

Vestiges Of The World's Bane: The Threat Of ISIS Resurgence Amidst The Turbulence In Postwar Syria

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Abstract

Some of the leftover from conflict such as unresolved status of ISIS-linked detainees, including women and children held in overcrowded and poorly managed facilities such as Al-Hol camp, continue to pose pressing humanitarian and security risks. This study aims to analyze the implications of prolonged detention on regional stability and radicalization efforts. By using a qualitative descriptive method, the research utilizes purposive sampling of secondary data from 2015–2024, which includes academic works, NGO and UN reports, and journalistic investigations. Our findings reveal that legal ambiguity, substandard living conditions, and lack of adequate oversight create a volatile environment that may deepen the spread extremist ideologies. The study also explores the role of geopolitical dynamics, especially Turkey's involvement in northern Syria and the questions involving Kurdish groups. The paper contributes to current discourse by offering a unique approach of the ISIS remnant issue in postwar Syria. The authors emphasize the need for a coordinated international policy response, urging the need for detainee rights protection, rehabilitation efforts, and sustainable reintegration programs within the region.

Beberapa sisa konflik seperti status tahanan terkait ISIS yang belum terselesaikan, termasuk perempuan dan anak-anak yang ditahan di fasilitas yang penuh sesak dan tidak dikelola dengan baik seperti kamp Al-Hol, terus menimbulkan risiko kemanusiaan dan keamanan yang mendesak. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis implikasi dari penahanan yang berkepanjangan terhadap stabilitas regional dan upaya radikalisis. Dengan menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif, penelitian ini menggunakan purposive sampling data sekunder dari tahun 2015-2024, yang mencakup karya akademis, laporan LSM dan PBB, serta investigasi jurnalistik. Temuan kami mengungkapkan bahwa ketidakjelasan hukum, kondisi kehidupan di bawah standar, dan kurangnya pengawasan yang memadai menciptakan lingkungan yang tidak stabil yang dapat memperdalam penyebaran ideologi ekstremis. Penelitian ini juga mengeksplorasi peran dinamika geopolitik, terutama keterlibatan Turki di Suriah utara dan pertanyaan-pertanyaan yang melibatkan kelompok-kelompok Kurdi. Makalah ini berkontribusi pada wacana saat ini dengan menawarkan pendekatan yang unik terhadap isu sisa-sisa ISIS di Suriah pascaperang. Para penulis menekankan perlunya respon kebijakan internasional yang terkoordinasi, mendesak perlunya perlindungan hak-hak tahanan, upaya rehabilitasi, dan program reintegrasi yang berkelanjutan di wilayah tersebut.

A. INTRODUCTION

Syrian civil war, now listed as one of the most devastating conflicts of the 21st century has officially come to an end in December 2024, after more than a decade of bloodshed, war crimes, and human rights violations. What starts as a peaceful uprising against the Assad regime in 2011 spiraled into a brutal, multifaceted war involving numerous factions, including government forces, rebel groups, Kurdish militias, and resurgent extremist organizations such as ISIS (Swinnen, 2023). The conflict drew in regional and international powers, turning Syria into a battleground for proxy wars. Over the years, the war claimed hundreds of thousands of lives, displaced more than half of the population, and left much of the country in ruins (Baczko, 2018; Mami, 2021). The widespread use of chemical weapons, indiscriminate bombings, and mass detentions deepened the humanitarian crisis, drawing international condemnation and sporadic intervention (OPCW, 2025) (UNHCR, 2025).

A stark example state's abusive power comes in the form of Sednaya Prison. Located in north of Damascus, it is one of Syria's most infamous detention centers. It primarily holds political prisoners, suspected extremists, and former opposition members. According to the UN Commission's "Web of Agony" report, detainees suffered arbitrary detention, torture, severe malnutrition, disease, and prolonged isolation with many dying slowly under such conditions (UNHCR, 2025). It is also known for severe overcrowding, excessive use of abusive tools, and inhumane conditions, Sednaya sometimes referred to as "Syria's death factory". It parallels ISIS-linked refugee camps in neglect. With little to no oversight from international bodies, these prisons remain outside any accountability framework, raising urgent ethical and humanitarian concerns (Amnesty, 2016).

According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights (2023) reports, over 135,000 individuals remain forcibly disappeared, many of whom were never formally charged or tried. Prominent clerics, peaceful protesters, and academics have been subjected to torture, starvation, and inhumane treatment in notorious facilities such as Sednaya and Mezzeh (SNHR, 2023). These prisons have come to symbolize the regime's broader strategy of repression and control, where the label of "terrorist" is frequently used to silence political opposition. The Syrian government has used its sweeping Counterterrorism Law and special courts to criminalize peaceful political expression and humanitarian work by labeling dissidents as "terrorists," even when their actions involved documenting abuses, distributing aid, or participating in

protests. Human Rights Watch documented that as of mid-2013, tens of thousands of nonviolent activists were referred to these courts, often without due process, in trials that lacked fairness and transparency (EP, 2021). The continued detention of both ISIS suspects and nonviolent dissidents reveals the depth of Syria's detention crisis and highlights the urgent need for justice, transparency, and international accountability in the postwar era.

