

Prisoner Releases will Empower Extremist Insurgencies

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Key Takeaway: Large-scale prisoner releases and escapes will invigorate the global Salafi-jihadi movement at a time when it has ample opportunity to expand. Recent prisoner exchanges, escapes, and mass releases are returning thousands of insurgents to battlefields in West Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia and will accelerate the growth of several insurgencies.

What's happening:

Global counterterrorism efforts are receding. The US is planning [drawdowns](#) from Afghanistan under the US-Taliban deal and from the counter-Islamic State in Iraq and the Sham (ISIS) mission in Iraq. The US footprint in the Sahel, which enables a French-led counterterrorism mission, may be [removed](#).

The COVID-19 pandemic has also [challenged](#) extant counterterrorism missions. The downsizing of counterterrorism missions is pulling already limited support from local forces and governments that are responsible for detainees and lack sufficient long-term detention infrastructure and effective de-radicalization programs.

The US-Taliban deal set conditions for several thousand Taliban fighters to return to the battlefield. In February 2020, the US and Taliban [signed an agreement](#) setting conditions for ending the war in Afghanistan and guaranteeing a US drawdown by May 2021. The Afghan government agreed to release 5,000 Taliban members in Afghanistan in exchange for 1,000 government-affiliated detainees during the US-Afghan peace negotiations. The Afghan government [released](#) most of the promised Taliban-affiliated detainees, including 400 convicted of [serious violent crimes](#), by August 2020. The Taliban guaranteed that released detainees will abide by the terms of the US-Taliban agreement and support an intra-Afghan cease-fire, but there is no mechanism for the US or the Afghan government to enforce that guarantee. The [drawdown of US forces](#) in Afghanistan creates an opportunity for the Taliban to expand and cement its political power just as these experienced fighters return to the battlefield.

The postcoup Malian government released prisoners to an al Qaeda-linked group in exchange for hostages. The Malian government [released](#) 180 prisoners to Jama'at Nusrat al Islam wa al Muslimeen (JNIM) on October 8 in [exchange](#) for four high-profile hostages. The prisoners released were [not exclusively JNIM](#) militants and included other combatants in Mali's complicated insurgency.

JNIM's strategy includes forging alliances with nonideologically aligned groups to achieve its ends; securing the release of such groups' members will raise JNIM's profile and increase the likelihood of cooperation. Creating alliances with these groups will provide protection and safe havens for JNIM militants. The release of JNIM militants will also strengthen the group directly.

The US-Taliban deal has influenced the handling of the Salafi-jihadi threat in Mali. Ousted Malian President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita [directly cited](#) the US-Taliban deal in Afghanistan as a justification for negotiating with JNIM. Other international arbitrators, including UN Secretary-General António Guterres and an African Union commissioner, [encouraged negotiations](#) with Salafi-jihadi groups in the Sahel region after the JNIM prisoner exchange, citing the Afghan deal as a successful precedent.

Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) accelerated releases of former ISIS fighters and their families without de-radicalization and reintegration. ISIS has [exploited](#) the poor conditions of Northeast Syria's overcrowded internally displaced person (IDP) camps and detention centers, encouraging [*attacks](#) and [riots](#) since the fall of ISIS's territorial caliphate in Syria in March 2019. On October 4, the US-backed SDF announced it would release all 25,000 Syrian IDPs from the al Hol camp upon the IDPs' request, rather than under previous tribal guarantees to prevent ISIS recidivism. The SDF announced a [general amnesty](#) for petty criminals and "low-level" [*ISIS affiliates](#) on October 14 and released more than 600 detainees on October 15 and [*another](#) 515 IDPs on November 16, explicitly outside the framework of tribal guarantees.

ISIS will pressure released fighters and families to rejoin ISIS's anti-SDF [insurgency](#). The SDF does not have the capacity to de-radicalize and reintegrate detainees or IDPs while combating a mounting ISIS insurgency. The SDF may instead shift its focus to protecting communities without ISIS presence, rendering communities with returnees more isolated and vulnerable to ISIS and pro-regime intimidation.

The Islamic State has focused on freeing fighters from detention facilities around the world through bargains, bribes, and prison breaks concurrent with recent detainee releases. Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) [attacked](#) the Nangarhar central prison in Jalalabad, Afghanistan, on August 2, freeing over [50 detainees](#) and providing a [propaganda](#) coup. Islamic State spokesperson Abu Hamza al Quraishi [called](#) for fighters to "break the walls" of detention centers to free fellow Islamic State members in an October 18 speech that referenced the Jalalabad prison break. The Islamic State conducted a major [raid](#) on the Kangbaya prison in the Democratic Republic of the Congo on October 20, freeing 900 detainees, in response to Quraishi's "call."

The Islamic State also released an [editorial announcement](#) in its weekly Naba magazine on August 6 encouraging Islamic State members to bribe or bargain with local governments to escape detention centers, prioritizing escape despite the organization's aversion to working with local governments. The Islamic State will likely continue encouraging prison breaks and smaller-scale escapes on detention facilities in the coming months.

Why it matters:

Experienced Salafi-jihadi fighters returning to the battlefield will reinvigorate insurgent organizations poised for breakout. Al Qaeda in Iraq, later ISIS, set the precedent for this style of resurgence in its "Breaking the Walls" prison breaks campaign in 2012 and 2013, following the American withdrawal from Iraq. The breaking the walls [campaign](#) freed approximately 600 veteran ISIS fighters over nine months; recent releases in Afghanistan and Syria have greatly exceeded that campaign in scale and pace. Released fighters were radicalized while in prison and used their battlefield expertise to [bolster](#) their organization's command and control networks.

Fighters released in the [Taliban](#) and [JNIM](#) prisoner exchanges are likewise battle-hardened veterans. Onetime Taliban-affiliated fighters may have been [recruited](#) to Salafi-jihadi groups, including al Qaeda and ISKP, while in prison. Malian prisons similarly serve as [hotbeds](#) for radicalization. In Syria, returning ISIS-affiliated families may also carry forward the group's governance vision by replicating the religious law enforcement they maintained in IDP camps in their home communities. Detainee releases and escapes will exacerbate the effects of current drawdowns in counterterrorism missions to empower surging extremist groups globally.