



Global Islamism Monitor No. 56

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Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Islamic Extremism; Afghanistan; Iran; Iraq

THE ISLAMIC STATE'S SECOND ACT

Is ISIS on track for a comeback? Despite the Trump administration's recent triumphalism about strategic victory against the Islamic State, a leading national security policy institute thinks so. Although the U.S.-led anti-ISIS campaign has mostly accomplished its objectives of dismantling the terror group's physical "caliphate" and eroding its operational capabilities, it "has not eliminated the global threat posed by ISIS," write Brandon Wallace and Jennifer Cafarella of the Institute for the Study of War. Indeed, they note, ISIS "is reconstituting a capable insurgent force in Iraq and Syria," and retains a foreign fighter contingent estimated at nearly 30,000 militants. The implications, suggest the authors, are dire. "On its current trajectory, ISIS could regain sufficient strength to mount a renewed insurgency that once again threatens to overmatch local security forces in both Iraq and Syria." (Institute for the Study of War, October 2, 2018)

AFGHANISTAN'S PARALLEL GOVERNMENT

Recent moves by the Afghan militant group in various rural districts suggest that the Taliban may be seeking to establish strongholds throughout the country from which to run a government structure to compete with the U.S.-backed administration in Kabul. The rural city of Charkh, in particular, has seen recent improvements in crime rates, local dispute resolution, and access to medical care and education. Unlike the Islamic State, however, the Afghan insurgency group is attempting to work within the existing government structure, choosing instead to co-opt services and aid projects. The initiative is part of an effort by the Islamist movement to capitalize on Afghan frustrations and local corruption to leech power and legitimacy away from the government of Afghan President Ashraf Ghani. (*Foreign Policy*, September 12, 2018)

THE PERSISTENCE OF "PAY TO SLAY"

The Palestinian Authority's practice of rewarding militants for attacks on Israeli civilians - a policy that has been euphemistically called "pay to slay" - has come under intense scrutiny from the international community, and even prompted sanctions from the U.S. Congress. This, however, does not seem to have altered Palestinian practices. The Palestinian Authority has announced that it "will continue to support the resolve of the prisoners and their families and will not succumb to the Israeli and American pressures calling to stop the Martyrs' (Shahids) and prisoners' salaries (rawatib) and allowances (mukhassasat)." The Palestinian Authority's martyrs fund is currently estimated at about \$355 million, and those funds are used to reward terrorists (or, if deceased, their families) for acts of violence against Israeli targets - with the more severe crimes garnering more significant payments, creating an incentive structure for still more violence. (Palestinian Media Watch, October 2, 2018)

IRAN IN THE CROSSHAIRS

On September 22nd, a deadly assault on a military parade in the Iranian city of Ahvaz killed at least 24 people. The parade, commemorating the Iran-Iraq war, was held in the largely Arab Khuzestan province, which saw ethnic unrest in both 2005 and 2011. In a statement, the Iranian ministry stated that "The five members of a terrorist squad affiliated to jihadist separatist groups supported by Arab reactionary countries were identified." Following the attack, Iranian officials reportedly discovered the terrorists' hideout and made as many as 22 arrests. In addition, they are said to have discovered explosives, as well as military and communications equipment.

Both the Islamic State and an Arab separatist group known as the Ahwaz National Interest were quick to claim responsibility for the attack. Iran's leaders, however, believe they know who is to blame. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has charged that the attackers had links to major ISIS strongholds in Iraq and Syria, while observers have noted that the attack more closely resembled ISIS attacks as opposed to the "hit and run operations" more typical of Arab separatist groups. Khamenei and Iranian authorities have also made allegations that the attackers were funded by the United States, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. Officials from Saudi and UAE have denied any involvement with the attack claiming that the accusations were false. (*The New Arab*, September 25, 2018)

THE KURDISH PRISONERS DILEMMA

As Kurdish-Arab Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) begin the final push to drive *jihadists* from the eastern desert of Syria, Kurdish officials are beginning to grapple with a new question - what, exactly, should be done with foreign fighters loyal to the Islamic State who are captured on the battlefield? Kurdish officials have fretted that foreign nations are not repatriating foreign members of ISIS, leaving Kurdish prisons and refugee camps full. Abdel Karim Omar, co-chair of the local Kurdish foreign affairs committee in Qamishli, Syria, has stressed the need for every foreign nation to be pressured "to repatriate its own citizens, and prosecute them on their own soil." There are currently said to be 520 foreign ISIS fighters in Kurdish custody, and some 2,000 women and children with links to the group being held in displacement camps. (London *Guardian*, September 24, 2018)