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INFORMATION
CENTER

HIDDEN BATTLEFIELDS:

REHABILITATING ISIS AFFILIATES AND BUILDING A DEMOCRATIC CULTURE IN THEIR FORMER TERRITORIES

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ABSTRACT

A “general amnesty” for all Syrian nationals held in Hol Camp was recently announced by the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), the political authority representing the autonomous regions of Syria known as North and East Syria (NES) connected to the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The decision was followed a week later by an amnesty for low-ranking Syrian ISIS members. These announcements drew fresh attention to the struggle to cope with ISIS detainees and remnants in NES. Despite ISIS’ territorial defeat, the region is struggling with the legacy left behind by the terrorist group. At its height, ISIS was able to diffuse its ideology through large swathes of what is now NES. Nowadays, ISIS affiliates fill prisons and other detention centers operated by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES).

Global media have closely followed the dire humanitarian and security conditions in Hol Camp, branding it a ‘ticking time-bomb’ from which ISIS will be able to rise anew. Less is known about the attempts that are being made by the AANES to fight ISIS on the battlefield of ideology inside the prisons and camps, and to promote long-term reconciliation with those parts of society who were most likely to support ISIS.

This report offers an overview of how the enduring legacy and impact of ISIS’ rule and ideology is being handled in NES. Despite harsh material conditions, several organizations related to the AANES are attempting to address this crisis by offering education programs, discussion sessions and other activities to former ISIS affiliates, while the SDC and AANES’ own program of justice reform is also intended to break the cycle of violence and retribution which led to ISIS’ rise.

THIS REPORT WILL COVER:

- The broader political context and the politics of amnesties and releases in NES. The recent amnesties must be understood as part of a long term process which aims to secure the situation within the detention facilities, and comes with a perspective of reconciliation with the Arab population.
- Rehabilitation measures within detention facilities. Several institutions host rehabilitation measures in NES. The Huri Center is a detention facility located near Qamishlo, specifically built to host teenage boys from the age of 11 up who have been trained as fighters by ISIS. Educational programs are underway for adults in prisons which hold

ISIS affiliates, like the women’s prison in Derik. Rehabilitation efforts are also made in Hol and Roj camps, both home to thousands of relatives of ISIS fighters and female ISIS affiliates. In particular, local NGO Waqfa Jin is developing seminars and other activities in order to establish a dialog with camp residents and teach skills that facilitate future return into society. RIC visited all these sites to conduct research and interviews.

- The development of a new political and religious culture through the promotion of ‘Democratic Islam’ in areas previously under ISIS rule. Through institutions such as the Religious Assembly and the Academy for Democratic Islam, religious authorities in NES hope to promote a secular yet inclusive political culture and encourage interfaith dialog.

The report will highlight the potential of these initiatives for achieving successful rehabilitation of former ISIS affiliates, but also outline the challenges they are currently facing, notably:

- A shortage in the resources (material and human) needed to expand detention facilities, improve the conditions of inmates and develop existing initiatives on a broader scale;
- Political and security instability as Turkey threatens new assaults on the region, while ISIS sleeper-cell attacks continue;
- Economic isolation (partial embargo on NES, a pan-Syrian economic crash, sanctions targeting the Syrian Government but also affecting the AANES).

The international community can play its role in preventing a resurgence of ISIS by strengthening ongoing initiatives in NES, the report concludes. Concretely, this would mean:

- Providing material support;
- Offering psychological, social, and legal expertise to existing rehabilitation initiatives;
- Repatriating foreign ISIS suspects to their countries of origin and/or providing support for the establishment of a local or international court in NES;
- Facilitating trade between NES and the outside world;
- Promoting inclusive negotiations on the region’s fate, incorporating Arabs, Kurds and all communities resident in NES into official political processes;
- And preventing Turkey from conducting further attacks on NES.

DEFINITIONS AND METHODOLOGY

DEFINITIONS

ISIS affiliates: This term encompasses a wide range of political profiles, including all individuals who have had a direct link with the organization. This might mean a high ranking ISIS cadre; a member of the religious police (Hisba); a person who worked for ISIS' administration as an official, recruiter or organizer; those who were drawn into the organization as wives of fighters; or even children who grew up under ISIS and who did not join the organization out of their own free will, but who are now under the influence of ISIS' ideology.

Ideology: Ideology has been defined as "a set of beliefs, especially the political beliefs, on which people, parties, or countries base their actions."¹ In section 2 this report will address the beliefs and political principles that characterize ISIS' ideology.

Rehabilitation: Rehabilitation has been defined as a purposeful and planned intervention that aims to change characteristics of ISIS supporters or members (attitudes; cognitive skills and processes; personality and/or mental health; and social, educational or vocational skills) in order to prevent the individual from re-joining the organization in question.² The initiatives for ISIS affiliates outlined in this report certainly pursue this aim, even though they lack at times the systematic approach which would characterize a full-blown rehabilitation program, mostly due to a lack of material and human resources.

METHODS AND LIMITS OF THE INVESTIGATION

The report is based on over 20 interviews with interlocutors including: staff of detention facilities; sheikhs who participated in the tribal guarantee program and officials overseeing the new amnesties; professionals working within organizations that deliver educational and recreational activities in camps and prisons; people who engage with society as religious or civil-society actors or organizations with the perspective of creating a counter-narrative to ISIS' ideology; and ISIS affiliates being held in AANES-run detention facilities.

¹ <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/ideology>

² Haid Haid 2018, p. 9

Due to the Coronavirus pandemic, several activities mentioned by the interviewees were paused during the time that the research was being carried out. Our team could visit Hol Camp, Roj Camp, the Huri Center, the Qamishlo prison and the women's prison in Derik. In both Derik and the Huri Center, our team was able to conduct interviews with individual detainees. In Roj Camp and Qamishlo prison, due to preventive measures put in place to protect the residents against Coronavirus, restrictions had been placed on interview and visiting procedures. It was not possible to take photographs or video material in any of these secure locations, apart from Hol Camp.

For background information and to contextualize the current situation in NES, the report draws on secondary sources (academic, journalistic, and administrative). Links to newspaper articles are directly mentioned in the footnote, while reports and academic articles are referred to by name of the author and date of publication. The full references appear at the end of this report.

AUTHORS

The **Rojava Information Center (RIC)** is an independent media organization based in North and East Syria. The RIC is made up of local staff as well as volunteers from across Europe and North America. Some of us have experience in journalism and media activism and came here to share our skills, and others joined bringing other skills and experiences to the team. There is a lack of clear and objective reporting on Rojava, and journalists are often unable to make contact with ordinary civilians and people on the ground. We set up the RIC to fill this gap, aiming to provide journalists, researchers and the general public with accurate, well-sourced, transparent information. We work in partnership with civil and political institutions, journalists and media activists across the region to connect them with the people and information they need.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 TERRITORIAL DEFEAT OF ISIS

When the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) captured ISIS' last stronghold in the Syrian village of Baghouz in March 2019, the terror group finally faced territorial defeat. This military victory marked the end of the self-proclaimed caliphate, which for over four years had enforced a particularly violent interpretation of Islamic law and radical Islamist ideology throughout the large swathes of territory it controlled in Syria and Iraq, including in present-day North and East Syria (NES). But the relief this military victory brought about was short-lived.

The fall of Baghouz drew the world's attention to a major problem, which had received little media attention up to that point: the fate of tens of thousands of ISIS affiliates – men and women, plus their children – now being held in SDF prisons and camps. It is feared that these camps and prisons are becoming ideological breeding grounds which will fuel a revival of the terrorist group. As such, **preventing further radicalization and encouraging former ISIS members to disengage from the group and reintegrate into civil society constitutes a major challenge.** Yet, while the SDF's military battles against ISIS have been widely covered in international media – as have the “ticking time-bombs” of potential radicalization at Hol Camp and in NES' prisons – little is known about the attempts that are being made by NES' civil administration to fight ISIS on the battlefield of ideology.

1.2 DETENTION FACILITIES

When evaluating these efforts, it is necessary to take into account the extremely tense situation in detention facilities throughout NES. During the final military operation culminating in the battle to retake Baghouz, thousands of ISIS fighters and their families were evacuated and brought into prisons and camps which were never intended to host such high numbers of detainees. Over 60,000 people were evacuated from Baghouz from December 2018 through to the close of the military campaign, with 9,000 people exiting in a single three-day period. The majority of those evacuated were the families of ISIS fighters.³

At one time, the autonomous regions governed by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) reportedly had the lowest rate of imprisonment of any state or self-governing region in the world bar San Marino, thanks to the AANES' policies

³ RIC report, *Bringing ISIS to justice*, 2019, p. 12

of justice reform and community mediation. But following the SDF's defeat of ISIS, the AANES is now dealing with one of the world's highest incarceration rates.⁴

This massive influx of detainees put a strain on the AANES' detention facilities. International media have reported extensively on the dire living conditions in some camps and prisons. Hol Camp, in particular, suffers from severe over-crowding. In the space of months, the population of Hol Camp surged from its original 10,000 capacity in January 2019 to more than 73,000 people by May – a 680% increase.⁵

The camp initially experienced high rates of child mortality, as severely malnourished and war-wounded children exited ISIS' dwindling territory and were transferred into a camp lacking the means to offer appropriate health care to all inmates. According to the Center for Global Policy, more than 500 people died at the camp in 2019, of which 371 were children – with most dying soon after leaving ISIS-held territory.⁶ A year on, mortality rates have stabilized to expected levels. But overcrowding and widespread refusal to engage with camp services by radicalized female ISIS affiliates mean the humanitarian situation remains critical.

