepare, indoctrinate and train its next generation of fighters.

## ***Al Hawl Camp Internal Dynamics and Terrorism Facilitation: A Crime X Terror Nexus***

ISIS has realized that it has a singular opportunity to exploit the humanitarian and security crisis in IDP camps and prisons across Northeastern Syria. In the long run, SDF simply does not have the resources to maintain more than a 100,000 people under its custody in a network of detention facilities and IDP camps. Besides, some sources estimate that in *Al Hawl* alone 20,000 of its residents are suspected hard core ISIS militants. Thus, the terror group has been networking effectively within the camp for more than a year. There is an inflow of money for ISIS militants within. These resources often sent by ISIS insurgents help the women to keep the 'caliphate' activities inside the camp: indoctrination, basic services for its members, fulfillment of basic needs not delivered by aid workers and camp authorities, purchase of items such as cell phones, communication lines, weapons, and others. These financial resources also serve to bribe officials, buy counterfeit documents, pay smugglers to move families outside the camp - among other things. ISIS might be gradually setting the stage for a major future breakout of both detained fighters and displaced persons as part of its resurgence campaign in Syria.[31] One particular point that differentiates *Al Hawl* from other IDP Camps in Northeastern Syria, e.g., *Al Roj* and *Ain Issa* (the later collapsed after the Turkish invasion) is that its residents are more connected to ISIS and more radicalized than the ones interned in some other camps. Some sources claim that *Al Hawl* residents are the "ruling class of ISIS". *Al Roj* actually houses a large number of dissidents who openly express their disappointment about ISIS. Women interned in *Al Roj* and *Ain Issa* (before it fell apart) have said that they felt safe and comfortable to dispose of ISIS 'uniform' of black *abaya* and *niqab* for good. Instead they were wearing loose outfits in light colors and even sunglasses.[32]

As the dire situation in *Al Hawl* lingers on, ISIS members within take advantage to indoctrinate, coerce and radicalize other residents. This remodeling of the camp by ISIS radical females has produced a gang-like atmosphere. Their activities clearly look like a deliberate plan since Al Baghdadi had allegedly ordered ISIS females to surrender *en masse* to the SDF in February 2019. He was probably already determined to infiltrate facilities like *Al Hawl*, since his previous experience of recruiting, radicalizing and indoctrinating fellow prisoners at *Camp Bucca* proved to be a success more than a decade earlier.[33]

Meanwhile, the worldwide COVID-19 outbreak has reached Syria since March 2020 and some of *Al Hawl's* residents have started to panic, fearing for their lives. The already grim conditions in the camp might now get even worse. The pandemic has forced the SDF to restrict visits in all IDP camps run by them. However, in the case of *Al Hawl*, the frequent and illicit communications and trade between residents, smugglers and ISIS fighters could surely aggravate the spread of the virus. On the other hand, ISIS has been broadcasting propaganda through its media channels stating that the pandemic is a divine revenge for the Muslims who fell victim of Coalition strikes in Baghouz more than a year ago. Thus, ISIS propaganda presents Coronavirus as a 'soldier of Allah'. Moreover, inside *Al Hawl*, radicalized women have been declaring that the virus does not infect true Muslims like them because they are pious, fear Allah and follow the path laid by Abu Bakr Baghdadi. They claim the only Muslims infected and killed by the virus are the ones who are not true believers.[34]

Since the beginning of 2019, *Al Hawl* Camp has been structured as a two-tier system; one that is stricter for the foreigners housed in the annex and another, much laxer, in the section that houses Iraqis and Syrians. It is worth emphasizing that both sections accommodate mostly ISIS families. In the foreigner's section of the camp, SDF guards noticed that the radicalization towards ISIS is more intense. Eventually this section of the camp would mimic an ISIS territory with ISIS flags flying high and a rigid code of conduct, among other things. It is unusual to find a girl over eight years old without a veil. Some residents behave as if they are still part of *Al Khansa* Brigade, the women-led *Hisba* police that acted during caliphate times. The women indoctrinate the children daily and keep telling them that the SDF killed their fathers and destroyed their homes, fostering hate not only towards the SDF but also directed at everyone they deem to be infidels such as aid workers and NGO personnel. Hence, they have been constantly exposed to an extremist worldview by their ISIS supporting mothers. The children have no choice about their upbringing: they have not been able to be children, there are no playgrounds, no regular schools, no psychological services available, no deradicalization programs for the ones educated in the ISIS system from 2013 to 2019. Furthermore, the women in this sector of the camp created