However, not all those detained in Syria's prisons have found freedom. A particularly troubling issue concerns individuals imprisoned due to alleged connections with ISIS, including women and children. These detainees are held in overcrowded and poorly managed facilities, where harsh conditions reflect an alarming disregard for human dignity (Al Jazeera, 2020). Over the past decade, numerous reports have documented the dire conditions in ISIS-related detainee camps such as Al-Hol and Roj in northern Syria. As of 2024, over 56,000 individuals, mostly women and children are remain held under harsh conditions marked by malnutrition, limited medical care, physical insecurity, and psychological trauma (Moss, 2022; OHCHR, 2025). Despite international awareness, there remains a significant gap in oversight and accountability, as few international bodies are granted access to monitor or intervene meaningfully. This lack of effective legal and humanitarian mechanisms reflects a deeper issue: the detainee crisis has fallen between the cracks of counterterrorism policy, humanitarian response, and political will. The root causes lie in the absence of coordinated repatriation efforts, fractured local governance, and reluctance by many states to reclaim their nationals. This study narrows its focus to the humanitarian and legal conditions in post-ISIS detention camps in Syria from 2014 to 2024, without addressing the conditions in Iraqi facilities or broader counterterrorism strategies outside of Syria.

ISIS, or the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, rose from the instability following the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the outbreak of the Syrian civil war. It began as a faction of al-Qaeda before rebranding and expanding rapidly by 2014, capturing large territories and declaring a caliphate. Fueled by sectarian divides, regional conflict, and sophisticated propaganda, ISIS attracted thousands of foreign fighters and spread its ideology globally. Though its territorial hold has collapsed, its influence remains embedded in regions like northern Syria (Dagher, 2023).

Aside from the worsening humanitarian conditions within these camps, the risk of radicalization among their inhabitants remains a pressing concern. Many detainees,

including women and children, have been exposed to extremist ideology for years, often without access to education, psychological support, or de-radicalization programs. The prolonged confinement, lack of legal resolution, and minimal oversight only deepen resentment and increase the likelihood of extremist beliefs taking root in a new generation. These camps, if left unchecked, risk becoming incubators for renewed cycles of violence and extremism, undermining regional security and the broader fight against terrorism (Moss, 2022).

B. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive research design with a library-based approach, relying entirely on secondary data to examine the humanitarian and security implications of unresolved ISIS-affiliated detainee cases in post-civil war Syria. The method used is qualitative content analysis, allowing for the systematic interpretation of narratives and information drawn from relevant documents. Data are collected through purposive sampling of materials published between 2015 and 2024, including academic articles, NGO and UN reports, policy briefs, and journalistic investigations accessed via platforms such as Google Scholar, ReliefWeb, and official institutional websites. Thematic analysis is applied to identify key patterns and issues related to legal ambiguity, substandard camp conditions, and the risk of radicalization. To ensure data credibility, source triangulation is used to cross-check findings across different types of documents, thereby enhancing reliability and minimizing bias. This study is limited by its dependence on open-access, publicly verifiable sources and does not involve fieldwork or primary data collection.

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. ISIS and its pulse of existence

As a non-state threat, ISIS has proven itself to be not only lethal but also adaptive, as it made use of the technological advances of globalization. ISIS has effectively used digital media to amplify its presence and spread its ideology across the globe. Platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Telegram have become tools for propaganda and recruitment (Stevens, 2015). These propagandas often target young people, including those in Western countries, by promising them a sense of purpose and belonging. The group also used encrypted apps, such as Telegram, to coordinate activities, recruit members, and spread training materials. For instance, they

distributed detailed instructions on how to make improvised explosive devices (IEDs) through these channels, directly influencing lone-wolf attacks, such as the 2017 Manchester Arena bombing (Dearden, 2017).