Captured (male) ISIS fighters also swamped the pre-existing prison capacities. Sometimes, schools were converted into prisons, most notably the Ghurian prison in Heseke which holds between 3000 and 5000 prisoners.⁷ (It is Ghurian which has experienced the bulk of uprisings, while other, smaller detention facilities such as those in Qamishlo and Kobane have been able to maintain better security conditions). Inside both camps and prisons, a significant number of detainees are still active and devoted ISIS members. In Hol Camp, the most radical women enforce Sharia law on less-radicalized members of the camp population, and put their allegiance to ISIS on display by organizing pro-ISIS marches and demonstrations or even raising the ISIS-linked black standard during the Eid al-Fitr festival.⁸

A considerable number of those detained in prisons and camps are foreign or 'third-country' nationals (ie. neither Syrian nor Iraqi). These individuals cannot easily be tried under the judicial system set up by the AANES – which has tried thousands of local ISIS affiliates in its own courts – and therefore pose a specific challenge to which a long-term solution still needs to be found.^{9/10} Estimates for the number of foreign women and chil-

⁴ http://www.prisonstudies.org/highest-to-lowest/prison_population_rate

⁵ However, "between May 2019 and May 2020, the number of Al Hol residents dropped from 73,000 to 65,000 mainly due to returns by Syrian nationals and the repatriations of Iraqi and foreign nationals." <https://www.savethechildren.net/news/syria-thousands-foreign-children-al-hol-camp-must-be-repatriated-givencoronavirus-fears-0#ref>

⁶ Center for Global Policy, 2020, p. 8

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/30/islamic-state-prisoners-escape-from-syrian-jail-after-militantsriot>

⁸ Operation Inherent Resolve. Lead inspector general report to the United States Congress. April 1, 2020-June 30, 2020, p. 60

dren being held in NES vary from 12,000-13,500, in addition to over 2000 foreign ISIS suspects detained in prisons, per AANES figures.¹¹

But calls from the AANES to the international community to repatriate their nationals currently withheld in NES have been consistently ignored by Western countries.¹² Countries primarily repatriate orphaned children or small numbers of women and their children, while refraining from taking the generally-unpopular step of taking back large numbers of male fighters or women who adhere or were exposed to ISIS' radically-Islamist and violent ideology.^{13/14} Only a handful of central Asian states have been more proactive in terms of repatriation and setting up rehabilitation centers.¹⁵

However, **leaving foreign ISIS affiliates in prisons and camps is far from an ideal choice in terms of security, as camp and prison authorities are overstretched and escapes are frequent.** Camp authorities at Hol Camp say they have stopped over 800 escape attempts in 2020 alone, but it is known that women regularly escape the detention facility, and it seems that many of those who escape are those who have remained loyal to ISIS.¹⁶

Several escapes from detention facilities have occurred, most notably during the Turkish invasion and occupation of AANES territory around the cities of Sere Kaniye and Tel Abyad in October 2019. Turkish shelling in the vicinity of Ain Issa camp enabled at least 750 people with suspected links to ISIS to flee the camp, since many of the camp guards and staff were called to the front themselves, fled from the shelling or were overwhelmed by rioting camp inmates.¹⁷

⁹ Read the RIC report "Bringing ISIS to justice", 2019: <https://rojavainformationcenter.com/2019/07/report-bringingisis-to-justice-towards-an-international-tribunal-in-north-east-syria/>

¹⁰ <https://rojavainformationcenter.com/2020/05/translation-north-and-east-syrias-anti-terrorism-act-used-to-try-local-isis-suspects/>

¹¹ Center for Global Policy, 2020, p. 6

¹² For example, Canada: <https://globalnews.ca/news/7108763/returning-canadians-isis-suspects-rights-group/>

¹³ Hoffman, Furlan, 2020, p. 14-15

¹⁴ <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/28436/for-former-supporters-of-isis-syria-camps-are-breedingground-for-caliphate-2-0>

¹⁵ <https://www.usip.org/blog/2019/09/central-asia-leads-way-islamic-state-returnees>

¹⁶ <https://www.hstoday.us/subject-matter-areas/counterterrorism/the-security-risk-posed-by-isis-women-smuggling-their-way-out-of-camp-hol/>

¹⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/13/kurds-say-785-isis-affiliates-have-escaped-camp-after-turkishshelling>

Even when the ongoing conflict with Turkey is less active, prison and camp guards have struggled to prevent escapes. ISIS prisoners in Ghurian prison in Heseke have rioted and attempted mass breakouts on multiple occasions throughout 2020.¹⁸

According to a U.S. Government report, regular riots and ongoing small-scale escape attempts underscore the “high-impact risk of a mass breakout” from camps and prisons in NES, in a potential repeat of the mass breakout which enabled ISIS’ rise in Iraq.¹⁹

As calls from the AANES for an international justice mechanism for ISIS have been left unanswered by the international community, the AANES has announced it will start putting foreign ISIS suspects on trial through its own penal system, while still viewing an international court as the best possible solution for foreign ISIS suspects. At the time of writing, however, such trials have yet to begin.

1.3 DEFUSING THE TIME-BOMB: THE NEED FOR REHABILITATION

For all of these reasons, prisons and detention camps holding ISIS-related men, women and children have been popularly termed “ticking time-bombs” – hot-spots for a potential revival of ISIS posing a regional and international security threat.²⁰ The recent amnesties alone cannot solve the crisis. All the most-radicalized former ISIS members, including all foreign nationals, remain in detention – while those who have been released cannot be simply disregarded. The way the mindset of detainees evolves during their detention is key in lowering or raising the risk posed by individuals who, at some point, have left or will leave the detention facilities.

In spite of a shortage in the material and human resources and a constant threat of further Turkish offensives against NES, several initiatives have been set up in camps and prisons to prevent the spread of ISIS ideology and prepare ISIS affiliates for future reintegration into society. More broadly, AANES policies - including a program of sponsored release of ISIS-linked individuals back to their home communities with the guarantee of tribal sheikhs, and new amnesties covering both low-level ISIS prisoners and ISIS-linked women and families not accused of any formal crime - are part of general efforts to improve the security situation in the prisons and foster closer connections with Arab communities whose active engagement will be key in ensuring an enduring defeat of ISIS’ ideology.

¹⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/30/islamic-state-prisoners-escape-from-syrian-jail-after-militantsriot>

¹⁹ Operation Inherent Resolve. Lead inspector general report to the United States Congress. January 1, 2020-March 30, 2020, p. 57

²⁰ <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2019/08/03/isis-women-al-hol/>

What is more, beyond the prison walls, efforts are being made to spread a democratic culture and a democratic interpretation of Islam across NES, especially among those populations which lived for years under ISIS rule and were exposed to its indoctrination programs. These initiatives are small in number, but should be considered in the context of the AANES' broader efforts at reconstruction and community-building in former ISIS strongholds in Deir-ez-Zor and Raqqa. Indeed, granting amnesties long sought-after by local tribal and Arab communities is one way in which the AANES is trying to break cycles of violence and retribution, and create a coalition of local actors working together to uproot ISIS' mentality.

Those programs which are in place should be taken as a blueprint for how the struggle against the spread of ISIS' ideology can be led in the future if such initiatives receive international support and are able to expand and constitute a more universal program of rehabilitation.

2. ISIS' LEGACY IN NES

This section presents a brief overview of ISIS' history, theological basis and ideology; its indoctrination methods; and the motivations other than ideological commitment which led individuals to join the group in order to illustrate the challenges faced by actors engaging in the rehabilitation of ISIS affiliates.^{21/22/23/24/25/26}

2.1 ISIS' IDEOLOGY IN NES

2.1.1 THEOLOGICAL, POLITICAL AND SOCIAL ASPECTS

The group which would later become ISIS started as a branch of Al Qaeda in the aftermath of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003.²⁷ In 2006 the group split, establishing itself under the name of Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), and formulating for the first time its ambition to establish a state and at the same time gaining control over parts of Iraq.

²¹ This and subsequent sections of the report draw on a number of sources, including the following: <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/a-war-with-isis-is-a-battle-against-ideologies>

²² <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/03/what-isis-really-wants/384980/>

²³ <https://www.du.edu/korbel/middleeast/resources/isis-radicalization.html>

²⁴ <https://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/ICCT-Schmid-Challenging-the-Narrative-of-the-Islamic-State-June2015.pdf>

²⁵ <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1015&context=ciwag-case-studies>

²⁶ This section does not aim to exhaustively present ISIS' ideology, but rather stresses the aspects which have the most evident political implications. See Bunzel (2015) for an in-depth analysis of the development of ISIS' ideology and the different schools of thought that have contributed to its formation, and Abedin (2019).

²⁷ ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham [Greater Syria]) has been known by several other names: ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant), IS (Islamic State) or DAISH/Daesh (a derogatory Arabic acronym for the same phrase, ie. Al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi al-Iraq wa al-Sham). Even though in 2014 ISIS changed its official name into IS, in this report we will use the commonly-recognized term 'ISIS'.

When expanding its territories to Syria in 2013, the group changed its name into ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Sham [Greater Syria]) and rapidly gained worldwide infamy through its widespread online distribution of hyper-violent propaganda and subsequent claiming of major terror attacks in the Middle East, Western world and beyond.

ISIS' religious affiliation has been defined as Jihadi Salafism. Salafism is a radical movement within Sunni Islam which is concerned with "purifying the faith", "eliminating idolatry" and "affirming God's Oneness".²⁸

Jihadi Salafism focuses in particular on the violent enforcement of a Salafist reading of the Quran. Following this purist approach, ISIS aspires to restore the caliphate established by the first three generations of Muslims (the Salaf al-Salih, meaning pious ancestors) to which all Muslims had to pledge allegiance. In terms of the social order it seeks to establish, the so-called Islamic State is characterized by authoritarianism, the total submission of women under male authority, religious intolerance and the enforcement of all of these principles with extreme brutality.

ISIS' authoritarian beliefs were incarnated in the person of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who was the leader of ISIS from 2010 until his assassination in 2019. He declared himself in 2014 to be the first caliph of a newly-restored Islamic Caliphate. Baghdadi's image of Islam was authoritarian and exclusivist, as expressed in his phrase: "One leader, one authority, one mosque: submit to it, or be killed."²⁹ Muslims who participate in democratic political structures are therefore seen as apostates by those who subscribe to this ideology.

Though scores of Islamic academics and religious leaders around the world have denounced the deeds of ISIS, branded them as un-Islamic, and highlighted that Islam forbids slavery, torture, killing of the innocent or depriving women and children of their rights, ISIS claims to represent the one and only true interpretation of the Quran, "considering those who practice so-called 'major idolatry' to be outside the bounds of the Islamic faith."³⁰

ISIS expects the total submission of women to a male authority (ie. husband, father, or brother). This translates into an interdiction against women leaving their homes without a male escort. Even for urgent medical appointments, a woman could only leave her home if a man was willing to accompany her. In its propaganda material, ISIS stressed that Muslim women had an important role to play as long as they fulfilled the role of "good wives of jihad"³¹, taking over tasks such as cooking, child rearing (and thus ideological indoctrination), or providing first aid.

