



ISIS Poised to Exploit Mass Releases of Displaced Persons from Syrian Camp

By Eva Kahan
October 15, 2020

Key Takeaway: The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the US partner force in Syria, plans to release up to 25,000 Syrian women and children from the al Hawl internally displaced persons camp. The al Hawl camp absorbed an overwhelming wave of internally displaced persons and combatants after the SDF seized the last ISIS physical stronghold in Baghuz in March 2019.¹ The camp's horrendous conditions presented a humanitarian and security challenge for the SDF, the United States, and the international community. The mass release of these displaced persons risks providing new opportunities to ISIS by dispersing a vulnerable population into areas where ISIS is active. ISIS will capitalize on the mass release of Syrians to increase recruitment efforts and intimidation campaigns against these returnees, who may also face retributive violence within their own communities. The SDF is not adequately resourced to monitor or protect returnees unless the United States and the international community increase their support.

Tripwire

The Syrian Democratic Forces' political wing announced its intent to "release all Syrians" from the al Hawl camp at a symposium for the northeast Syrian governance entity in Raqqa City on October 4.² The new announcement could lead to the release of up to 25,000 Syrians.³ The political wing's co-chair, Ilham Ahmed, later clarified the policy via Twitter, stating that "Syrians who have serious accusations will remain in the camp," but she did not define "serious accusations."⁴ The timeline and process for returns remain unclear.⁵ The SDF remains committed to returning the remaining 30,000 Iraqi residents of the camp to Iraq.⁶ Iraqi officials continue to stall efforts to negotiate a plan with the SDF to return residents safely, as local communities have rejected them as possible ISIS supporters.⁷ The SDF continues to encourage non-Iraqi foreign governments to repatriate their citizens held in al-Hawl's foreign annex, to little avail.

Pattern

Poor security and humanitarian conditions in al Hawl have deteriorated since the establishment of the camp, and some of its thousands of women and children residents still adhere to ISIS's ideology.⁸ As of September 2019, al Hawl housed roughly 28,000 Syrians and 31,000 Iraqis as well as 10,000 foreigners housed in a separate annex in order to prevent their radicalization of other residents.⁹ The total population was more than twice what the camp was built to sustain.¹⁰ The AANES struggles to provide these residents basic services, including health and education. Deradicalization programs for former ISIS supporters are similarly sparse. Although the SDF has repeatedly requested additional aid to address the challenges of administering al Hawl, the international community has failed to sufficiently mitigate the camp's humanitarian and security crises.

The SDF began limited releases of Syrians under local agreements with Arab tribes, primarily in Deir ez Zour and Raqqa, in June 2019.¹¹ The tribes assumed responsibility for reintegrating these returnees and preventing their return to ISIS, with unclear results. Arab tribes upon whose support the SDF depends have become increasingly vocal in demanding the release of Syrians at al Hawl, where the SDF's inability to provide security has worsened perceptions of its legitimacy as a security guarantor. Turkey and pro-Assad actors, including Russia, have used al

Hawl as a wedge issue to undermine the SDF by amplifying stories alleging that the SDF abuses al Hawl residents, particularly women.¹²

US policy has called for the return of foreign al Hawl residents to their homes, although many countries have resisted.¹³ The SDF started moving hundreds of foreign al Hawl residents to the better secured and less crowded al Roj camp nearby in August 2020.¹⁴ At least 17,000 ISIS combatants, 100 of whom are foreign, remain detained in northeast Syria's makeshift detention facilities.¹⁵

ISIS and al Qaeda alike have used the plight of residents of al Hawl as a rallying cry and fundraising pitch.¹⁶ The late ISIS caliph, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, urged ISIS members to free women in displacement camps in his last public speech in September 2019.¹⁷ ISIS social media accounts echo this demand, claiming that all Muslims are obliged to release their "sisters" in displacement camps. The extent of ISIS's penetration into the camp is unclear, but demonstrations of loyalty from numerous women and expressions of solidarity from children indicate that ISIS may have infiltrated the camp.¹⁸ ISIS fundraising efforts have used video reports showing women and children at al Hawl calling for the return of the caliphate.¹⁹ Women in the camp's foreign annex have actively attempted to enforce ISIS's extreme religious laws on other residents within the annex, sometimes through violence.²⁰ Women may pragmatically perform or fake pro-ISIS activity to solicit donations for their living expenses or to get smuggled out.²¹ Some examples of violent activity with unclear motives have occurred in the main section housing Syrians and Iraqis. For example, an unknown resident killed an Iraqi refugee on October 3 and several residents burned the tents of other residents in May 2020.²² ISIS operatives and smugglers have also enabled a low-level but steady stream of escapes.²³

A Message To The Men Of This Ummah

Where are you?!