As a non-regular force, ISIS has proven its adaptability in modern warfare by employing guerrilla tactics and exploiting the urban environment. During the Battle of Mosul (2016–2017), ISIS fighters used underground tunnels to ambush Iraqi and coalition forces, allowing them to strike and vanish without a trace. They also fortified residential areas, using civilians as human shields to deter airstrikes and complicate ground operations (Dehghanpisheh, 2016). In addition, ISIS frequently deployed vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs) to disrupt the advancing forces. For example, during the fight for Raqqa in Syria, ISIS used suicide car bombs to target military convoys, causing significant delays and casualties (Kaaman, 2019). Beyond tactics, ISIS has creatively adopted modern technology to combat superior forces. The group has become infamous for its use of commercial drones, repurposing them for surveillance and attacks. During the battle for Mosul, ISIS used drones to drop grenades on Iraqi troops, effectively turning low-cost technology into a weapon of war. They also used drones to scout enemy positions and relay real-time intelligence to their fighters (Chávez & Swed, 2020). These tactics allowed ISIS to counter superior firepower and maintain control of key areas for extended periods, effectively adapting to technological advancements and utilizing tools of globalization to level the playing field against militarily superior forces.

At its peak, ISIS transformed from a decentralized terrorist group into an organization resembling a state, controlling large swathes of territory in Syria and Iraq between 2014 and 2017. During this time, the group governed millions of people, imposed strict interpretations of Sharia law, and maintained a complex administrative structure, including a judiciary, taxation systems, and education (Plundirch, 2024). Their reign of terror was characterized by mass executions, public beheadings, and brutal punishments intended to instill fear and suppress dissent. For example, the group massacred over 1,700 Iraqi soldiers at Tikrit's Camp Speicher in 2014, an atrocity that became one of the darkest symbols of their cruelty (UNITAD, 2020). ISIS also destroyed historical landmarks, such as the ancient city of Palmyra, to assert its dominance and erase cultural heritage (Clapperton et al., 2017).

Their campaign of fear reached Europe and beyond, leading to some of the most devastating attacks in recent history. At the height of their power, ISIS's reign of terror

created widespread panic, with governments around the world scrambling to counter their influence. In November 2015, coordinated ISIS attacks in Paris killed 130 people, targeting a concert hall, restaurants, and a stadium (Europol, 2016). This attack shocked the world and revealed ISIS's ability to plan and execute complex operations outside their strongholds. Another example is the 2016 Brussels bombings, where ISIS operatives carried out suicide attacks at an airport and metro station, killing 32 people and injuring hundreds (BBC, 2016). These attacks demonstrate their global reach and ability to inspire both organized cells and lone-wolf attackers.

The downfall of ISIS began when a coalition of nations, led by the United States and its allies, launched a coordinated military campaign to dismantle the group's territorial control in Syria and Iraq, codenamed Operation Inherent Resolve. Starting in 2015, this campaign combined airstrikes, ground offensives, and local partnerships, such as working with Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and Iraqi military forces (Wilson Center, 2019). One of the turning points was the liberation of Mosul in 2017, when Iraqi forces, with international support, reclaimed the city after months of brutal urban warfare. Similarly, in Syria, the fall of Raqqa, once declared ISIS's capital, marked another significant blow to its operational capabilities (Al Jazeera, 2017). The coalition's strategy of targeting their leaders and supply lines also disrupted the command structure of the insurgents and weakened their ability to sustain prolonged conflicts. By 2019, ISIS had lost the last of its territorial holdings, most notably in Baghouz, Syria, where a final, desperate battle was fought (Wedemen & Said-Moorhouse, 2019).

Despite their defeat on the battlefield, the group continued to conduct sporadic attacks, showing that they were still capable of instilling fear, albeit on a much smaller scale. In March 2024, ISIS claimed responsibility for a bombing attack that resulted in more than 100 casualties in Russia (Knight et al., 2024). Elsewhere, some of its pulses can also be felt, notably in Afghanistan and some African states. In Afghanistan, ISIS Khorasan has established itself as a threat not only to the ruling Taliban government but also to other states. Apart from being the one to carry out the attack in Russia, in the past, ISIS Khorasan has also carried out other attacks on Taliban figures, foreign governments, and visitors in the country (Mackintosh et al., 2023). A stronger presence can be seen in Africa, where it has maintained its presence in countries such as Mali, Mozambique, and Somalia (Zelin, 2024). Here, ISIS has gone as far as getting a grip over some territories, for example, its control of the Puntland region in Somalia. The overall

active presence it maintains around the globe is also paired with the remnants of its glory days in the form of refugee camps in Northern Syria.

2. Turkiye's undertaking in Northern Syria

In the past, Turkiye has had its share of problems with the Kurds of northern Syria. In 2019, it carried out a military operation, that is, Operation Peace Spring, that led to the creation of safe zones following an agreement with Russia (TRT World, 2024). Amidst the intricate tapestry of the Syrian Civil War, Turkiye is among the foreign countries involved. Turkiye is one of the backers of the rebel forces against the then-ruling Assad regime. One of the forces it backs is the Syrian National Army, which, unlike the HTS, has been busy carrying out offensive overtures in Kurdish-populated areas, notably Manbij.