²⁸ Bunzel 2015, p. 8

²⁹ Abedin 2019, p. 147

³⁰ Bunzel 2015, p. 8

Girls could be married off as soon as they turned nine. Women were expected to live a sedentary life and fulfill their “divine duty of motherhood”³² at home, submitting absolutely to their husband’s will. This ultra-rigid image of gender roles also had direct consequences for men who diverged from gender norms, as men who were accused of homosexuality faced the death sentence.

Non-Muslim women were dehumanized and could be used as slaves. According to the ISIS Research and Fatwa Department, female captives could be bought, sold and given as gifts as they were considered to be “mere property that can be disposed of”³³. Captured non-Muslim women and girls, particularly members of the Yazidi minority, were given to soldiers as spoils of war and traded on slave markets. Women who survived ISIS’ prison in Mosul said they were either forced to convert to Islam, only to be sold as wives to ISIS fighters, or faced further torture and rape in prison if they refused.³⁴

In order to enforce its rules, ISIS legitimized and normalized the use of exceptional brutality and violence. The book “Management of Savagery”, written by an Islamist strategist, served as a guide for the military strategy of ISIS. According to the author, brutality was a necessary means to intimidate potential enemies, in the phase of establishing the Islamic State. Hence, the violence perpetrated by ISIS was not random: it was a well thought-through strategy that served a specific aim of spreading fear and breaking the psychology of anyone who would try to resist.

2.1.2 INDOCTRINATION METHODS UNDER ISIS

When addressing the ideological legacy of ISIS, it is important to take into account how the general population was exposed to ISIS’ ideology and indoctrinated under its rule. At its peak, the self-proclaimed caliphate of ISIS governed a territory of 90,800 km² holding a population of around 10 million people.^{35/36} During their rule, only the Salafist interpretation of Islam was preached, with the (male) population obliged to attend the mosque. ISIS also widely spread its violent propaganda in public spaces so as to integrate its interpretation of Islam into everyday life, for example by establishing “media points” in towns and cities across Iraq and Syria: “Broadcasting to audiences of both children and adults, large screens show[ed] indoctrination videos featuring blood-soaked battle scenes and executions, while IS militants distribute[d] pamphlets to the audience.”³⁷

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ For a more detailed description of the situation of women under ISIS, in theory and in practice, see the report “ISIS’s persecution of women” by the Counter Extremism Project, July 2017: <https://www.counterextremism.com/content/isiss-persecution-women>

³⁵ Territorial extent in January 2015.

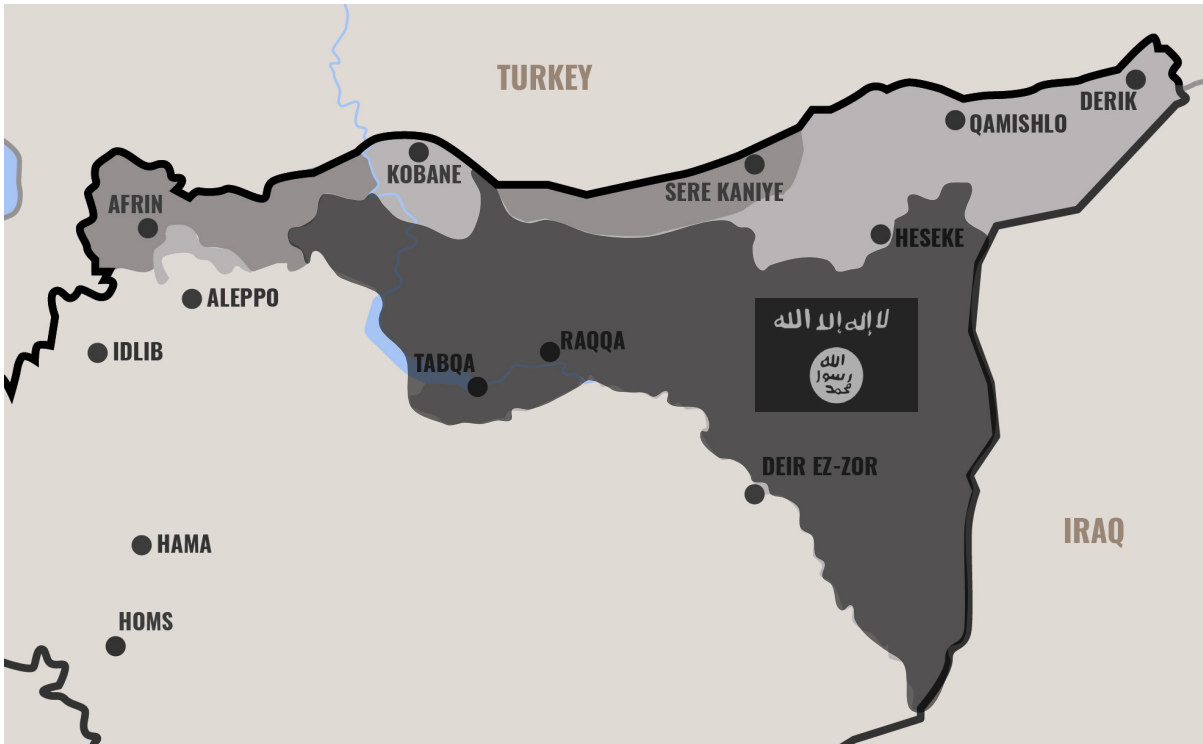
ISIS reached its maximal territorial extent in May 2015. Oosterveld, Bloem 2017, p.19

³⁶ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27838034>

³⁷ Haid Haid 2018, p. 14

Children were particular targets of ISIS’ indoctrination, so as to raise the next generation of fighters. At school age, they were constantly exposed to ISIS’ ideology, as ISIS transformed an estimated 1,350 primary and secondary schools into “recruitment arenas” in which its restricted ideological curriculum was delivered to over 100,000 male and female students.³⁸ Young boys who had received military training – the so-called “Cubs of the Caliphate” – were prominently used by ISIS in propaganda and as fighters or suicide bombers, and participated in mass executions.³⁹

The map below shows the part of today’s AANES territory (November 2020) which was under ISIS’ control (shown in dark grey) at its largest territorial extent (taking into account territory held by ISIS in Iraq, May 2015)



³⁸ Vale 2018, p. 3

³⁹ <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2015-07-21/cubs-caliphate>

ISIS used several techniques to normalize such acts in children's eyes and desensitize them to violence. Under ISIS, children were encouraged to watch public stonings, amputations and beheadings, in order to eradicate feelings of disgust or fear, as a sort of "emotional reprogramming".⁴⁰ Furthermore, **the education system under ISIS withdrew topics which encourage the development of creativity and critical thinking, such as art, music or history.** The curricula taught in schools and training camps for children introduced obligatory religious and extremist jihadi education instead, including lessons in Quranic memorization and recitation; Hadith (teachings of the prophet Mohammed beyond those included in the Quran); tawhid (unity of God); fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence); aqida (creed); and physical preparedness.⁴¹

2.1.3 IMPLICATIONS FOR REHABILITATION PROGRAMS

Countering ISIS' ideology requires tackling all of these aspects in order to abolish the basis upon which ISIS justifies and legitimizes its actions. While it is unlikely that ISIS hardliners will let go of their convictions, those who were drawn into the organization without full understanding of its tactics and aims, due to a lack of alternatives (see below), or at a very young age, can be open to a different set of ideas if shown a credible alternative.

Moving from an authoritarian and hyper-violent normality towards a democratic social consensus requires the development of a framework in which new forms of collective life and decision making can be taught and put into practice, in opposition to ISIS' rigidly top-down hierarchy. This is particularly important for younger generations which have been socialized under ISIS for a significant part of their childhood. Most importantly, though, ISIS builds its legitimacy on the basis of a particular interpretation of Islam. Islamic authorities therefore have a key role to play in defending and promoting a different, non-violent and democratic reading of Islam while at the same time grounding their arguments on the core text of the Islamic faith, the Quran.

⁴⁰ Vale 2018, p. 3

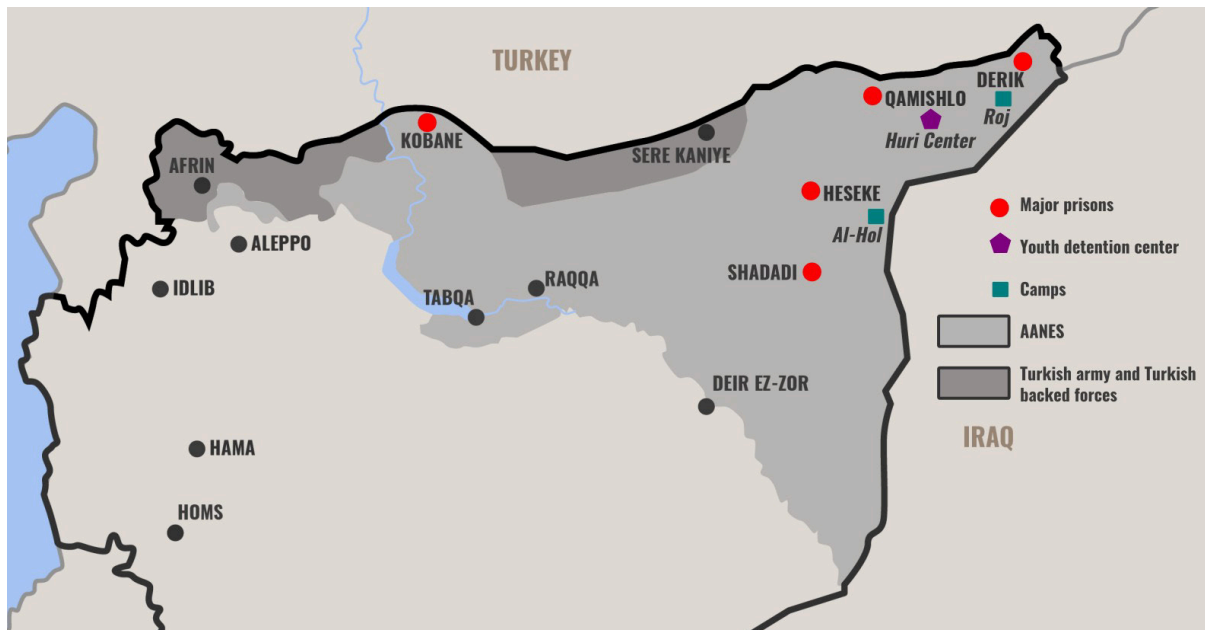
⁴¹ Ibid.