a sub-section even more radical and violent than the rest of the annex. This new subsection was named '*Jabal Al Baghouz*', which stands for 'the mountain of Baghouz', referring to the very last edge of territory held by ISIS on the banks of Euphrates river where their husbands fought and were defeated by the Coalition troops in March 2019. ISIS militants held in *Al Hawl* believe that '*Jabal Al Baghouz*' is the spot where the caliphate will be reborn. Their collective experience as camp residents under hardships has strengthened their bonds, regardless of their nationalities and past way of life. If released or broken out in the future, they will probably be more committed to ISIS than ever before. The scenario in *Al Hawl* demonstrates the continuing growth of women and their role in jihadist groups, especially within ISIS. This is the place where the seeds of ISIS territorial resurgence have been sown.[35]

Life in the other section of the camp destined for Iraqis and Syrians is less strict even though most are ISIS families. They also receive better health care and services. In that section they are allowed more freedom of movement within the camp although they cannot leave the camp. They can even access the outside world through the use of the hawala money transfer system; mobile phone technology is also allowed in this section so they can communicate with those outside. There has been a constant inflow of money to *Al Hawl*'s ISIS families within this annex through money orders originated overseas and from within Syria. Money has been coming from at least 40 different countries as well as the Syrian province of Idlib and surroundings (Idlib town, Sarmada and Harem, mostly). There are two hawala remittance offices in this part of the camp. These money orders come through a well-established local hawala system authorized by the camp authorities. The authorities, in turn, control how much money the residents receive monthly as the SDF guards have access to the ledgers. Hawala employees within the camp claim they receive dozens of remittances daily and an estimate sum of between US\$ 15,000 to US\$ 20,000 USD per month is destined for the ISIS resident families. When analyzing the remittances, one can see that approximately 60% of the total value received each month in *Al Hawl* is coming from Turkey. This fact does not mean that the money is originating from Turkey, but rather that the country might be a transit point for money orders and also a way to disguise the country of origin. The camp administration usually does not allow any individual to receive more than US\$300 at once. In case the total sum received in a given transaction is over this limit, SDF allegedly keep the excess to be returned to the owner the following month. SDF argues that this policy is aimed at discouraging the residents from hiring smugglers to illegally take them out of the camp. It is worth noting that some countries criminalize money remittances to *Al Hawl*'s residents as terrorism financing based on their counterterrorism laws. Therefore, some relatives back home have been afraid of sending money through both the legal channels—such as *PayPal* and other apps—and the irregular hawala system. This situation enables ISIS insurgents outside the camp to aid the women who have no other option but to turn to ISIS for support. Furthermore, in an effort to curb illegal money remittances to camp residents, the US Treasury has recently (July 2020) sanctioned individuals and hawala offices both in *Al Hawl* and inside Turkey for providing financial support for ISIS.[36]

Not all camp residents are ISIS militants or ISIS families. Apart from those few original camp inhabitants who are simply IDP, there are others who were coerced into ISIS through forced marriages with fighters. There are also those who later became disillusioned with ISIS and just want to go home. Some authors claim that in the year 2020 a growing number of women have become tired, disappointed and have lost the passion for ISIS now that they realized its leadership used them only to advance their ideological goals. According to some reports, loyalty towards ISIS has been falling steadily in 2020. Many women do not believe in ISIS anymore and no longer want to be part of it.[37]

The women who are willing to go home have been increasingly seeking the services of human smugglers to be taken out of the camp with their children. Most of their home countries will not repatriate them due to their domestic policies. Smuggling in and out of the camp happens on a daily basis. All sorts of goods have been brought in as well as residents have been smuggled out of the camp through arrangements that include bribing SDF guards to allow them out, followed by an onward overland travel to places such as Deir Al Zour or even as far as Idlib province in Northwestern Syria.[38] All these smuggling enterprises have encouraged the smugglers to set up their 'businesses' in the vicinity of the camp so they can promptly access their clients' needs and approach the guards that partner with them more easily and frequently. Consequently, crime and

the 'shadow economy' have progressively taken its grip not only around the camp and into *Al Hawl*'s structure, but also in the adjacent region.[39] It should be noted that both sections of the camp have taken advantage of these criminal dynamics.[40]

