

ISIS Activity Surges in Major Syrian Displacement Camp

Featuring Eva Kahan



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ISIS has carried out more acts of violence in the Al Hawl displacement camp in the first quarter of 2021 than in all of 2020. The militant group exploits camp members for propaganda and recruitment, fueling its activities elsewhere in northeast Syria. The US-partnered Syrian Democratic Forces has launched an operation to quell and contain ISIS activity in the camp, but the operation's long-term prospects for success are grim without consistent international support. On this episode of Overwatch, ISW Evans Hanson Fellow Eva Kahan discusses the ongoing operation and what it means for ISIS in the region.

Jacob Taylor:

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This is Overwatch, a podcast presented by the Institute for the Study of War. I'm Jacob Taylor. ISIS attacks and other malign activity have spiked in Syria in the first quarter of 2021. Near the center of the violence is a massive displaced persons camp called al Hawl. The camp is a hotbed of ISIS activity. The Syrian Democratic Forces, the opposition group that ostensibly controls the camp, has announced an operation to reduce ISIS's presence there. ISW's Evans Hanson Fellow, Eva Kahan, has been closely tracking ISIS in Syria, and is with us today to offer her insight into these recent developments. Eva Kahan, thank you for being with us today.

Eva Kahan:

Hi, Jacob. Thank you for having me.

Jacob Taylor:

The SDF began a new counter ISIS campaign last week in the al Hawl displaced persons camp. What is the objective of this new campaign?

Eva Kahan:

The SDF is trying to secure the al Hawl displaced persons camp to reduce the risk of an ISIS-affiliated breakout in Northeast Syria. The plan is for SDF counter-terrorism forces to spend two weeks searching and securing the camp as part of what they're calling the Humanitarian and Security Operation.

Jacob Taylor:

And this operation has started, right? It's not just that they announced it or something. It is ongoing, correct?

Eva Kahan:

Yep. The SDF arrested over a hundred people over the last week, and they've confronted at least three ISIS cells. The SDF also shut off internet and radio broadcasting within the camp, likely to prevent ISIS cells from coordinating their response or escape.

Jacob Taylor:

The operation started roughly in the last week of March, and you said it's slated to run for about two weeks. Is that just a rough estimate, or is there a set end date for the operation?

Eva Kahan:

There isn't a set end date, but the plan is for the operation to end by mid-April, likely in anticipation of ISIS's annual Ramadan campaign, which will begin this year on April 12th.

Jacob Taylor:

Got it. And, what triggered this operation?

Eva Kahan:

ISIS cells ramped up their violent activity in al Hawl Displaced Persons Camp over the last few months, conducting 50% more killings in the first three months of 2021 than we saw in the entirety of 2020. ISIS killings in the camp target SDF-affiliated camp residents, including Iraqi refugees who are given more authority in the camp. ISIS has also threatened and attempted to assassinate members of the camp's Iraqi and Syrian councils, which represent other camp residents to the SDF. Captured cell members have claimed that they were targeting people who left ISIS, many of whom might have once fought for ISIS and later reconciled to work with the SDF as informants.

Jacob Taylor:

Al Hawl is extensively controlled and sealed off by the SDF, and if that's the case, how could ISIS have been pulling off this assassination campaign inside the camp?

Eva Kahan:

Jacob, that's a really important question, and one that we've been wondering about for a while. Early on in the SDF's counter-ISIS operation, they discovered and interrogated members of an ISIS cell within the camp who revealed serious gaps in camp security. The cell had passed weapons into the camp by way of women wearing heavy veils who were not searched by camp security on their entrance and exit. Of the three cells that the SDF has arrested, two were following the orders of an ISIS coordinator nicknamed El Jarrah, or The Surgeon, who lives 30 miles north of the camp. ISIS attacks in the camp have been increasingly sophisticated. ISIS conducted its first ever explosive attack in the camp in January, and conducted a mass shooting with victims as young as 16 in the Iraqi section in March. Hopefully, with the new information about how weapons are entering the camp, the SDF can shut some of this smuggling down.

Jacob Taylor:

As bad as these incidents are, they do sound like fairly straightforward security holes to plug. Like, your example of them simply not searching certain women entering the camp, that seems like a pretty ready fix if they can start searching them now. With that in mind, are you optimistic, then, about the SDF's ability to contain ISIS within the camps now that it's aware of the security holes, and has started an operation, presumably to plug them?