FACT BOX: DETENTION CENTERS HOLDING ISIS AFFILIATES IN NES — AN OVERVIEW

Prisons holding suspected and convicted ISIS fighters

According to a report by the Inspector General for the US Congress, the SDF hold approximately 2,000 foreign fighters⁴² and 8,000 Iraqi and Syrian fighters in 16 SDF-run detention facilities across NES. The majority of these detainees (around 85%), are held either in the Ghurian prison in Heseke or in Shadadi.⁴³ The types of prisons range from former schools to former Syrian Government prisons.

Major detention centers for suspected and convicted ISIS fighters and affiliates, November 2020



Camps holding ISIS-linked individuals

Many relatives of ISIS members – mostly women and children, but also a small number of men – are not officially under arrest but are nonetheless de facto detained as suspected ISIS affiliates in Roj and Hol camps.

Hol Camp’s inhabitants number 65,000, 46% of which are Iraqis (approximately 30,000, including 10,000 in place before the Baghouz influx), 39% Syrians (approximately 25,000),

⁴² Regarding the origin and situation of foreign ISIS affiliates, see RIC’s report “Bringing ISIS to justice”, 2019.

⁴³ Operation Inherent Resolve. Lead inspector general report to the United States Congress. April 1, 2020—June 30, 2020, p. 60

and 15% third-country nationals (approximately 10,000). Most but not all of the Syrians are ISIS-affiliated, while most but not all of the Iraqis do not have any affiliation with the terror organization, with some estimates indicating that around 50% of the camp's Syrian and Iraqi population is ISIS-affiliated. 53% of camp residents are children under the age of 12 and more than 25% of camp residents are under the age of 5. 65% of the third-country nationals are under the age of 12.⁴⁴

Roj Camp hosts about 2000 camp inmates. Syrians and Iraqis account for 15% of all inhabitants, while the others are third-country nationals.⁴⁵ Again, over 50% of the population are children – 58% as of October 2019.⁴⁶

Until recently, Syrians were not authorized to leave the camp unless through the tribal guarantee program in which a tribal leader accepts the responsibility of re-integrating the individual into their community under the assurance that they will not engage in any further support for ISIS. This has changed with the announcement of a general amnesty meaning all Syrian nationals who want to leave the camp are able to return home, without the need for a tribal sponsor. *(See section 3.4 for more context on this important development.)*

Likewise, Iraqi nationals who wish to return to their country of origin are able to register for transfer back to the custody of the Iraqi Government, though this returns program has slowed down as the Iraqi Government has been failing to respond to the AANES' formal requests for repatriation. On the other hand, no-one is forced to leave the camp if they would prefer to remain there. This includes an estimated 50% of the Iraqis, and several thousand Syrians from Syrian Government-controlled regions, both of whom fear violent reprisals, as well as others who are reliant on the basic services provided in the camps.^{47/48}

As far as third-country nationals are concerned, the only way out of the camps at present is repatriation by the individual in question's government – or paying a smuggler to flee to Idlib, Turkey, or Turkish-occupied regions of Syria.

⁴⁴ Operation Inherent Resolve. Lead inspector general report to the United States Congress. April 1, 2020—June 30, 2020, p. 59

⁴⁵ Interview with Nura Abdo, Roj camp management, September 2020

⁴⁶ <https://rojvainformationcenter.com/storage/2019/10/Erdogans-security-zone-Refugees-and-humanitarian-aid-in-North-East-Syria.pdf>

⁴⁷ Interview with Hol Camp official, October 2020

⁴⁸ <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/2193051/exclusive-half-40000-iraqis-living-al-hol-camp-long-return-home>

Youth center for ISIS-affiliated minors

Up to now, there exists one youth detention center for under-18s convicted or suspected of having fought in ISIS' armed forces – the Huri Center. It holds around 80 Syrian, Iraqi and third country national male teenagers. *(See section 4.1 for more details.)* More centers which can host under-age ISIS affiliates are planned, but currently lack adequate funding.⁴⁹

2.2 NON-IDEOLOGICAL MOTIVES FOR JOINING ISIS

According to a report by Chatham House's Haid Haid, only 20% of ISIS members joined the organization out of (purely) ideological reasons. Here we see a break between simplistic Western media coverage focusing on high-profile recruits from Western countries – almost all of whom were radicalized – and the reality of ISIS' base in the Syrian and Iraqi population. In order to understand how and why an individual joins ISIS and play an active role within the organization, aspects other than ideology must be taken into account. The local population and foreigners who joined from around the world must be considered distinctly from one another, since these two groups have experienced and continue to experience different material circumstances which affect their prospects for rehabilitation.

In terms of the local population, the political marginalization of Sunni Muslims in both Iraq and Syria created a fertile breeding ground for ISIS recruits. Political institutions built up in Iraq after the US invasion in 2003, as well as the Shia Alawite minority's dominance in Syria ever since the Assad family came into power in the 1970s, generated discontent among an often-marginalized Sunni population, the power held by individual Sunni figures, tribal leaders and politicians in Sunni heartlands notwithstanding.⁵⁰ The anti-Shia line of ISIS attracted Sunni Arab Muslims who felt discriminated against by pre-existing political institutions. Considering the economic hardship the local population was and still is facing, financial incentives were a major motivation for locals to join ISIS.

⁴⁹ Interview with Abdul Karim Omar, Co-Chair of the Department of Foreign Relations of the AANES, July 2020
⁵⁰ Oosterveld, Bloem 2017, p. 6-7

ISIS paid relatively high salaries, so in impoverished regions, “joining ISIS was considered a viable way to accumulate wealth in the areas it controlled,” as well as to gain social status.^{51/52} As ISIS initiated a regime of terror and omnipresent surveillance, joining ISIS could also be a way of protecting oneself and one’s family from being seen as a potential enemy. Another important factor was the military capacity of ISIS. In the midst of the chaos and violence of civil war, ISIS profiled itself as the actor most able to provide stability, and even outstrip the Syrian and Iraqi states in terms of its ability to provide basic services.⁵³

Other motives need to be taken into account when considering those who traveled from abroad to join ISIS. Foreign fighters in particular were motivated by the idea of fighting for a just cause, as ISIS portrayed themselves as a group fighting against the oppression of Muslims around the world. Foreign fighters from non-Muslim countries also reported being victims of discrimination and racism within their home countries.⁵⁴ Other motives included seeking a sense of identity, finding meaning in life and living an honorable life in accordance with sharia law.⁵⁵

While the large majority of foreign nationals travelling to ISIS’ territories were men (75%, as opposed to 13% for women, and 12% for children), women from around the world also joined the organization and enforced its ideology both in the home and in the street.⁵⁶ For both women and men, much the same diversity of motivations for joining ISIS is cited. However, the way women were made legally and physically available and subservient to men under ISIS should also be understood as an important motive for men in particular to join.

Documents left behind by ISIS recording the marital status of foreigners who arrived in ISIS’ territory suggest that it was much more common for men to arrive without a partner, while women who traveled to join ISIS were more likely to arrive with or follow their husbands – sometimes against their will or without full knowledge of what was occurring.⁵⁷ At the same time, many women did play an active role within ISIS, as recruiters, within the Hisba (religious police) or even as combatants or suicide bombers.⁵⁸

⁵¹ Haid Haid 2019, p. 11

⁵² <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/a-war-with-isis-is-a-battle-against-ideologies>

⁵³ <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/04/04/world/middleeast/isis-documents-mosul-iraq.html>

⁵⁴ <https://www.icsve.org/report-can-an-isis-terrorist-be-rehabilitated-and-reintegrated-into-society/>

⁵⁵ <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/a-war-with-isis-is-a-battle-against-ideologies>

⁵⁶ Cook, Vale 2018, p. 23-24

⁵⁷ “Milton and Dodwell analyzed 1,100 women registered in a guesthouse logbook operated by ISIS (assumed to be between 2014 and 2016), which provides an intriguing snapshot of the diversity behind these numbers.

The women had a mean age of 29 years; 77% were married (in contrast to only 30% of men), and 10% of women were single (compared to 61% of men).” Cook, Vale 2018, p. 23-24

⁵⁸ <https://www.icsve.org/the-security-risk-posed-by-isis-women-smuggling-their-way-out-of-camp-hol/>

Where ISIS has set itself apart from other radical Salafist organizations like al Qaeda is in its offer not just of a militant struggle, but of a proto-state. Despite the brutal reality of ISIS' treatment of women, ISIS propaganda lays out a vision of highly-traditional society where women, too, can live as part of a traditional family unit, and in some cases has foregrounded a rejection of liberal and feminist values coded as Western and corrupt. While playing on similar motivations to those which drove young men to join its ranks, ISIS made a specific pitch to women, abetted by propaganda efforts by female ISIS affiliates already living in its territories.

On the other hand, local female ISIS affiliates may have received little or no formal education, are less likely to have been directly exposed to in-depth Islamic teaching, and in general are less ideologically radicalized than their counterparts from foreign countries. Syrian, Iraqi and foreign national female ISIS affiliates from other majority-Muslim states are more likely to have passively participated in ISIS' activities due to a sense of duty, familial pressure, or lack of alternatives for survival. Though Syrian and Iraqi women are also involved in ISIS' ongoing organization in Hol Camp, it is the foreign national residents who present the largest security and deradicalization challenge.

2.2.1 IMPLICATIONS FOR REHABILITATION PROGRAMS

While it is impossible to isolate these different reasons for joining ISIS from one from another, it is important to bear in mind that ideology is only one of several factors that attracted new members to ISIS. **Genuine ideological conviction intermingled with personal interests which were shaped by specific social, economic and political contexts**, resulting in a diversity of ideological profiles requiring a diversity of approaches to rehabilitation. There is no one-size-fits-all rehabilitation program which can deal with an impoverished Raqqa farmhand turned gun-for-hire on the one hand, and a German teenager from a middle-class Christian family who first encountered ISIS' ideology online on the other.