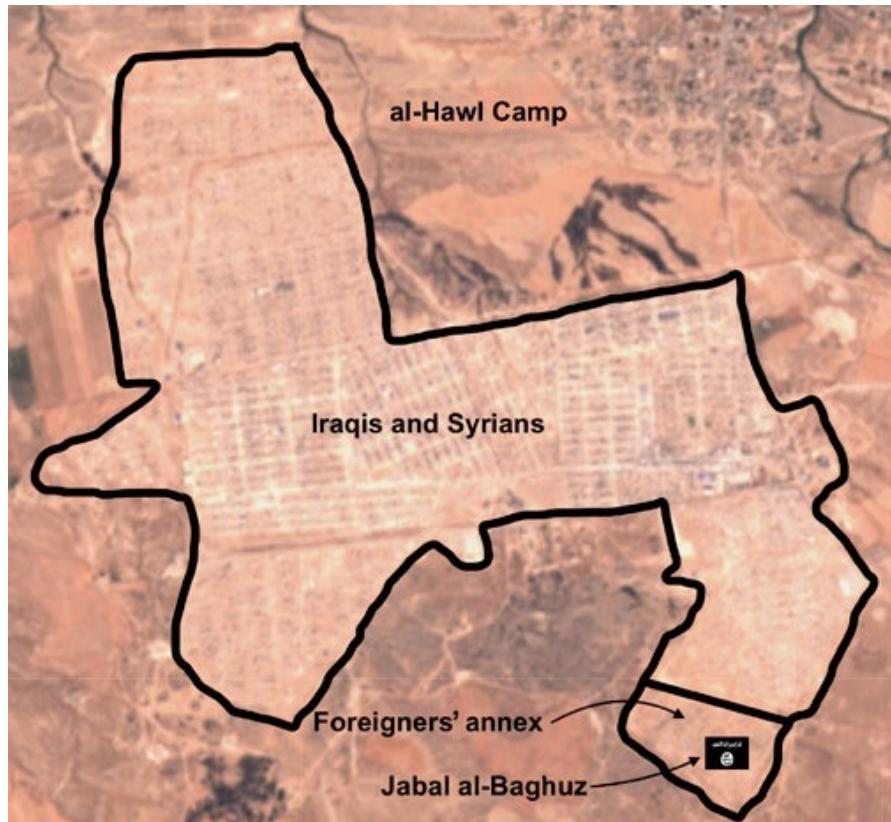


Figure 4: *Al Hawl* Camp. 2019. Source: Zelin (2019)

The cyberspace and particularly social media have helped ISIS women at *Al Hawl* to spread propaganda, work on fundraising and also engage in smuggling of all sorts. In the past, during the territorial phase of ISIS, women were generally excluded from producing and/or participating in propaganda created by its media outlets. Nowadays, in the insurgency/post-territorial phase, the women of ISIS have taken prominence in the online campaigns since they have been creating and spreading their own propaganda material and cyber actions. Around June 2019, pro-ISIS media channels in social media have started disseminating propaganda material from *Al Hawl*, e.g., videos of women pledging loyalty to Baghdadi, women and children raising an ISIS flag inside camp, children inside camp chanting pro-ISIS slogans, etc. The women within *Al Hawl* competently manage accounts on an array of social media platforms, but most frequently *Telegram*, *Facebook* and *Twitter*. Whenever their accounts are shut down by a social media provider due to extremism content offenses, they quickly create several new ones, using disposable email accounts. Moreover, at around that same time (June 2019) supporters of ISIS launched campaigns on *Telegram* to raise funds and to advertise the presence of ISIS in *Al Hawl*. Calls for liberating the camp's population within *Telegram* channels have also surfaced.[41]

