

# CSAG INFORMATION PAPER:

## Reawakening Threats: The Reemergence of Islamic State Amid Global Distractions

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*The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of a number of international officers within the Combined Strategic Analysis Group (CSAG) and do not necessarily reflect the views of United States Central Command, nor of the nations represented within the CSAG or any other governmental agency.*

1. **Subject:** "Reawakening Threats: The Reemergence of Islamic State Amid Global Distractions."
2. **Purpose:** This paper examines the reemergence of Islamic State (IS) in the Middle East. IS continues its recruiting efforts, resulting in a steady trend of malign activities in the region, while the coalition is pressured to withdraw its forces and is preoccupied with recent developments in the AOR and elsewhere (e.g., Israel-Hamas, Red Sea-Houthis, Russia-Ukraine).
3. **Introduction:** Islamic State (IS) emerged from the remnants of al-Qaeda in Iraq in 2004. After coalition forces reduced presence in Iraq, IS began to reemerge in 2011, taking advantage of growing instability in the region. After changing its name to ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), ISIS declared a Caliphate in 2014 and established regional branches (e.g., Islamic State – Khorasan Province (IS-K)). Militarily defeated in 2019, leading to a significant declining trend in attacks since 2022, IS transformed into a disaggregated terrorist group with its ideology enduring. Although it is scattered and decentralized, the organization is still a considerable threat in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan with intent and ability to inspire acts of terror globally.
4. **Facts:**
  - a) Syria
    - 1) In 2023, Islamic State conducted at least 212 attacks in Syria, killing at least 502 people. In the first ten days of 2024, the group had already conducted and claimed 35 attacks across 7 of Syria's 14 provinces.<sup>1</sup>
    - 2) The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), backed by the US-led coalition, provides security at the refugee camps and detention facilities. The main refugee camps in Syria are al-Hol (originally

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Lister, "America Is Planning to Withdraw from Syria—and Create a Disaster," *Foreign Policy*, January 24, 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/01/24/america-is-planning-to-withdraw-from-syria-and-create-a-disaster/> (accessed January 25, 2024).

designed for 10,000 people, now hosts well over 40,000 people) and Roj.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, 10,000 battle-hardened Islamic State militants are detained within at least 20 makeshift prisons. These prisons are a challenge to guard, resulting in mass breakouts and the escape of IS members.<sup>3</sup>

- 3) These refugee camps are primarily holding the relatives of IS members. IS has maintained its “Cubs of the Caliphate” program, recruiting and indoctrinating vulnerable children, who are living in poor conditions, without access to adequate education and healthcare.<sup>4</sup>
- 4) For months, the Assad regime (backed by Russia and Iran) is pressuring the US to withdraw from Syria.<sup>5</sup> Although sounding controversial, this allegedly resulted in a US proposal to the SDF for closer collaboration with the Assad regime to maintain the fight against IS.<sup>6</sup> US officials denied this and declared that the US position on northeast Syria has not changed.<sup>7</sup>

#### b) Iraq

- 1) In Iraq, IS claimed a total of 141 attacks in 2023. Remote areas around the porous Iraqi/Syrian border are their preferred refuge.
- 2) The number of Iraqi detainees in Syria camps is estimated to be around 27,000 people (11,800 are children), which represents the biggest contingent; Iraqi authorities repatriated 600 families (5,500 civilians) to Iraq through June 2023. Over 20,000 Iraqis remain in camps in Syria.<sup>8</sup>
- 3) The Iraqi government considers the concentration of IS fighters in northeast Syria as a potential threat with concerns about the mass prison breakouts (the last prison breakout happened in June 2023) and spillover of violence in the region around a leaky border.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Courtney Kube, “Syrian Rebels Say Anti-ISIS Operations with the U.S. Have Stopped and ISIS Fighters May Escape from Prisons and a Refugee Camp,” *NBC NEWS*, December 2, 2022, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/syria-rebels-warn-isis-escape-rcna59853> (accessed January 25, 2024).