The factors outlined here underscore the need for taking into account the broader political, social and economic contexts to individual political affiliation. Poverty, political marginalization and insecurity were key in motivating Syrian and Iraqi populations to join ISIS. Therefore, **ideologically-focused rehabilitation efforts must go along with political and economic improvements in regions previously held by ISIS, in order to prevent the group from regaining its social base.**

This requires building up politically-inclusive and democratic institutions which grant an active, participatory role to tribal, religious and ethnic groups present in NES – in particular the Sunni Arab majority. Humanitarian aid and economic development will also prevent bad feeling toward the forces which defeated ISIS from festering among the civilian population, and stop ISIS from recruiting disaffected local youth by utilizing its still-significant financial resources. Strengthening inclusive political institutions and ties between different social and ethnic groups will help stabilize the region and improve the security situation, creating the space for concrete rehabilitation programs. These factors are also one reason why many of the rehabilitation programs outlined below also focus on delivering concrete skills which will be useful in the job market after rehabilitation and thus offering participants the attractive opportunity to learn skills with direct, practical application, while taking a more holistic approach to challenging their mindsets.

3. NES' POLITICAL FRAMEWORK AND THE POLITICS OF AMNESTIES

Rehabilitation measures set up by bodies related to the AANES, and the new political culture that is being promoted in regions liberated from ISIS, must be understood within the context of the new political framework that is being built up since the region gained autonomy from the central Syrian Government in 2012.

Most relevant in terms of rehabilitation programs as they are currently run in NES are the establishment of a new justice and conflict resolution system; the new prominence given to education across all institutions and sectors of society; the role of NES' burgeoning women's movement; and the overall political paradigm of a "democratic nation". Rojava Information Center's report 'Beyond the frontlines' provides a comprehensive overview of this political system, and illustrates the context in which putative rehabilitation efforts for ISIS-linked individuals are taking place.⁵⁹ Related to the new justice system are the ongoing release and amnesty programs mentioned above, which run alongside rehabilitation measures in detention facilities.

3.1 DEMOCRACY, DECENTRALIZATION AND SECULARISM IN NES

Ideologically rooted in the writings of imprisoned PKK founder and Kurdish political figurehead Abdullah Öcalan, the new political system in NES promotes the concept of a so-called "democratic nation", founded on the values of "mutual coexistence and peoples' fraternity". As opposed to the nation-state, the paradigm of the democratic nation aims to establish a political culture in which all ethnicities living in a given area organize autonomously within their own political structures and have a say in the general institutions.

⁵⁹ <https://rojvaimformationcenter.com/2019/12/report-beyond-the-frontlines/>

NES' 'social contract' also stipulates the protection of all religions and guarantees all citizens the free practice of their religious beliefs. At the same time, it upholds the secular principle that public matters should not be decided on the basis of religious beliefs. Several institutions of the AANES are in charge of putting into practice the dialog between religion and the protection of religious minorities, including the Religion and Beliefs Office and the Religious Assembly (see below).

In accordance with these principles, **the AANES therefore promotes decentralized, confederal decision-making on the local level rather than top-down central government.** This is particularly relevant in the case of rehabilitation efforts as it devolves decision-making ability to local councils and enshrines the right of the Arab populations who made up ISIS' base of support to proportional political representation in their local communities. As might be expected, it is those local councils in conservative Arab regions like Deir-ez-Zor and Raqqa who have most actively pursued and put into practice a distinct and more conservative political agenda from that being practiced in Kurdish-majority regions more sympathetic to the AANES' secular, pro-gender equality agenda.

On the one hand, this creates difficulties when attempting to encourage deradicalization and rehabilitation. For example, the Deir-ez-Zor Civil Council has chosen not to implement the secular, pro-gender equality school curriculum promoted by the AANES and in use in Kurdish regions, criticizing it for its lack of focus on Islamic teachings and for its inclusion of lessons on religions other than Islam. But on the other hand, when it is successful then this confederal approach encourages community buy-in and closer collaboration between tribal and Arab communities and other demographics within the AANES, thus combating some of the feelings of alienation and prejudice which contributed to ISIS' rise, as we saw above.

As will be evident, this system is not without its difficulties – the AANES is well aware that simply deferring all decision-making to local community leaders may result in decisions which harm members of these communities, such as young girls who might have benefited from a secular education program in Deir-ez-Zor, while at the same time it cannot afford to enforce unpopular policies on a population in which certain portions still resent its governance. But at the same time, **if achieved then the AANES' vision of a decentralized, federal Syria with empowered minority communities can constitute the best possible tonic to ISIS' (and other actors') attempts to sow discord, sectarianism and violence.**

3.2 JUSTICE REFORM IN NES

It is also particularly important to note that the AANES is developing a new justice and conflict resolution system, which stands in sharp contrast to the Syrian Government's system or to the judicial systems of neighboring states, all of which indulge in egregious abuses of the rule of law, plus torture and execution in many instances.

Where possible, AANES promotes conflict resolution through mediation rather than through an opposition between two parties, with one being punished in retaliation. This idea is put into practice through committees for conflict resolution, functioning across NES on the level of towns and neighborhoods, with higher committees at the regional and pan-NES level. Via trusted community elders, these committees work to resolve blood feuds, property disputes and other legal disagreements without recourse to violence or punitive sentences. These committees are among the core pillars of the commune system at the grassroots level of the political system in NES.⁶⁰ In the field of women's rights, the 'women's houses', known as Mala Jin, are another example of this alternative justice system (*see section 4.3.2 below for more*).⁶¹

This new approach to justice and conflict resolution also affects the treatment of ISIS fighters captured by the SDF. The AANES does also operate a more conventional criminal justice system, which works in consultation with the community justice mechanisms outlined above. Locals accused of terror offenses are tried in conventional courts, but again they can expect relative leniency, first of all because the death penalty has been abolished in NES, as opposed to Iraq where suspected ISIS fighters are regularly executed after hasty trials.⁶² Judged under the terrorism law of NES, the maximum prison sentence a convict under this law can get is 20 years.⁶³ The sentence can be shortened for good behavior.

While there are still shortcomings in this judicial system – particularly the lack of provision of AANES-funded defense lawyers – it is easily the most fair and competent option in the region for trying ISIS fighters. The fact that roughly 10% of those tried have been found innocent and released, 10% handed maximum sentences, and the remainder handed sentences somewhere in between is testament to this.

⁶⁰ See RIC's Explainer on the communes, the building block of the democratic system of NES: <https://rojavainformationcenter.com/2020/05/explainer-communes-the-building-block-of-democraticconfederalism/>

⁶¹ <https://sur.conectas.org/en/building-peace/>
⁶² <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/12/iraq-38-hanged-in-abhorrent-mass-execution/>,
<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/iraq-executions-hangings-isis-baghdad-kirkuk-haider-alabadi-a8423416.html> and <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/29/world/middleeast/france-iraq-isis-trials.html>

⁶³ Translation of the Anti-terrorism act used to try local ISIS suspects in NES: <https://rojavainformationcenter.com/2020/05/translation-north-and-east-syrias-anti-terrorism-act-used-to-try-localisis-suspects/>

3.3 EDUCATION AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN NES

We should also note the importance given to education within the political structures of NES. Education is another one of the three core pillars of the local communes: as soon as communes are created, a committee for education is set up, with the aim of changing mentalities and empowering people. Secular values are promoted through the AANES' schooling system, while as will be explored below the AANES also promotes a diverse range of educational programs targeting adults throughout society, including in regions recently liberated from ISIS.

The women's movement in NES also plays an important role in shaping the political landscape of the region. In all public bodies, women organize their own affairs in autonomous structures. In the academic sphere, the women's movement has developed what they refer to as 'the science of women' (Jineolojî) which focuses on recovering historically-marginalized or excluded women's history and knowledge – a concept which is developed in institutes and taught in schools and at the university.

Autonomous women's structures take a leading role in rehabilitation efforts in camps and newly-liberated regions. The umbrella organization of the women's movement, Kongra Star, coordinates and supports institutions or campaigns that promote women's rights and independence.⁶⁴ Meanwhile, autonomous women's committees and offices within the devolved councils of the AANES; the overall NES Women's Council; and female co-chairs appointed as part of the AANES system of guaranteed 50% female representation all also participate in deradicalization efforts among women.

All of these elements underpin the initiatives taken inside the camps, in prisons and in civil society and the discourse of the actors involved in such activities. The institutional actors interviewed for this report all refer, in different ways, to this set of beliefs and values, which frames their approach to rehabilitation and a future reintegration of ISIS affiliates into civil society in NES.

3.4 RELOCATION, RETURNS AND AMNESTIES

Relocations, returns and amnesties for ISIS affiliates in prisons and camps are part of the new justice system and efforts for reconciliation underway under the AANES' aegis. They also aim at relieving pressure on overcrowded detention facilities for ISIS affiliates, and creating the conditions for effective rehabilitation programs to be put into place.

⁶⁴ See RIC's Explainer on Kongra Star for more: <https://rojvainformationcenter.com/2020/06/explainer-kongra-starthe-womens-congress/>

As such, the initiatives for rehabilitation and outreach efforts outlined in the next chapter of this report should be understood in the wider context of ongoing justice reform efforts in NES.

3.4.1 AMNESTY FOR HOL CAMP RESIDENTS AND ISIS PRISONERS

There are multiple reasons for the recently-announced amnesties, which have emerged out of the context of public consultations launched by the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) following unrest in Deir-ez-Zor. Deir-ez-Zor is one of the seven constituent regions of NES, a majority-Arab, rural district which was ISIS' last stronghold and where many locals still support the terror group. Destruction of infrastructure during the war, poverty, and poor conduct by the SDF-linked Deir-ez-Zor Military Council mean that despite almost daily anti-terror raids by SDF, the region still suffers frequent sleeper-cell attacks as part of an ongoing ISIS insurgency.

ISIS' attacks in the region often target Arab community leaders and other locals working with the AANES and SDF, in an effort to drive a wedge between the Arab community in Deir-ez-Zor and the NES political project being spearheaded by the Kurdish movement. In summer 2020, ISIS assassinated a respected tribal sheikh, sparking two days of protest across the region in which Arab communities demanded more effective security measures, more participation by tribal leaders in the political process in Deir-ez-Zor, and other reforms to AANES governance – including the release of ISIS suspects from Deir-ez-Zor tribes and communities.