One example is the *Telegram* channel 'Justice for Sisters' created by ISIS supporters in June 2019 that used to post messages in Arabic, English and German. This channel would call for donations to support ISIS women in *Al Hawl* via *PayPal*. By the time this account was aired, there were already several *PayPal* accounts links posted on this channel. A video message requesting donations from Muslims posted in its very beginning showed four women holding cardboards written in the languages above that read: "To the monotheists in all parts of the World: take us out of *Al Hawl Camp*". This campaign has raised thousands of euros in a few days. This can be explained by the large amount of people subscribing to this channel within the first days it was created. Among

other things, this channel had clear instructions for users to avoid detection by authorities and *PayPal* IT managers. *Telegram* removed the channel a month later. However, other channels with the same objectives and links to *PayPal* accounts for collecting donations have popped up on *Telegram* as well as on other social media platforms. In July, ISIS supporters created several *Telegram* channels titled 'Kafel' to offer all sorts of support for ISIS families in *Al Hawl*, including calls for Muslims to 'free the prisoners'. The plea for their release is constant in these channels. In spite of *Telegram* IT management's efforts to repeatedly take down these channels - it has deleted the original ones in Arabic and French - ISIS supporters and members have not only recreated and renamed them 'Islamic Kafel for after Deletion' but have also taken measures to secure these communications. All these channels have enabled some online crowd funding campaigns that have managed to raise thousands of US dollars in a short amount of time. Other crowd funding efforts have clearly urged people to raise funds for ISIS families so they could afford smugglers to help them escape. To avoid being taken down, they have made attempts to disguise and dissimulate the aim of the fundraising adopting labels such as 'Honeymoon in Vienna' or an invite for a boxing event, among others.[42]

According to this author's sources and fieldwork, it is still unclear how often these crowdfunding campaigns are successful and exactly how many women have benefited from it and have managed to escape from the camp by bribing guards. It should be taken into consideration that most of the successful smuggling of persons' arrangements in Syria actually do not happen online. They may start online, through the first contacts between the 'client' and the smuggler, but they go on and develop outside of cyberspace. Mostly because the parties involved already know that the scrutiny on terrorists' communications is routine for intelligence agencies and social media service providers.[43] Besides, results from fieldwork and subsequent interviews revealed that, since mid-2019, there have been numerous reports of scams involving fake smugglers who offer their services on the Internet. A similar claim was made by Vera Mironova whose reports in her Twitter account depict fake smugglers deceiving women in *Al Hawl*.[44] These scammers claim they can take people out of *Al Hawl* and also out of Syria, demanding that their prospective clients pay them upfront a percentage of their fees. The scammers appear to be very knowledgeable about the smuggling routes and their practicalities. They usually make promises that seem credible and solid, therefore very convincing; once the victims wire the money to them, they disappear, and the victims of the scam never hear of them again. Every now and then women within *Al Hawl* fall prey to such bogus schemes and are deceived by false promises. This fact might explain two current trends: first, why several of the residents who want to escape have been resorting to the smugglers that are introduced by people who know them. And, second, the increasing numbers of middlemen both among the Kurdish and the women within the camp who are able to connect prospective clients with smuggling networks outside the wire.[45]

### ***When Crime and Terror Converge: How ISIS Takes Advantage of Human Smuggling in Syria***

Since the second half of 2019, there has been an increasing number of escapes from SDF-run IDP camps and detention facilities across Northeastern Syria. Authors usually claim that this is a result of the US administration's decision to pull back its special operations forces from the area and the Turkish invasion of SDF-held territory. The subsequent loss of US influence in the region impacted negatively on the SDF's ability to ensure that both ISIS male prisoners and ISIS wives would be securely held in the camps and prisons.[46]

Law enforcement investigations have revealed that terrorists and their families have taken advantage of established migrant smuggling routes that have been set up in the region since 2011. Migrant smuggling follows the same logic as other transnational criminal markets: supply and demand. The core of this business is to circumvent existing regulations and thus facilitate irregular border crossings. There are several routes out of Syria and the Middle East that have been used by tens of thousands of refugees bound mostly for Europe. Smugglers advertise their services in places where migrants and displaced people can be easily reached such as social media networks, refugee camps and diaspora communities. Besides, smugglers do not mind helping terrorists to move across borders as long as they pay them well.[47] Therefore, when human smuggling is

exploited by terrorists, it becomes one of the numerous manifestations where crime and terrorism converge, either as a deliberate material support for terrorism or as an unintentional support. Terrorist groups, ISIS included, take advantage of illicit human smuggling to advance their strategic objectives. In the case of ISIS, this connection is used to enable the resurgence of its caliphate by sending its fighters, families and facilitators to safe zones or to places where they can coordinate and plot future terror attacks. Hence ISIS needs to coordinate both the relocation of its fighters as well as their families held in facilities like *Al Hawl*. As a result, partnering with human smuggling networks became a pillar for this strategy. It is worth mentioning that this author's fieldwork suggests that thus far, ISIS relies on pre-existing human smuggling networks rather than running its own; although it does have its own 'smugglers of choice'.