Are you aware of the situation of your sisters who are in the hands of filthy criminals?

Are you aware of your sisters caged up in broken tents in the middle of the bare desert, during 50 degrees of summer heat, and the freezing, cold winter?!

Are you aware of their suffering and fear?

Are you aware that they are forbidden to cover themselves?!

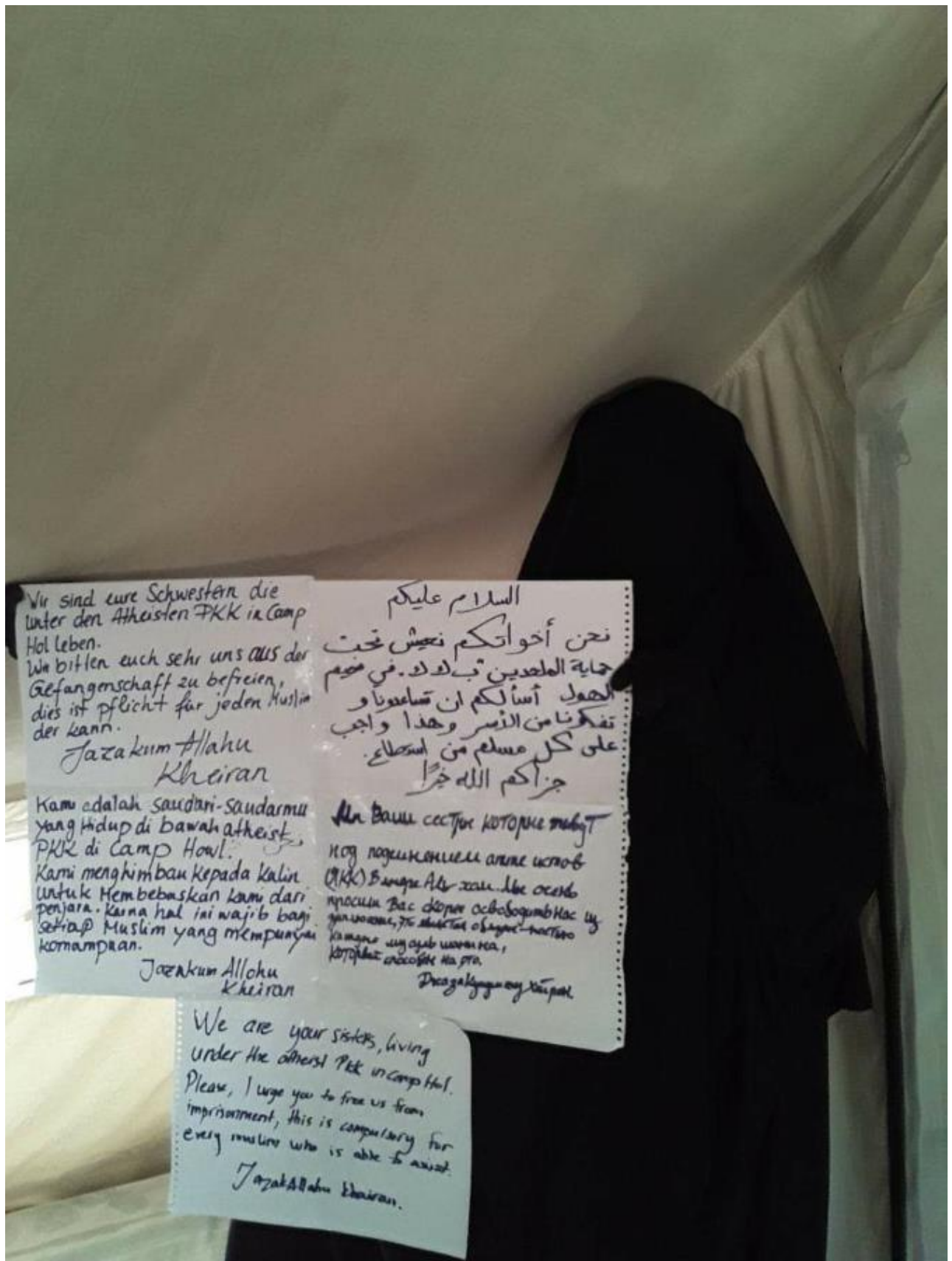
Are you aware that these filthy criminals undress your pure sisters NAKED in front of camera?!