Responding to these demands, the SDC launched a series of consultations across NES, where tribal and other community leaders voiced similar demands. It was at one such consultation in Raqqa where President of the SDC Executive Council Ilham Ahmed announced the new amnesty concerning Hol Camp, saying:

“These are basic matters that concern you [ie. the public of NES], raised on an ongoing basis in consultations and meetings, the issue of Hol Camp and the removal of Syrian nationals from the camp. A ruling will be issued to empty the camp of Syrian nationals... Hol Camp is a heavy burden on the shoulders of the AANES.”

Practically **this means that where before Syrian residents had to find a tribal guarantor/sponsor in order to leave Hol Camp, now they can simply register their names and be transferred back in coordination with AANES' local civil councils.**

289 individuals have thus far been released from Hol on this basis, joining the 4000 released under the now-superseded tribal guarantee program. Meanwhile, the AANES continues to seek repatriation to Iraq for Iraqi residents. The Iraqi Government has been dragging its feet over accepting returnees, though work has recently restarted on a camp intended to hold up to half of the 30,000 Iraqi nationals currently resident in Hol Camp.

Neither Syrian nor Iraqi residents will be forced to leave the camp, however, while the AANES continues to seek a solution for the thousands of Hol Camp residents from Syrian Government-controlled areas, unable to return home for fear of reprisals. At the same time, **any camp residents suspected of serious involvement with ISIS will be identified and not permitted to leave SDF custody** – raids and security operations targeting ISIS operatives in Hol Camp increased following the amnesty. So too did security incidents, as the most-radicalized women and foreign nationals in the camp recognized that the net was starting to close in around them.

Meanwhile, per the amnesty for Syrian prisoners, those guilty of less serious crimes; the sick; and over-75s will be freed. Those guilty of serious felonies will have their sentences halved. Convicts fleeing justice have 60 days to hand themselves in to benefit from the amnesty. Those not to be released include those guilty of: espionage and treason; honor killings; drug trafficking; commanders in terror organizations such as ISIS; and terrorists guilty of violent crimes. But low-ranking members will be released, subject to good behavior. **Officials say the move is intended to promote a new approach to justice, revitalize community relations, and relieve pressure in prisons dealing with the burden of over 10,000 ISIS fighters.**

“In response to the demands of our people, who we met in consultations across the regions of NES, and in order to build bridges of trust and enhance participation in the AANES, the SDC paid close attention to the case of detainees,” said Amina Omar, Co-Chair of the SDC. “Following discussions with the AANES, we saw the need for a general amnesty on the level of NES. This includes those convicted of terror charges whose hands are not stained with the blood of Syrians.”

On the same day as Ms Omar announced the decision, 631 prisoners sentenced on terror charges who have served over half their sentences were released, while 253 saw their sentences halved. Further releases are planned in the coming weeks, while the decision will also affect low-level criminals convicted of other, non-terror offenses by NES’ courts.

3.4.2 TRANSFERS FROM AND EXPANSION OF HOL CAMP

Neither of these amnesties currently affects foreign nationals, but measures are also underway to reduce pressure on the 'Annex' housing third-country nationals in Hol Camp.

Hundreds of "less-radicalized" foreign nationals have recently been transferred from Hol to Roj Camp, in transfers occurring largely on the basis of nationality. This at once lightens the burden on Hol, enables easier access to these less-radicalized women in calmer and more secure surroundings, and makes it easier for potential repatriations to occur – since Roj Camp is located in a very secure region, close to NES' sole border-crossing to the outside world.

Similarly, a project is currently underway to build an extension to Hol Camp, with the potential support of a European NGO. Per Abdulkarim Omar, Co-Chair of the AANES' Foreign Relations Department, this extension will serve to rehouse the third-country nationals currently held in the ad-hoc 'Annex' section of the camp. As noted above, third-country nationals are particularly likely to be ideologically radicalized. As such, the primary goal of this new project is to separate out the most radical camp inmates from others who have a greater potential for rehabilitation.

"Those women who start to change their ideology cannot express their opinions because the radical women burn their tents and try to kill them. This is why we want to separate out these radical women from those who are starting to change" — Abdulkarim Omar, AANES

As well as hosting foreign ISIS-linked women, the new section of the camp is also intended to host a rehabilitation center, open to any and all women still resident in Hol Camp. The section for foreign women would be subdivided in order to separate those who are more radicalized from the less radicalized inmates, while the extension is also planned to include a school and recreational facilities for children. "If the children stay [in the camp] they will still be educated to be radical, to have ISIS' mentality – and even to try and avenge ISIS' defeat," Mr. Omar says. As such, children will be encouraged to join educational and rehabilitation programs modeled after the example of the Huri Center.

3.4.3 AMNESTIES AND TRANSFERS IN THE CONTEXT OF REHABILITATION AND REFORM

Such decisions are not taken lightly, and of course come with significant security risks. As noted above, **meeting Arab and tribal leaders' demands for releases is not a straightforward panacea to the crisis – releasing hundreds of ISIS-linked individuals back to unstable areas presents obvious security risks.** At least one ISIS-linked woman released from detention facilities in NES after serving a prison sentence for helping ISIS to organize people-smuggling out of Hol Camp has gone on to repeat the same offense and be recaptured.

There is a certain opacity over the outcome of these returns programs. With monitoring and follow-up mechanisms not clearly laid out, it is difficult to know whether the 4000 primarily women and children who have returned home to date via the tribal guarantor program have had any involvement in the ongoing security crisis in Deir-ez-Zor. Monthly RIC reports documenting sleeper-cell attacks in Deir-ez-Zor do not indicate any direct correlation between releases and increased sleeper-cell activity, with major releases like the recent amnesty for ISIS fighters not resulting in any immediate uptick in attacks. However, this by no means precludes the possibility of individual acts of recidivism like the case mentioned above.

As noted above, the new amnesties give a boost to Arab tribal actors who have long been pushing for such releases. Building a stronger relationship with Arab communities is among the primary aims of these releases, in order to foster stronger security and political cooperation, particularly in Deir-ez-Zor. **While imperfect, these broad-brush efforts at enacting a less punitive form of justice towards low-level ISIS suspects “should help bolster tribal heads' credibility with their populations while also improving Kurdish relations with the tribes,”** as the US Institute for Peace has concluded.⁶⁵ This will be crucial in stamping out ISIS' sleeper-cells and working to diminish ISIS' influence among the Arab population, whose collaboration will be crucial in launching more wide-spread rehabilitation programs among the civilian population.

As a prison guard at one prison where hundreds of low-level ISIS members will shortly be released tells RIC: *“We will give them enough money for a ticket to whichever city or region [in NES] they want to visit, and a note to show at checkpoints so they won't be bothered. Many of these men, who are from regime-held or other parts of Syria, say they will settle here. They respect our system and the way they have been treated.”*

⁶⁵ <https://www.usip.org/publications/2020/10/can-syrians-who-left-isis-be-reintegrated-their-communities>

As noted above, separating out prisoners also helps to improve the internal situation in camps and prisons. Hol Camp residents who still follow ISIS' radical and Salafist interpretation of Islam enforce their rule upon other residents who would potentially be amenable to change, or who even want to escape from the organization altogether, posing a significant barrier to the delivery of rehabilitation programs. Potential attendees at rehabilitation programs have been warned off by other attendees through threat of violence, religious leaders working among ISIS-linked women in NES tell RIC. Separating out from one another inmates at different stages of radicalization is therefore a vital first step towards the potential success of rehabilitation programs.

People who retain sympathy for ISIS' aims will be released as a result of these programs. **But the hope is that the security risk this presents will be outweighed by the benefits in terms of building a more positive environment in troubled regions such as Deir-ez-Zor, reducing pressure within the camps and prisons, and separating out the most-radicalized ISIS members from their peers.**

4. REHABILITATION INITIATIVES IN DETENTION FACILITIES AND BEYOND

RIC has visited several detention facilities and interviewed staff as well as some inmates working on or participating in rehabilitation programs for ISIS affiliates. The Huri Center for teenagers who fought with ISIS is the most impressive institution dedicated to rehabilitation and is seen by professionals across NES as a pilot project providing a blueprint for future rehabilitation efforts. The situation is more complicated in the general prisons and camps, but limited education and reconciliation efforts are also underway in these institutions.

4.1 REHABILITATING THE "CUBS OF THE CALIPHATE": THE HURI CENTER

The Huri Center is a detention facility located near Qamishlo, specifically conceived to host teenage boys from the age of 11 up. Founded in 2017, it is the only center of its kind in NES. It was set up in order to separate captured, ISIS-affiliated male children and teenagers from adults, and to keep them away from the influence of ISIS' ideologues – including women in Hol Camp, who are actively training children in the camp in ISIS' ideology and strategies of violence.

The center focuses on working with males aged under eighteen who were part of ISIS' so-called "Lion Cubs Brigade" or otherwise received military training from or participat-

ed in armed conflict for ISIS – meaning they may have been trained to fight as part of ISIS’ military, to behead and execute people, or to become suicide bombers.⁶⁶

RIC visited the center and talked to Sara Efrin, co-chair of the facility, and Nofa Eli Derik, a teacher, who explained the principles according to which the Huri Center conducts its work. The center does not apply a specific, targeted program for rehabilitation, instead focusing on teaching a new value system in everyday life. The interviewees refer to values of democracy, peaceful coexistence and gender equality, which they transmit and put into practice through day-to-day life, interactions, and conversations. Their work with the teenagers is based on the conviction that if the children are shown a positive example and given the chance to live according to these values, they will gradually let go of violent and authoritarian ideas.

4.1.1 EVERYDAY LIFE AND DAILY INTERACTIONS: CREATING A SPACE FOR MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING

The Huri Center holds local teenagers who have been tried and convicted of fighting as part of ISIS and who are serving their sentence at this location, as well as foreign teenagers from all over the world whose fate is still uncertain due to the lack of judicial options for dealing with foreign nationals.

Considering the violent and traumatic past of the children in their care, officials at the center put an emphasis on offering their charges a peaceful and calm environment in which they can receive a basic education in reading, writing and practical skills. In order to create an environment in which the teenagers can open up, the staff emphasize that the center should feel as little like a prison as possible to its inhabitants. The children are not allowed to leave the center, but can move around freely within it, and live in small groups in shared rooms. Daily life is busy and structured, with classes in the morning (from 9AM until 1PM) and practical training, sport or creative activities in the afternoon. Besides the dormitories, sanitary facilities and a garden, the center includes a class room, a barber shop, and an outdoor sports ground.