Some migrant smuggling networks that do not involve online transactions have been uncovered in recent years. They are made up of routes that seem to be counterintuitive: Syrian, Iraqi and Eastern African nationals have been smuggled to Europe and the USA through South Asian and Latin American countries, using counterfeit and stolen or fraudulently obtained European (mainly) passports and visas. These routes are beneficial for terrorists and criminals alike since they provide covert and illogical itineraries that baffle authorities worldwide. When originated in Northeastern Syria, these schemes usually involve the participation of SDF personnel who help with the overland escort of the 'clients', often as far as the borders of Turkey, Iraq or Lebanon. From there, they take commercial airlines to Latin America, Southeast Asia, and East Africa and then to Europe or the USA. A year ago, the cost of an escape from *Al Hawl* to the borders of Turkey usually started at around US\$ 3,000 to US\$ 5,000 excluding the expected bribes. Meanwhile, the costs to the Iraqi and Lebanese borders have always fluctuated widely. However, they are eventually doubled if the 'client' needs a doctored passport. As for the ongoing travel out of the Middle East, the costs vary greatly.[48] Nowadays, the costs have climbed steeply, especially due to the increasing awareness by law enforcement agencies about the destination countries as well as the number of people involved in the smuggling schemes. More people involved means an increasing amount of people to be bribed. Also, the growing chaos in Syria and the neighboring region, combined with the impact imposed by COVID-19 related travel restrictions even inside Syria have also contributed to this increase of costs. All these facts have been extensively used by smugglers in their narrative to justify to desperate people within the camps why their services have now a higher fee. Besides, it is not unusual for greedy human traffickers eager to exact an extortionate fee to exaggerate to their clients the increasing difficulties in completing a journey due to travel constraints.[49]

Upon analyzing several human trafficking cases, it can be easily seen that the key to a successful transnational human smuggling plan is the combination of a high-quality forged/adulterated/stolen/fraudulently obtained travel document and a reliable route. Skilled smugglers usually have a portfolio of routes and a range of travel documents to offer to their clients. However, the type of route and the quality of the travel document to be used by the migrant will depend on how much money the clients want to pay for the arrangement provided by the criminal organization. The more they pay, the better the quality of the documents and routes. The smugglers handle the necessary documents in support of the fraudulent passports provided, visas needed, the overland travel arrangements, the flight tickets and the lodging along the route.[50]

High-quality document forgery requires technical skills and know-how. The transnational smugglers that offer their services in Syria have to resort to specialized professionals who manufacture and supply travel and identification documents. Thus, the smugglers usually source these documents from others instead of manufacturing the documents themselves. There are a few hubs of document forgery that have been identified as suppliers for Syrian migrants. The main hubs of passport/visa procurement—for the routes to Europe that go through South Asian and South American countries—are based in Turkey, Thailand, Brazil and Paraguay. Despite the prevalence of forged travel documents in this market, it's been increasingly common to abuse genuine passports that were either stolen or sold by the bearers themselves (the bearers sell their own passport and report it stolen). In such cases, the genuine passports are used for impersonation by 'look-a-likes' in which the smuggled migrants travel with passports that belong to persons who resemble them. This has been used more recently due to the fact that some countries have introduced more advanced techniques for document fraud detection. For the same reason, the technique of replacing the passport photo by the migrant's one has

not been used much lately. Instead, the forgers substitute the whole bio-data page. In some cases, this is done with the help of corrupted government officials. However, techniques for adulterating a passport/ID abound. There are several other methods of doing it.[51]

Document forgers operate in different ways. Some forgers work individually, and their business is local supplying the documents for local people. Others work in groups or networks and are structured as a transnational criminal enterprise. Yet others work directly with a transnational crime organization of another sort. The networked document forgery organizations are usually comprised of people of various nationalities who work in a coordinated fashion through established forgery syndicates across different countries. Both situations can be seen in the case of Syrian migrants since 2011. The organizations that work on the routes involving South American and South Asian destinations are usually based in the hubs mentioned in the paragraph above. Generally speaking, document forgers do not specialize in one type of document. Rather, they supply a range of travel and identity documents according to their clients' needs. It is worth noting that passport and visa forgery commonly go hand in hand. In terms of advertising their products, these groups usually adopt one of two options: they advertise them on the Internet, either through social media platforms or through an illicit online store hosted on the Dark Web; or, they work directly with the smugglers tailoring the documents to their needs; avoiding, in such cases, the use of social media or the Internet to do business. Additionally, several investigations have found that these travel documents and visas can be used again and again after being returned to the smugglers' network. This is especially true with the higher-quality forged documents as well as visas. Whenever the smuggling network wants to re-use a passport or visa, they usually send the passport/visa/passport pages through regular mail back to its origin or to another destination operated by the network. This *modus operandi* has often been observed in the case of routes out of Syria.[52]