<sup>3</sup> Omar Abdulkader, “Heavy Fighting Continues for Third Day to Stop ISIS Prison Break Attempt in Syria,” *CBS News*, January 22, 2022, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/isis-prison-break-attempt-syria-heavy-fighting/> (accessed January 15, 2024); “Prison Break: ISIS Members Escape Raqqa Central Prison,” *Al Mayadeen*, June 19, 2022, <https://english.almayadeen.net/news/politics/prison-break:-isis-members-escape-raqqa-central-prison> (accessed January 15, 2024); James Rothwell, Abbie Cheeseman, “Islamic State Militants Break Out of Prison During Syria Earthquake Chaos,” *The Telegraph*, February 07, 2023, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2023/02/07/islamic-state-militants-break-prison-syria-earthquake-chaos/> (accessed January 15, 2024); “Iraqi Forces on Alert After ISIS Militants Escape from Syrian Prison,” *Asharq Al-Awsat*, June 19, 2023, <https://english.aawsat.com/arab-world/4389761-iraqi-forces-alert-after-isis-militants-escape-syrian-prison> (accessed January 25, 2024).

<sup>4</sup> Edith M. Lederer, “Islamic State Group Still Has Thousands in Syria and Iraq and Poses Afghan Threat, UN Experts Say,” *Associated Press*, August 14, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/islamic-state-fighters-syria-iraq-875d5ee8a0978f3b28aeec210b33cd5f> / (accessed January 25, 2024).

<sup>5</sup> Charles Lister, “America Is Planning to Withdraw from Syria—and Create a Disaster,” *Foreign Policy*, January 24, 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/01/24/america-is-planning-to-withdraw-from-syria-and-create-a-disaster/> (accessed January 25, 2024).

<sup>6</sup> Amberin Zaman, “Pentagon Floats Plan for its Syrian Kurd Allies to Partner with Assad Against ISIS,” *Al-Monitor*, January 22, 2024, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2024/01/pentagon-floats-plan-its-syrian-kurd-allies-partner-assad-against-isis> (accessed January 30, 2024).

<sup>7</sup> “US Denies That it's Planning to Pull Out of Syria,” *Azerbaijan 24*, January 25, 2024, <https://www.azeribaycan24.com/en/us-denies-that-it-s-planning-to-pull-out-of-syria-media/> (accessed January 30, 2024).

<sup>8</sup> “27,000 Iraqis 'Still Held' in Syria's Al-Hol Camp: UNDP,” *The New Arab*, April 08, 2023, <https://www.newarab.com/news/27000-iraqis-still-held-syrias-al-hol-camp-undp> (Accessed January 25, 2024); Simona Foltyn, “The People Don’t Want Us’: inside a Camp for Iraqis Returned from Syrian Detention,” *The Guardian*, June 15, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jun/15/inside-the-holding-camp-for-iraqis-returned-from-syrian-detention-al-hawl-jeddah1> (accessed 25 January 2024).

<sup>9</sup> “Iraqi Forces on Alert After ISIS Militants Escape from Syrian Prison,” *Asharq Al-Awsat*, June 19, 2023, <https://english.aawsat.com/arab-world/4389761-iraqi-forces-alert-after-isis-militants-escape-syrian-prison> (accessed January 25, 2024).

- 4) On January 27, 2024, Iraq and the US started the first negotiations on the nature and presence of US troops in Iraq, both having different perspectives on the topic.<sup>10</sup>
- c) Afghanistan
  - 1) In 2023, IS claimed 20 attacks. It managed to conduct high-profile attacks internally as well as in neighboring Pakistan and Iran.<sup>11</sup> On January 3, 2024, a prominent, highly publicized attack occurred in Iran, where bomb blasts killed nearly 100 people at Qasem Soleimani's memorial.<sup>12</sup>
  - 2) IS has reportedly increased its operational capabilities and now has an estimated 4,000 to 6,000 fighters and family members in Afghanistan.<sup>13</sup>
  - 3) IS in Afghanistan has seen an increase of funding and recruitment capabilities in line with ISIS ambitions and plans to move to less secured or controlled territory to build operational capabilities for worldwide terrorist attacks.<sup>14</sup>
  - 4) The US-led coalition withdrew from Afghanistan in August 2021 and the Afghan security construct (Afghan National Defense and Security Forces) collapsed. Some of the Afghan security personnel joined IS-K to continue to fight the Taliban.<sup>15</sup>

## 5. Analysis/Assessment:

- a) The concentration of IS related members in the refugee camps and detention facilities in Syria pose a significant potential threat for the region.
  - 1) Camps serve as a “supply depot” or “reservoir” of new potential IS fighters, where the continuous recruitment and indoctrination of vulnerable people contribute to the perpetuation of the group's ideology.
  - 2) Although repatriation efforts are ongoing, the number of relatives that are willing and able to go back to their previous homes have not met the expectations and the pace of the process indicate that significant time is still needed to reduce occupancy to sustainable levels.