I like it here. It's better than before. We can play football, we learn new things here, we have good classes, it's much better. The people treat me well. I get to speak to my mom sometimes. I got to visit my mom [in Hol camp] once. She is happy that I'm continuing to learn and study.
— Suli, 17, US national resident in Huri Center

⁶⁶ <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2017-10-13/inside-isis-dysfunctional-schools>

Contact between children and their parents is limited, but the relationship is maintained. Twice a week, the children are allowed to call their families, and for those who have mothers living in Hol Camp, regular visits are organized. The mothers are brought from the camp to the center and back to the camp again. Even though many foreign children arrive in the center, all of them have a basic knowledge of Arabic which allows communication between them and with the staff. Staff members insist on the importance of adopting a “soft and respectful” approach when interacting with the children, to ensure the residents don’t feel like “they are locked up in a prison with guards watching their every move”. Given that the residents come from an environment which was extremely hierarchical and authoritarian on the one hand, and extremely chaotic and marked by random violence on the other, staff try to establish a relationship with the residents based on mutual understanding in order to allow them to experience “a life of peace, freedom and friendship”.

The center aims to foster a collective approach to life, showing the teenagers an alternative to the authoritarian organization they have been part of before by using techniques and rhythms of life to be found in any of NES’ civil-society academies. The children are given responsibilities for the maintenance of communal spaces and for taking care of their common needs (cleaning, emptying the trash, cooking, or representing their class as a delegate).

We want to create a communal lifestyle where children can learn to take responsibility. And the children feel a sense of pride and joy from receiving this trust and responsibility. Here, there is not one child who does not help out. — Sara Efrin, co-chair of the Huri Center

The staff also emphasize equality between all members of the center, be they teenagers, supervisors or teachers. This contrasts with the repressive, authoritarian structure which characterizes ISIS. For example, staff share everyday life with the youngsters without receiving apparent privileges such as better food: “The children are always shocked when they first arrive and see that both the children and the staff eat the same food, that there is no difference between us.”

Staff highlight the importance of respectful daily interaction as part of teaching the children to resolve problems in a non-violent fashion: “We who work here spend all day with the children. We live together and have discussions together, and the children learn a lot from these daily interactions, like social skills, ethics and morals. If a child misbehaves

or causes problems we solve it by discussing with him, not by punishing him” Ms Efrin says. This way, children learn “how to solve problems without violence”. This method has allowed staff to resolve conflicts without any major incident of violent behavior so far.

4.1.2 CHALLENGING ISIS’ IDEOLOGY THROUGH PRACTICE AND DIALOG

The formal education program at the Huri Center is focused on knowledge that can be of daily use for the children, rather than directly addressing ideological issues.

The children here have already been through ideological education with ISIS, so the last thing we should do is brainwash them with a different ideology. They are only children and should stay that way. Our goal is to educate the children and give them a new perspective on life.

— Sara Efrin, co-chair of the Huri Center

As many children are illiterate when they arrive at the center, the teaching focuses on reading and writing Arabic, as well as Kurdish for more advanced students. They can also learn an instrument, handcraft and sewing, as well as playing football, volleyball and pool. “Our goal is that one day when they leave us they will know that their time was not wasted here, that they learned many new and useful things, that they had a good time here and that they improved themselves,” says Ms Derik, the teacher who works in the center.

The value system transmitted by ISIS is also challenged in the classroom, for example by having women teaching and supervising the children. Ms Efrin explains: “These children have been taught by ISIS that it is a huge shame for them to be taught by a woman. In their mind they can only be taught by a man. And they regard anything that we teach them to be unworthy and against their religion, no matter what.”

Female staff report that on their arrival, many of the residents refuse to look the women in the eyes, to shake their hands or to answer to their questions. Ms Derik reports: “When I first started working here the children were shocked and enraged when they saw me and understood that I would be their teacher. In the first class I gave them they refused to listen or participate. Some even refused to look at me. But after some time and many discussions they started to get used to me and the idea of having a woman as a teacher. Now, if I have been absent for a day, they come up to me and ask where I have been and why I did not come to class. So there is definitely improvement, but it takes time and patience.” The children also learn musical instruments, challenging the ban that ISIS had put on this practice.

Without challenging ISIS' ideas head-on via the curriculum delivered in the classroom, the aim is that the extremely misogynist ideas that the teenagers learned under ISIS will nonetheless gradually dissipate: "A lot of the changes and improvements happen through their observations, and their discussions with the staff. Now most of the children are on a level where they make eye contact with me and are willing to shake my hand," Ms Efrin says.

Rather than following a strict curriculum, residents are encouraged to define the content of their own classes, by making suggestions for subjects they would like to cover, in order to encourage them to think by themselves and take responsibility for their own learning: "For example, they love it when we read stories together, or they have questions that they want to ask," says Ms Derik.

Hence, classes also create room for discussion, during which pupils and teachers alike share their opinions. Most discussions concern everyday life, while the sensitive topic of religion is rarely brought up in class. Again, the staff prefers to adopt a slow-and-steady approach, tackling sensitive issues by following the lead and rhythm defined by the center's residents.

Sometimes they ask really interesting things. For example one day a child asked me what science says about the beginning and creation of humans. We take it very slowly with them. If we go too fast and talk about things that they are not ready to talk about then they will refuse to accept it. But slowly their minds are opening. — Nofa Derik, teacher at the Huri Center

Syrian children find it easier to let go of ideas taught under ISIS than their foreign counterparts do, staff report. While Syrian ISIS members were in many instances led to join the organization out of economic necessity rather than ideological beliefs, Westerners joined on a more purely ideological basis. Therefore, according to Ms Efrin, "the children from the West are usually stronger believers and followers of ISIS, and it takes longer for them to let go of this extreme mindset and start making improvements".

4.1.3 PSYCHOLOGICAL SUPPORT

Regarding the psychological support that the children receive, the staff of the center focus on keeping their attention on learning new skills, creating bonding experiences and opening up new perspectives for the future, rather than looking back on past experiences: **“Our goal is to give them a chance to forget what they have been through and the things that they have done, and to give them back the childhood that was stolen from them”**. Ms Efrin says. Center resident Suli, 17, says he prefers not to think about the past. Rather, he busies himself with learning to play the piano.

I have friends here, I have a friend from Finland, a Swedish friend as well, Indonesians, French. I draw, we play football, listen to music, watch television, see what's going on with the Premier League... sometimes I play on the instruments, the piano. — Suli, 17, US national resident in Huri Center

Residents are not forced to talk about their past. The children that arrive at the center are considered victims that have been manipulated by ISIS and who need a chance to rediscover their childhood and their “inner child”, as Ms Derik puts it, through simple activities such as football, singing songs, making and listening to music, watching movies and learning. When talking about their past, Huri Center residents stress the fact that they were forced to participate in ISIS. In such cases, staff highlight the importance of not blaming the teenager, and letting them know that they were victims of ISIS.

But staff also acknowledge the need for more psychological and educational expertise that would allow professional support to overcome the traumatic experiences these children have gone through. As Ms Efrin explains, due to years of war and economic hardship in NES, not all staff members in the Huri Center have received specialized training for their work with traumatized children. As such, the work that the center is doing is based on the individual efforts of the staff as they develop new methods in practice, rather than formal expertise.

4.1.4 FUTURE PERSPECTIVES: THE HURI CENTER AS A PILOT PROJECT

Staff also emphasize an urgent need for support to improve the work and to extend the capacities of the center. The main financial and practical support is provided by the AANES, while INGOs have donated materials or games for the children. In terms of expert support or training in the fields of education and psychology, the center has yet to

receive any international support: **“The help we want is not just material or economic. For example, we would love for people who are knowledgeable in psychology and in subjects concerning our work to help train our teachers so we can improve our approach with the children and the education we deliver.** This exchange would be beneficial for all parties, we can learn from their experience and they can learn from ours,” Ms Efrin says.

The Huri Center is currently expanding its operations with the aim of doubling its capacity, while staff aim to set up more centers of this kind in the future, if the conditions allow it.

Across NES, the Huri Center is the project which comes closest to a rehabilitation center. Though a detention center, it was conceived of from the beginning with the principal aim of removing children who had become ISIS fighters from any further exposure to this ideology. Those who are working with the youths held in Huri Center argue that to counter ISIS’ ideology, daily practice should be prioritized over theoretical learning. The project focuses on creating a peaceful environment, implementing democratic forms of organization and creating opportunities for the young people to learn new skills and broaden their mindset – all values which should be implemented in any future, broader rehabilitation programs.

When considering the role that younger generations will play in any future revival of ISIS, potentially exacting revenge for the perceived persecution of their parents, the importance of the Huri Center is clear. At the same time, its limited capacity means it is far from meeting the needs of all those children and youths who have been involved with ISIS or exposed to its ideology.

4.2 EDUCATION PROGRAMS IN PRISONS FOR ISIS AFFILIATES

It is in the prisons for captured ISIS fighters – whether convicted or waiting for trial – that reeducation programs face the biggest challenges. As the SDF advanced in their fight against ISIS, more and more ISIS fighters were captured or surrendered, and transferred into prisons and improvised detention facilities. As there are hardly means to cover even the basic humanitarian needs of the camps and prison detainees, the necessary resources to set up programs promoting disengagement from ISIS ideology are even harder to come by.

Though direct access to the camps was difficult due to the Coronavirus pandemic, RIC has met with prison and camp authorities, to better understand how they approach the question of rehabilitation of ISIS affiliates. They stressed the difficulties facing such programs, but also indicated that initiatives are underway.

Many reports have highlighted detention conditions inside the prisons holding ISIS fighters under the control of the SDF and of the AANES. Overpopulation in certain prisons and the lack of adequate installations and facilities leading to riots and attempted break-outs are well documented. On the other hand, some reports have highlighted the lenient sentences handed to convicted ISIS fighters and those smaller facilities in which prisoners can engage in artistic activities, practical education or study.⁶⁷ The humane treatment that prisoners receive in NES has received attention as it stands in contrast with practices of torture well-documented in neighboring Iraq and Turkey – who also hold large numbers of ISIS detainees – as well as under the Damascus government.^{68/69}

Jeylan Hame, the administrator for prisons in the Jazira region of NES, told RIC that while efforts are being made by the prison authorities to promote a change of mentality within the prison population, there remain multiple barriers which limit the extent and effectiveness of such measures. There are education programs on a voluntary basis, with the aim of enhancing social integration once the prison sentence is completed. Seminars are offered twice a week and include both practical and theoretical aspects.