How can you eat, relax, laugh and stay busy with your own comfortable life, forgetting about your precious sisters?!

Do you not read The Words of your Lord?!

Do you not understand?!

Message about al Hawl posted in an ISIS Telegram channel on October 5, 2020.



Wir sind eure Schwestern die
 unter den Atheisten PKK in Camp
 Howl leben.
 Wir bitten euch sehr uns aus der
 Gefangenschaft zu befreien,
 dies ist pflicht für jeden Muslim
 der kann.

Jazakum Allahu
 kheiran

Kami adalah saudari-saudarmu
 yang hidup di bawah atheis-
 t, PKK di Camp Howl.
 Kami menghimbau kepada kalian
 untuk membebaskan kami dari
 penjara. Karena hal ini wajib bagi
 setiap Muslim yang mempunyai
 kemampuan.

Jazakum Allahu
 kheiran

السلام عليكم
 نحن أخواتكم نعيش تحت
 حماية الملحدين بكم في مخيم
 الحول أسألكم ان تساعدونا و
 تفكرونا من الأسر وهذا واجب
 على كل مسلم من استطاع.
 جزاكم الله خيرا

Ala Bawu ceşjepe kotopke mabyt
 hog noqekonueu anme uroo-6
 (PKK) Bawupe Ala xau lbe ocexo
 mpooua bac depeu ocibobogomb hoc ug
 qan uoouue, je dnetes obayne-mactero
 ka mame uny ayub uwaru ka,
 kotopkat ococofek na pta.
 Dica galyunay xau pan.

We are your sisters, living
 under the atheist PKK in Camp Howl.
 Please, I urge you to free us from
 imprisonment, this is compulsory for
 every muslim who is able to assist.

Jazakum Allahu
 kheiran.

Photo of a woman in al Howl posted on an ISIS Telegram channel on June 22, 2020.

Fractured Arab tribes have agreed upon and long demanded the release of the women and children in al Hawl. The SDF has likely made the decision to release prisoners from the al Hawl camp now in order to dampen the growing risk that some Arab tribes will reject the SDF outright. This threat spiked in August 2020 as overlapping insurgent attacks from ISIS and pro-Assad groups provoked tribal backlash against the SDF.²⁴

The maintenance of al Hawl is expensive, manpower intensive, and growing in difficulty as COVID-19 precludes even the poor medical care that international organizations previously provided.²⁵ The SDF may aim to exert pressure on the international community by threatening to release potential ISIS affiliates en masse, particularly targeting the US-led coalition whose campaign initially displaced al Hawl's residents. However, a rushed release is unlikely to inspire international support and could instead endanger returnees.

Assessment

The mass release of Syrian residents of al Hawl will alleviate the SDF's near term strain but at the expense of long-term stabilization. There is little indication that tribal leaders, even those who lobbied for such releases, are prepared to quickly absorb such a large population, especially in the absence of new financial support. Tribal leaders gave the SDF's release announcement a muted response, possibly indicating such concerns.²⁶ Tribes may struggle to provide housing, employment, or social support, all of which are essential to reintegration and deradicalization.²⁷ Returnees will likely require food aid and other basic support and will turn to SDF-sponsored local councils to fill these needs if tribal leadership fails to satisfy them. An influx of returnees may also overwhelm the SDF's already stretched water and energy infrastructure, provoking competition and resentment between local communities and returnees.²⁸ The SDF will likely be held accountable for failures in the reintegration process.

Expectations that the SDF can prevent the release of all ISIS-linked individuals are unrealistic. Many of the residents of al Hawl are not ISIS members, but some ISIS penetration of this population likely remains. The SDF lacks the resources to vet every member of the al Hawl camp; it cannot even catalogue the identities of all camp residents.²⁹ The SDF will not be able to track returnees and will rely on informal tribal social networks to monitor and protect them from ISIS recruitment and exploitation—a challenging task.