<sup>10</sup> Abby Sewell, “Iraq and US Begin Formal Talks to End Coalition Mission Formed to Fight the Islamic State Group,” *Associated Press*, January 27, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/iraq-us-talks-to-end-coalition-mission-f782db4c6550ab31ef02ef3c1793ee7b> (accessed January 30, 2024)

<sup>11</sup> Asfandiyar Mir, “Two Years Under the Taliban: Is Afghanistan a Terrorist Safe Haven Once Again?,” *United States Institute of Peace*, August 15, 2023, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/08/two-years-under-taliban-afghanistan-terrorist-safe-haven-once-again> (accessed January 25, 2024).

<sup>12</sup> Jonathan Landay, Steve Holland, “Exclusive: US Intelligence Confirms Islamic State's Afghanistan Branch Behind Iran Blasts,” *Reuters*, January 5, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/us-intelligence-confirms-islamic-states-afghanistan-branch-behind-iran-blasts-2024-01-05/> (accessed January 25, 2024).

<sup>13</sup> Edith M. Lederer, “Islamic State Group Still Has Thousands in Syria and Iraq and Poses Afghan Threat, UN Experts Say,” *Associated Press*, August 14, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/islamic-state-fighters-syria-iraq-875d5ee8a0978f3b28aeec210b33cd5f/> (accessed January 25, 2024).

<sup>14</sup> “Fact Sheet on Countering ISIS Financing,” *U.S. Department of The Treasury*, June 16, 2023, 2023.06.16-Fact-Sheet-on-Countering-ISIS-Financing.pdf (accessed January 30, 2024).

<sup>15</sup> “Why the Afghan Security Forces Collapsed,” *SIGAR*, February 2023, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/evaluations/SIGAR-23-16-IP.pdf> (accessed January 25, 2024); “Operation Freedom’s Sentinel Operation Enduring Sentinel,” *Lead IG Report to the US Congress*, February 15, 2022, <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Feb/15/2002939389/-1/-1/1/LEAD%20INSPECTOR%20GENERAL%20FOR%20OPERATION%20FREEDOM%E2%80%99S%20SENTINEL%20AND%20OPERATION%20ENDURING%20SENTINEL%20OCTOBER%201,%202021%20%E2%80%93%20DECEMBER%2031,%202021.PDF> (accessed January 15, 2024).

- 3) Moreover, detention facilities, holding a significant amount of experienced and hardcore IS fighters, are attractive targets of attack to release key operatives. This contributes to considerable pressure on the SDF which is required to secure these facilities while under pressure from multiple threats, and distracted from “pre-planned, day-to-day” D-ISIS operations.
- 4) The ongoing situation might result in “forever refugee camps and prisons” that will need permanent international attention and capacity to be secured.
- b) The SDF play a pivotal role in ensuring the security and stability of camps and prisons in Syria. With the potential reduction or withdrawal of US forces from Syria and Iraq it might create a security vacuum which reemerging elements of IS may exploit. New partnerships and collaboration efforts need to emerge, to counter the rise of IS in the region.
- c) Throughout the years, IS has modified its modus operandi. While maintaining various sleeper cells in Syria and Iraq, IS also adjusted its structure of command and control (C2) elements. Although the Taliban in Afghanistan conducts anti-IS operations, their effectiveness is disputable. IS exploited the power vacuum in Afghanistan by relocating its C2 and building a “hub for terror.” Together with no significant coalition forces present in Afghanistan, Afghanistan will remain a security “black hole” for the foreseeable future.
- d) After a potential withdrawal from Syria and Iraq, the US may be scrutinized for their “strategic judgement” while still promoting itself as a trusted partner with a permanent and meaningful commitment to security and stability in the region. The new security paradigm could be exploited by Russia, Iran, and China.

## 6. Conclusions:

- a) The resurgence of the Islamic State poses a significant and multifaceted threat across Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. With each of these countries suffering multiple security challenges, a withdrawal of the US-led coalition would create a power vacuum that is not only exploitable by IS but may also be an accelerant to a change in world order.
- b) IS’s ambitions to move to less controlled territories in Afghanistan and build operational capabilities for global terrorist attacks pose a concern in the short term that may result in a security problem in the longer term.
- c) Although the international community is focused on the Russia-Ukraine war and the Israel-Hamas conflict, the overall situation underscores the need for concerted international efforts to address the root causes of extremism, enhance border security, and facilitate collaboration between nations to effectively counter the reemergence of the Islamic State. The combination of ongoing education for vulnerable people, a reasonable military footprint and continuous intelligence efforts might be a necessity to prevent further destabilization in an already unstable region.