



## Global Islamism Monitor No. 86

March 11, 2021 **Ilan I. Berman, Gracia Watson**

**Related Categories:** Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Intelligence and Counterintelligence; Islamic Extremism; Terrorism; Iraq; Middle East; North Africa; Turkey

### THINKING ANEW ABOUT ISIS FINANCES IN WASHINGTON...

In the past couple of years, the Islamic State has experienced a dramatic reversal of fortune at the hands of the U.S.-led Global Coalition. Nevertheless, according to a new estimate from the U.S. government, the terror group still has access to around \$100 million in cash reserves in safe havens across the Middle East - money that provides it with ample resources to carry out terror operations on an ongoing basis. These funds, the U.S. Treasury Department has laid out in an internal memo, are being replenished by multiple sources, associates in Turkey as well as smugglers in Iraq prominent among them.

For the Biden administration, the Islamic State's ongoing solvency represents a key challenge. Experts and observers are hopeful that the White House will take decisive action against the group's financial enablers and funding streams as part of its emerging Middle East strategy. (*AI-Monitor*, February 1, 2021)

### ...AS THE ISLAMIC STATE SURGES IN IRAQ...

Meanwhile, signs that the Islamic State is mounting a comeback in the Middle East continue to emerge. Officials in Iraq's Kurdish north have noted an influx of fighters with Arab nationalities from across the Syrian border, with the current number of active militants in the region pegged at around 1,500. Terror attacks by the group and its affiliated extremists have also become more coordinated and lethal, posing a mounting challenge to local security.

This resurgence has been facilitated by ongoing political disputes between the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and Iraq's central government, which have inhibited stable governance and allowed ISIS to gain a foothold in the region. "If Iraq remains indefinitely the way it is, we expect the impact of this group called Daesh to only increase in Iraq," Sarbast Lazgin, the deputy minister of Iraq's Kurdish *peshmerga* forces, has warned. (*VOA News*, February 7, 2021)

### ...AND FOCUSES ON SYRIA'S REFUGEE CAMPS

The Islamic State is making inroads elsewhere in the region as well. Conditions in Syrian refugee camps, the notorious al-Hol camp in the country's north prominent among them, continue to provide fertile soil for the group's extreme ideology. Despite technically being under the control of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), "there seems to be internal courts and councils of ISIS members who decide the fate of these victims and others" at the camp, according to Charles Flynn, a researcher at the pro-Kurdish Rojava Information Center (RIC). A new RIC report notes that efforts to repatriate and relocate the camp's 62,000 occupants, mostly women and children, have been slow - and that the festering situation is one that ISIS is likely to use to its advantage.

U.S. military officials are deeply concerned by the dynamic. In a virtual address last month to the Middle East Institute in Washington, DC, General Kenneth McKenzie, the commander of the United States Central Command, warned that that "[u]nless the international community finds a way to repatriate, reintegrate into home communities, and support locally grown reconciliation programs we will bear witness to the indoctrination of the next generation of ISIS as these children become radicalized." (*VOA News*, February 8, 2021)

### FRANCE'S SHIFTING COUNTERTERRORISM PRESENCE IN AFRICA

Despite rumors of a significant withdrawal of its troops from northern Africa, France's President, Emmanuel Macron, has made clear that he intends to maintain a military presence in the region in order to counter militant activity there. However, Macron also indicated that troops will be reduced over time, and that he eventually intends for the French-led Takuba multinational task force to take over security in the region - though precisely when is still unknown. In the meantime, Macron is hoping for more concrete counterterrorism results in Mali and the Sahel region, which has been the site of significant militant activity over the past few years. French efforts will be focused on the Sahel's leading *jihadi* group, the Group to Support Islam and Muslims (GSIM), and in particular one of its factions, Katiba Macina, which has been linked to al-Qaeda. (*Defense Post*, February 17, 2021)