Implications

ISIS will exploit this opportunity to target the newly returned population. ISIS's insurgency in eastern Syria is already outmatching the US-led coalition, which has not resourced a counterinsurgency campaign in Syria and is instead limited to targeted raids in partnership with the SDF.³⁰ ISIS will likely attempt to intimidate returnees into supporting the group and could make public and gruesome examples of those who do not comply. Children are the most at risk, particularly those who suffered indoctrination and trauma during ISIS's rule and the counter-ISIS campaign. ISIS may attempt to smuggle "rescued" returnees to ISIS strongholds in the Central Syrian Desert or in Idlib Province.³¹ In the most dangerous scenario, ISIS attacks and high-publicized recruitment of al Hawl returnees could incite retributive violence from local communities, driving even more returnees toward ISIS for protection.

Returnees may be particularly vulnerable in SDF-held areas where ISIS and pro-Assad insurgents have exploited tribal complaints to erode the SDF's governing capacity. These areas include the stretch between Busayrah, at the confluence of the Euphrates and Khabur Rivers, and Dhiban, across the Euphrates River from Mayadin. ISIS militants chanted ISIS slogans and attempted to enforce Islamic law in Busayrah on September 9 and October 4.³² Dhiban and nearby Hawayij were centers of anti-SDF protests in early August and have witnessed several assassinations and IED attacks claimed by ISIS or pro-regime elements.³³ A recent spike in anti-SDF activity has also occurred in Baghouz, the final ISIS holdout in 2019, which could also be a flashpoint for violence towards or by returnees. Pro-Assad insurgents may also surge attacks to feign a more severe ISIS resurgence and drive a wedge between tribes and the SDF.

An overhaul of coalition support to strengthen SDF governance capacity and improve the SDF-tribal partnership is necessary to ensure adequate returnee reintegration and deny ISIS and pro-regime forces this opportunity. It is

in the US interest to protect, deradicalize, and reintegrate returnees in order to preserve US-led gains against ISIS and prevent ISIS's reconstitution. Priorities should include developing information management capabilities, providing basic services, and strengthening rural infrastructure to prepare for a surge in residents.³⁴

Indicators

Indicators of inadequate integration will include a growth of tent cities; overcrowded, informal apartment buildings; and new resource shortages and disputes. A new wave of anti-SDF protests could also signal governance failures resulting from the burdens of accommodating this new population. Increased ISIS attacks could indicate successful recruitment from returnees, although such reports should be carefully examined due to the risk of false flag attacks by pro-Assad forces. In the most dangerous scenario, a vicious cycle of anti-SDF protests and retributive violence could force the SDF to abandon villages around Busayrah, weakening the SDF's ability to govern the lower Middle Euphrates River Valley.

The level of tribal collaboration in the SDF's release and reintegration plan will likely signal its viability. Tribal offers to sponsor and reintegrate returnees are positive indicators for reintegration. Alternatively, tribes may descend into familial and tribal disputes over reintegration, indicating their inability or unwillingness to facilitate sponsored returns. The SDF's proposed timeline for release will likely indicate whether they intend to work closely with tribes or to rush a mass release.

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² SDC Press, Twitter, October 4, 2020, <https://twitter.com/SDCPress/status/1312844675187867656>;

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³ RojavaIC, Twitter, October 5, 2020, <https://twitter.com/RojavaIC/status/1312998182058708992?s=20>

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⁷ “Kurds to allow IS-linked Syria families to quit Al-Hol camp,” *France24*, October 5, 2020, <https://www.france24.com/en/20201005-kurds-to-allow-is-linked-syria-families-to-quit-al-hol-camp>

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⁸ John Dunford and Jennifer Cafarella, “ISIS's Opportunity in Northern Syria's Detention Facilities and Camps,” *Institute for the Study of War*, May 13, 2019, <http://www.iswresearch.org/2019/05/isiss-opportunity-in-northern-syrias.html>

⁹ Syria Study Group, Syria Study Group Final Report, US Institute for Peace, September 24, 2019, <https://www.usip.org/syria-study-group-final-report>.

¹⁰ Syria Study Group, Syria Study Group Final Report, US Institute for Peace, September 24, 2019, <https://www.usip.org/syria-study-group-final-report>.

¹¹ The largest of these returns was of 800 IDPs to al Tabqa and ar-Raqqa regions on June 3, 2019. Since that release, which was the first recorded by ISW, all releases have been under 500 IDPs, most to ar-Raqqa Province or eastern Deir ez-Zour. Estimates of total releases to date range from 2,000 to 4,000 returnees.

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²⁹ The SDC has started the process of collecting personal information twice, once registering only IDPs from Raqqa and al Tabqa (not Deir ez-Zour) who wanted to return home on May 30, 2019 and once registering only foreign migrants on July 10, 2020.

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