Turkiye seeks to eliminate the threat of Kurdish groups in the region, which it deems connected to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) (Hakari, 2025). Said group has a history of attacks in Türkiye, prompting the latter to see it as a terrorist organization. With that in mind, it can be understood how a stronger Kurdish presence in the region, in the form of Rojava, would not be something that can be welcomed with open arms. Moreover, the tension between Turkiye and the PKK still remains with the latest clash taking place in northwestern Syria.

Prior to the present state of Syria, Turkiye launched aerial strikes on numerous infrastructures in Rojava (Rudaw, 2024). The strides that Turkiye is taking, that is, its support for some groups in Syria, along with the new stage Syria has found itself in, could pose a threat for more clashes in the region. Additionally, one must consider the primacy and importance Turkiye places on its own national security, which leads to military operations as a potential means for it to use (Al Jazeera, 2024). The risk of sparking yet another conflict in the area is all the more critical given the presence of the Al-Hol ISIS refugee camp in Rojava.

3. No tempest in a teacup: The fate of Al Hol Camp

As of 2024, the camp has more than 40,000 inhabitants, many of whom have ties to ISIS (MSF, 2024). Given the sheer size of the inhabitants and the camp, effective control and monitoring are difficult to maintain. As a result, the camp has the potential to serve as a fertile ground for the growth of ISIS. Such a notion is echoed by General

Erik Kurilla of the US, who deems the place a breeding ground for ISIS and its recruitment and indoctrination processes.

Prior to the toppling of the Assad regime in Syria, the existing forces that monitored the camp already faced difficulties. To exemplify these difficulties, one can look at the Al-Hol Camp. The sheer size of the camp and the number of inhabitants also make it more difficult for local forces to maintain order and security within the vicinity. Moreover, local forces must patrol on foot with no additional support, as there are no security centers inside (Enab Baladi, 2024). With this in mind, it is not surprising that violations and security incidents often occur in the camp.

Addressing the challenges faced by these detainees is complex. While legitimate security concerns surrounding former ISIS affiliates must be acknowledged, their continued mistreatment and dehumanization risk exacerbating existing tensions. Children, particularly those born into or coerced into ISIS-controlled territories, remain highly vulnerable and face limited prospects for a future outside these conditions. The lack of intervention to rehabilitate and reintegrate such individuals only deepens this crisis.

This issue is not Syria's burden alone; it requires immediate and coordinated action from the international community. Humanitarian organizations and global leaders must ensure that the rights of detainees are respected and that steps are taken to establish programs for justice, rehabilitation, and reintegration of detainees. For children, providing education, psychological support, and community reintegration is essential to break the cycle of violence and prevent future extremism.

The risks of neglecting these detainees extend far beyond Syria's borders. History has shown that systematic mistreatment of vulnerable groups can breed resentment and radicalization. If these prisoners continue to be treated as less than human, the conditions within these detention centers may replicate the circumstances that enabled ISIS to rise in the first place, potentially leading to a second wave of terrorism.

The new tumultuous developments taking place in Syria and the strides taken by Turkiye may pose difficult challenges for the Kurds. For the former, there is still uncertainty surrounding how the new Syrian government views Rojava. As for the latter, Turkiye has carried out numerous strikes in Rojava following the collapse of the Assad regime. There is a risk that Rojava would be another stage of conflict that

which, apart from threatening its stability, could also serve as a leeway for further aggravation in the ISIS refugee camps.

D. CONCLUSION

It is important for all players in the scheme of postwar Syria and the international community as a whole to not unleash yet another leeway for ISIS to return. The new landscape that postwar Syria provides should not omit or set aside the vestiges of ISIS that refugee camps represent. For those with a stronger degree of involvement, such as the new Syria government, Turkiye, and the Kurds, it is important to navigate through the intricate webs of interests without further aggravating the landscape at hand. As for the others, notably neighboring countries and international organizations like the UN, it is important to keep a watchful eye and be at the beck and call of the aforementioned group. In doing so, the international community can be kept in the loop and, if necessary, bring attention to the issue of ISIS refugee camps.

The cloud of uncertainty surrounding post-war Syria should not refrain the international community from engaging; rather, it should be seen as a good ground for building ties. The international community should work with Syria to address the problems surrounding the ISIS refugee camps. Such a feat could not only be the means to bring Syria closer to the international community but also for the international community to finally go beyond a stop-gap measure to the remnants of ISIS. The latter would mutually benefit Syria, the Middle East, and the international community.

As Syria embarks on this fragile path toward recovery, its approach to these detainees will serve as a critical measure of its commitment to justice, reconciliation, and long-term peace. Without decisive action, the shadow of this unresolved crisis will undermine both Syria's progress and the stability of a wider region. It is imperative that Syria and the international community work together to address this challenge, ensuring that the mistakes of the past are not repeated and that the promise of peace is not broken.

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