Considering the type and quality of the route, law enforcement investigations have acknowledged that criminals engaged in transnational smuggling of people often manage to change their routes looking for a combination that offers the least resistance. When they realize that a certain country is controlling better its land, maritime borders and airports they quickly shift their routes and flight hubs. Migrant smuggling often uses a combination of air, land and sea travel. Smugglers constantly test and adapt the routes, especially the air ones as the state control tends to be more dynamic in these routes. The most successful routes are used for larger groups. Besides, there are a number of cases of 'route testing' uncovered by investigations in which the persons (smugglers) responsible for checking the routes have travelled a few dozen times within a year, to the same transit country, using the same routes in and out, just to ensure the suitability of the itinerary.[53]

One of the routes that has been used quite successfully by transnational smugglers to take Syrian migrants to Europe has relied on South American countries as a jumping point on their way to their European destination. This route is manned by criminal organizations based in Turkey and South America (particularly in Brazil). First, the smugglers take their clients from several regions in Syria (rural and urban environments), including IDP and refugee camps. Then—following the logic described above—the migrants are first driven overland to Turkey, Lebanon or Iraq (Kurdistan region) from where they fly mainly (but not exclusively) to Dubai, Addis Ababa or to Istanbul. Right after, they take a flight to a South American country (generally Brazil, as São Paulo is the main airport hub within the continent). Once in South America, they are handed counterfeit/doctored/stolen European Union countries' passports for their onward air travel to the European continent. By the time they arrive in South America they are usually carrying their Syrian passports. However, some already leave the Middle East with a fraudulent European passport. At that point, they have dozens of international airports to choose from for their flight to Europe. The amount of money the migrants pay to the smugglers in these routes has been varying frequently because the routes' safety has been constantly shifting since 2011 due to preventive measures put in place by local authorities. This is especially true for the air hubs. Besides, the smugglers have been offering their clients different types of accommodation, mainly in the smuggling hubs of Brazil and Turkey. The clients can choose between 'safe places' or regular hotels. 'Safe places' other than regular hotels command a higher smuggling fee. Additionally, if the amount of bribes to be paid to state officials becomes higher, so will the costs for the client. Furthermore, through this author's sources and fieldwork it could be seen that over time there has been an increase in the use of better-quality passports, either forged or fraudulently

obtained ones, on these routes. This means that there has been a gradual increase in the fees charged by the smugglers. In 2019, the average going rate was between 5,000 and 12,000 euros. Nowadays the costs can get as high as twice that amount.[54]

Another route to smuggle Syrians into Europe that has been recently uncovered involves countries in Southeast Asia. This is also a counterintuitive route. The smugglers are European citizens with Syrian origins. They look for their clients in Syria and offer them a route that first goes overland to Lebanon or Turkey and then by airplane to Malaysia, then onto Singapore and after that to a European country. The smugglers arrange the migrant's accommodations *en route* and provide them with counterfeit European passports once they are out of the Middle East. Smugglers that work on this route have used more frequently the *Viber* social media platform for communicating with their clients. Malaysia seems to be the place in which the smugglers have their main base and network within Southeast Asia. From Kuala Lumpur, depending on the smuggler/client arrangement, the smugglers may or may not escort the migrants between Malaysia and Singapore, in order to ease this 'tricky' part of the route. Singaporean airport surveillance and scrutiny are said to be stricter. Some even speculate that the smugglers choose to insert Singapore as part of the route in order to allow the migrants to have a Singaporean stamp on their passports aiming at conferring the fake passport with more legitimacy for a later 'easier' entry through migration in Europe. Throughout 2019, the migrants paid an average of 5,000 to 10,000 euros for these services.[55]