Eva Kahan:

I'm cautious about getting too optimistic, given the myriad threats that the SDF faces. In addition to the killings at al Hawl, ISIS is spinning up large and well-trained cells in the Russian regime and Iranian-held central Syrian desert, and sending them across the Euphrates River to launch de-stabilizing attacks in SDF-held territory in advance of Ramadan. The SDF may be concerned that ISIS cells around the Euphrates River Valley could enable a camp or prison breakout in the upcoming Ramadan campaign, and this SDF operation does put that goal slightly further out of reach, but doesn't confront the larger Syria-wide ISIS issue.

Jacob Taylor:

Speaking of Russia and Iran, is the SDF getting any regional or international support on this operation at al Hawl?

Eva Kahan:

The SDF does have support from the US-led coalitions, specifically Combined Joint Task Force Operation Inherent Resolve. However, regional powers, including rising Iranian-Turkish tensions in Iraq, could additionally

stress the SDF's hold on the camp. Thousands of Iranian-backed Iraqi militia men have deployed to Sinjar, an area near the Iraqi border just 10 miles from al Hawl, and the SDF Iranian-backed militias, or Turkey, could weaponize the 25,000 Iraqi displaced persons at al Hawl in order to gain an advantage in Sinjar, which would trigger a humanitarian crisis in the region, which ISIS could also exploit.

Jacob Taylor:

After the fall of ISIS, at least the territorial fall, a lot of analysts started talking about al Hawl, the al Hawl camp, as something of a ticking time bomb, given the group's activity in and around the camp. Is there anything the SDF can do now to diffuse that threat?

Eva Kahan:

The SDF has tried to reduce the burden of maintaining these huge ISIS-affiliate detention centers and displaced persons camps over the last year. Last fall, the SDF announced that it would grant amnesty to, quote/unquote, "low level" ISIS affiliates in SDF-held detention centers, and released several of these low level detainees. The SDF also promised to allow all displaced Syrians to leave SDF camps. But, after a couple hundred releases in the fall, those releases slowed to a trickle in 2021.

Jacob Taylor:

Now, we've been talking about this situation in the context of the groups involved, the SDF, ISIS, regional powers, and so on. But, what does this new operation mean for the residents, the people living in al Hawl? What does it mean for their long-term prospects?

Eva Kahan:

It's a really important question. The SDF's recent operation may indicate a shift away from resettlement and re-integration towards a containment model. The SDF is collecting biometric data as part of the humanitarian and security operation, perhaps in order to identify camp residents who are eligible to return to their homes, while isolating and containing residents responsible for the latest spate of killings. ISIS relies heavily on camp members to produce pro-ISIS propaganda for online fundraising a cycle that increases camp resident dependency on ISIS networks. So, until camp residents have financial and social support from their communities, and that means communities outside of the camp, they're likely to keep falling back into relying on ISIS.

Jacob Taylor:

And Eva, do you have a long-term outlook for the SDF, at least in the months following this campaign?

Eva Kahan:

Al Hawl is likely to remain a thorn in the SDF side until the SDF and US-led coalition dedicate consistent resources to securing, de-radicalizing, and resettling camp residents, which doesn't seem feasible on the six-month to a year timeframe. The SDF lacks the personnel necessary to maintain within the 62,000 person camp, not to mention there are resources required to keep up living conditions at a minimum acceptable level. We're aware that the US-led coalition is deeply concerned, for good reason, about this generational ISIS problem, which will resound in the US's ability to counter ISIS-infiltrated populations, likely for decades to come.

Jacob Taylor:

Is there any scenario in which the SDF is able to resolve or improve the situation at al Hawl on its own?

Eva Kahan:

The SDF may achieve limited success in decapitating the camp's ISIS network in this two-week operation, and in preventing ISIS from conducting an intensive Ramadan breakout. But, ISIS is likely to reconstitute violent net-

works to control the camp population after Ramadan. Only a dual SDF-coalition effort to isolate dangerous camp residents and resettle the victims of ISIS networks could provide a sustainable solution to the camp's crisis.

Jacob Taylor:

Eva Kahan, thank you so much for being with us today.

Eva Kahan:

It was my pleasure. Thank you for having me.

Kim Kagan:

Thank you for listening to this episode of Overwatch. We look forward to your feedback on this episode and previous ones. Visit www.understandingwar.org to learn about ISW's work and to sign up for our mailing list.

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