Furthermore, ISIS members have resorted to smugglers not only to flee the conflict zone either from detention facilities or from desert hideouts. They also resort to smugglers to be able to get to a place/country in which they can rebuild their terrorist cells. Sources, interviews and field work have revealed that a number of ISIS facilitators who are neither Syrian nor Iraqi citizens have fled the Syrian/Iraqi conflict zone to either neighboring countries or other continents. This includes recruiters, media experts, instructors, logisticians and others who want to stay alive, reconnect with their communities, rebuild their networks and wait for a better opportunity to get back to Syria or Iraq and resume their ISIS caliphate objectives. It should be underlined that the ISIS terrorists who hold those skills are key to ISIS's resurgence as they were part of the administration during ISIS's caliphate times. However, it is still unclear whether this move is part of a bigger strategy outlined by ISIS leadership, or they simply did that due to their better connections with people who could safely take them out of the conflict zone. Moreover, based on this author's experience, quite a few of these ISIS members who in addition hold dual citizenship (e.g., a Western country plus a Middle Eastern/Northern African one) might have chosen to stay in the neighboring region instead of making their way back to the West. This is because remaining closer to ISIS former territory might simply facilitate acts of resource coordination and the establishment of the necessary local connections. After all, going back to the West would probably not serve the purpose of accelerating the rebuild of ISIS's caliphate. Finally, through field research it could be verified that indeed some of these ISIS members who hold dual citizenship have fled Syria and Iraq into Lebanon and Turkey. There they joined family or friends who can provide safe havens and reinsert them into a normal life thus providing them with a cover while away from ISIS territory.[56]

### **Concluding Remarks**

Despite a number of law enforcement investigations in multiple countries since 2011 that led to the arrest of dozens of smugglers and their middlemen, many of the routes and their forged travel document hubs are still active today. This author's fieldwork suggests that the criminal organizations that manage the routes/hubs have proven to be resilient and do not get deterred by a temporary fracture of their structure. The middlemen are easily replaced and their logistics can be efficiently rebuilt again over time.[57]

Thus, countering illegal smuggling of people is never easy. Improved border enforcements only result in displacement of smuggling routes to different border areas, smuggling mechanisms and procedures. These border enforcement measures have not reduced the number of smuggled migrants or the size of the problem. Smugglers have benefited from the inadequate concept adopted by most countries to neutralize it: targeting the routes (border enforcement) instead of targeting the hubs (leadership, finance, logistics). Besides, migrant

smuggling is somehow risk-free for the high-level smugglers who rarely travel with the migrants they smuggle as this job is oft done by low-level members of the criminal organization.[58] However, some successful counter-smuggling investigations have proved that if the smuggler's finance and logistics hubs are thoroughly scrutinized, there is a high chance that the leadership will be caught. An extensive and recent investigation coordinated by the Brazilian Federal Police in close cooperation with US law enforcement agencies and prosecution authorities led to the disruption and dismantling of an international human smuggling organization based in Brazil. This organization has been responsible for the illicit smuggling of scores of individuals, including suspected terrorists from East Africa and the Middle East, into Brazil and eventually into the US and Canada. The organization's inventive and dynamic leadership was arrested and charged in Brazil: Abdifatah Hussein Ahmed (a Somalian national), Abdesalem Martani (an Algerian national) and Mohsen Khademi Manesh (an Iranian national). Equally important, among the migrants smuggled by this criminal organization there were a few suspected Islamist terrorists possibly linked to Al Shabaab, who were arrested in Panamá and Costa Rica after transiting through Brazil.[59] Another recent, far-reaching and successful investigation was also conducted by the Brazilian Federal Police in cooperation with the US Department of Homeland Security and simultaneously carried out in 20 countries. It resulting in dozens of arrests including the one criminal considered to be the most ingenious and successful global human smuggler of our times: the Bengali national Saifullah al Mamun. He controlled an intercontinental smuggling network based in more than 20 countries. This investigation revealed that the smuggling organization has laundered at least US\$ 10 million in Brazil between 2014 and 2019, using sophisticated strategies to conceal the movement of its funds. Once more, targeting the smugglers' finance and logistics hubs has proven to be vital for the dismantling of a criminal enterprise.[60]

ISIS has ultimately benefited from these established migrant smuggling networks in the Middle East, especially in Syria. It has moved some of its women and children out of *Al Hawl* and also managed to get some of its combatants out of the country's prisons into places where its cells are better structured such as in the cities of Deir Al Zour, Raqqa, Idlib and several rural spots in the central and southeastern Syrian desert. ISIS likewise has been successful in smuggling its fighters and facilitators out of Syria to Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq and beyond. ISIS depends both on criminal networks and criminal 'in-house' capabilities to fuel its insurgency in Syria and Iraq and to extend its grip far beyond the conflict zone.[61] Moreover, as long as the overall living conditions in *Al Hawl* remain dire, the chances that *Al Hawl* will remain an incubator of grievances and radical ideologies that will benefit ISIS's future resurgence remains high. There are over 11,000 foreign women and children that have not been repatriated to their home countries, plus all the Iraqi and Syrian residents that cannot return to their villages.

Socio-politically speaking, Syria has a barely functional government and it will probably remain unstable for the foreseeable future. Bashar Al Assad's regime does not control parts of the country and it is still too weak to assert itself on some of the provinces where it claims to have regained authority. IDP camps are far from being the government's priority. As for Iraq, apart from the Kurdistan region in the north, the rest of the country has also not seen stability for a number of years. The country remains politically volatile and the population unsure about what the future holds for them. Consequently, both countries have been intensely exploited by criminals and terrorists.

States that are crippled by bad governance, abuse of power, weak institutions, absence of internal controls and lack of accountability become vulnerable to constant and deep infiltration by terrorist groups and organized crime. Both thrive in establishing their base of operations in conflict zones and in failing and/or failed states where crime and terror converge more frequently. For terrorists and organized crime, the worse a state's governance, the better for their illegal enterprises. That is why ISIS has been aiming to disrupt reconstruction and stability efforts in both Iraq and Syria ever since it took power, and even more so now during its new insurgency phase. It seems that the governments of war-torn Syria and Iraq cannot revert this alone. The international community has yet to figure out how to properly assist them. One likely first step would be to address the root causes and grievances that made terrorism and organized crime flourish so intensely. A deep look at *Al Hawl* Camp dynamics can provide some answers in this direction since it is a microcosm that undoubtedly mirrors the whole region and its challenges.

**About the Author:** Christian Vianna de Azevedo has been a Special Agent with the Brazilian Federal Police for the past 19 years. He is a PhD candidate in International Relations at PUC Minas University/Brazil, and a Research Fellow in the following centers: TRAC (PUC Minas/Brazil), CeCOT (Universidad La Plata/Argentina), ANP/PF (Federal Police Academy/Brazil). He has written and published a number of articles and book chapters in Portuguese, English and Spanish. He also acts as a post-graduate level instructor in Brazil and overseas.

## Notes

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[56] Notes from the field.

[57] Notes from the field.

[58] Notes from the field.

[59] As an example of a recent successful law enforcement investigation that involved the smuggling of Islamist terrorists from Africa, through Brazil onto the US and Canada, see these links: <http://www.pf.gov.br/imprensa/noticias/2019/08/policia-federal-deflagra-operacao-big-five-em-combate-a-exploracao-de-migrantes-em-sao-paulo> and <https://noticias.r7.com/sao-paulo/pf-inicia-operacao-de-combate-ao-contrabando-de-migrantes-20082019>; <https://politica.estadao.com.br/blogs/fausto-macedo/pf-poe-operacao-big-five-contra-esquema-de-ilegais-nos-eua/>; <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/international-law-enforcement-cooperation-leads-brazilian-takedown-significant-human>; <https://www.ice.gov/news/releases/international-law-enforcement-effort-leads-brazilian-takedown-significant-human>; <https://migrantes-otro-mundo.elclip.org/un-negocio-cruel/un-negocio-cruel.html>; <https://www.jusbrasil.com.br/diarios/261598145/trf-3-judicial-i-capital-sp-13-09-2019-pg-608?ref=topic-lawsuit>

[60] For more on the investigation see URL: <https://politica.estadao.com.br/blogs/fausto-macedo/do-bras-bangales-cobrava-r-47-mil-para-contrabandear-migrantes-aos-eua/>; <http://www.pf.gov.br/imprensa/noticias/2019/10/policia-federal-deflagra-operacao-contra-o-contrabando-de-migrantes-e-lavagem-de-dinheiro>; <https://www.ice.gov/news/releases/human-smuggler-indicted-us-charges-and-arrested-part-brazilian-takedown-significant>

[61] Notes from the field.