However, Mr Hame also emphasized that the potential for developing such activities in all prisons, and encouraging the effective participation of the prison inmates, is limited by several aspects:

- The prisons are overcrowded, to the extent that in some prisons the physical conditions do not allow for educational activities to take place
- The refusal of many inmates to participate in the education that is offered and the prisoners' strong ideological adherence to ISIS' ideology
- The need to take into account the different profiles of inmates in terms of radicalization and educational background, which would require the contents of practical and educational activities to be individually adapted
- The uncertainty of the fate of foreign fighters

⁶⁷ For example: <https://www.arte.tv/fr/videos/079770-000-A/syrie-la-prison-des-jihadistes/>, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/03/syria-kurdish-region-isis-prison-sdf.html>, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2019/08/14/captured-isis-fighters-get-short-sentences-art-therapy-syria/?arc404=true>,

⁶⁸ <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/07/torture-turkey-rise-erdogan-republic-fear.html>

⁶⁹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/11/world/middleeast/syria-torture-prisons.html>

The most notable example of a prison where poor security and humanitarian conditions preclude any serious effort at rehabilitation is the Ghurian prison in Heseke, where one room sometimes holds up to 100 people. The situation here is therefore harder to manage than in other facilities holding ISIS fighters such as the prison in Kobane, where men sleep 20 to a room, each with their own bunk, plus access to communal areas and leisure facilities.

Asked about the situation in Ghurian, AANES' Foreign Relations Department co-chair Abdulkarim Omar says: **"If they stay there, how can we change their mentality? How can we help them? But if we build many prisons and try to separate some of the prisoners from others we can try to help them and start to change the mentality."** He emphasized the need for international support to build new prisons and new rehabilitation centers.

4.2.1 CASE STUDY: DERIK WOMEN'S PRISON

The women's prison in the town of Derik holds women who have been convicted of crimes committed on ISIS' behalf. RIC met with Kheje Ebid El Eziz Ezo, one of the administrators at the prison, who described the education programs and psychological support that is offered there. Due to Coronavirus prevention measures, these activities were on hold when the interview was carried out.

The women's prison holds currently 29 women, divided in two sections: civilian women convicted of ordinary crimes, and ISIS-affiliated women, all Syrian nationals who have been tried, found guilty and are serving out their sentence. Most of these ISIS-affiliated women were in Hol Camp before being removed and brought to trial. The crimes they have been convicted for are primarily espionage work on ISIS' behalf, or organizing attacks on the staff of the camp. The ISIS-affiliated prisoners are kept in a separate section apart from the civilian prisoners. If the inmate has young children, the children live together with their mothers in the prison, while being allowed to go outside and attend a regular school.⁷⁰ The women can receive visits and contact their families on the phone once a week.

Twice a month a teacher comes and delivers education sessions, mostly in psychology, "so that the women can better help and understand themselves," Ms Ezo explains. According to the prison authorities, the prison inmates requested more sessions along similar lines, and in general appreciate the conditions in the prison, which are much better than those in Hol Camp.

⁷⁰ This is something RIC researchers visiting the Derik prison were able to observe. The team interviewed two convicted ISIS women, one of whom was accompanied by her son who was sitting on the lap of the prison supervisor during the interview.

The aim of these education sessions is to encourage the inmates to reflect on their acts and to improve themselves. Besides that, the prison cooperates with women's organization who visit the prison and hold discussion with the inmates.

We have received visits and support from "Mala Jin" and "Kongra Star" who are women's organizations working here in the region. They talk with the inmates, observe their life here in the prison, take notes of their struggles and problems, and what can be improved.

— Kheje Ebid El Eziz Ezo, administrator at women's prison in Derik

Similarly to her counterparts in the Huri Center, Ms Ezo explains that the approach towards the ISIS-affiliated prisoners is about promoting a different value-system to that promoted by ISIS, and changing mindsets by putting these values into practice through daily interactions with the broad aim of reconciliation: **"Here they get a chance to really get to know us and see for themselves what kind of people we are and what our values are, as opposed to the lies spread by ISIS"**.

(Many ISIS detainees report that their husbands, commanders and superiors in the Islamic State warned them that they would be raped, tortured or killed by the 'infidel' SDF if they were captured. These rumors had some effect, particularly influencing susceptible children, but the fact that tens of thousands of ISIS-linked individuals chose to surrender to the SDF rather than crossing to Iraq or Syrian Government-held territory indicates that many people in ISIS' territory were aware these rumors had little basis in fact.)

RIC interviewed two prison inmates, one of them whom was interviewed while her child was playing in the room. Since both of the women had arrived only a couple of months previously – when restrictive measures due to Coronavirus were already in place – they had not yet participated in educational sessions. Another difficulty that arose from these interviews was that both denied any involvement with ISIS, even though this is what they had been convicted for. As deradicalization specialist Anne Speckhard told RIC in an interview, such denials are common behavior among convicted ISIS members and a barrier to successful rehabilitation.

While Ms Ezo explains that "it is incredibly difficult to try to change these women's minds [as] many are still devoted members of ISIS and still support and follow their ideology", she also observed change in some inmates – "It is a long and slow progress but it can happen". As opposed to Hol Camp, the prison offers the basic physical conditions (space, coverage of basic needs, and smaller group size) which are a necessary condition for such a process to take place.

Yes, this is a prison but we do our best to help them out so as not to have such a hard time. We let them be outside in the garden and the courtyard one hour every day where they can walk, sit and converse. They can watch movies and TV, read books and do practical work, like making bracelets which they can sell. We try to help prepare them so they can re-enter society after they have served their sentence. — Kheje Ebid El Eziz Ezo, administrator at women's prison in Derik

Prisoners can obtain a reduction of their sentence for good behavior. Before leaving the prison, their behavior is evaluated, and a report is written and sent to the civil authorities in the town, region or city that they want to return to. This procedure, however, does not guarantee the fact that a former prison inmate will not resume support for ISIS after being released. Instances of recidivism have occurred. Ms Ezo gives the example of a woman who, after having left the Derik facility, got caught once again helping inmates of Hol Camp to escape. In cases of recidivism, higher sentences are handed down.⁷¹ Such cases underscore the difficulties of combating ISIS' ideology even in small groups under relatively close scrutiny.

4.2.2 FUTURE PERSPECTIVES: PROSPECTS FOR REHABILITATION IN PRISONS

Rehabilitation initiatives undertaken in prisons are also significant. Their outreach is limited, but they show that if the material conditions allow it, prison authorities are ready to actively work to change the mindset of the prison inmates. Prison authorities in Derik and Qamishlo also deliver education programs to inmates, along with artistic activities which were banned under ISIS. Their aim is to encourage reflection and reconciliation through humane treatment.

At the same time, this positive approach is prevented from having a broader impact due to two main problems – the lack of adequate detention facilities, and the impossibility of isolating the most radical ISIS affiliates from other prison inmates. As amnesties and re-organization of the prison population take effect, it is hoped that the positive approach of prison authorities can be translated into more concrete rehabilitation efforts. In particular, as less-radicalized foreign ISIS affiliates are moved to Roj Camp, opportunities will emerge for more focused rehabilitation efforts among this population.

⁷¹ Interview with Khaje Ebid El Eziz Ezo, led by India Ledeganck, researcher at the F.R.S.-FNRS., 9 July 2020.

4.3 THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN NES AND FEMALE ISIS AFFILIATES

4.3.1 INITIATIVES FOR REHABILITATION IN HOL AND ROJ CAMPS

The two major camps holding female ISIS members and family members of ISIS fighters in NES are Hol Camp and Roj Camp. Both camps were set up to host civilian refugees and IDPs from Iraq and Syria. Since the territorial defeat of ISIS, however, the majority inhabitants of both camps are women and children that have been evacuated from ISIS' strongholds, many of whom – though not all – retain strong ideological ties to ISIS.

As mentioned above, the humanitarian and security conditions in Hol Camp are the number one obstacle to delivering rehabilitation programs. In Hol, the most radical women still enforce ISIS' ideology inside the camp. Acting as Hisba – ISIS' religious police – they enforce sharia law and punish transgressions through acts of violence against other camp residents, even carrying out executions.⁷² Hol has been described as an "ISIS academy", as it is feared that the children growing up inside the camp are fully integrating ISIS' ideology and nourishing a desire for revenge.⁷³ Attacks against humanitarian staff mean camp officials have struggled to keep a permanent health point open in the 'Annex' housing foreign nationals, while the Turkish invasion and Coronavirus crisis have both had a detrimental effect on the extent of services that can be offered.

As compared to Hol, Roj is much smaller and offers considerably better living conditions and access to services. Residents benefit from more solid tent structures, 24-hour electricity, satellite television, and a much lower ratio of residents to humanitarian, medical and education services. To relieve pressure in Hol Camp, families and orphans are regularly transferred to Roj.⁷⁴

RIC has visited both camps and talked with camp management, as well as meeting with staff from Waqfa Jin (Women's Foundation), a local NGO which is one of the few organizations developing and delivering educational programs inside the camps.

When we give the seminars, it's not that we just come and read something to them. We want to hear their questions, to discuss with them. They have to be relaxed, to relieve the psychological pressure they're under. We want them to tell us their problems. — Rojin Hamid-Ali, Waqfa Jin coordinator in Roj Camp

⁷² <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2019/08/03/isis-women-al-hol/>, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/06/18/islamicstate-foreign-fighters-children-syria-camps-repatriation/>

⁷³ <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/09/12/middleeast/syria-al-hol-camp-isis-intl/index.html>

⁷⁴ <https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/25012020>

Established in 2014, Waqfa Jin works with women and children across NES, building kindergartens, orphanages and specialized schools for disabled children.

The foundation offers seminars and practical training for women in the general population across NES, as well as in IDP camps. Waqfa Jin transmits practical and professional knowledge through classes in reading and writing, first aid, sewing, and so on. The aim of such classes is to support women in gaining economic independence and enable them to “stand on their own feet”, as Hena Ali, overall director of Waqfa Jin’s educational programs, tells RIC.

But the NGO’s seminars also deal with social and philosophical questions, analyzing the place of women in society and encouraging attendees to defend women’s rights. Waqfa Jin’s approach is that the first step for women to transform their own fate is achieving “self-knowledge” through understanding women’s history and the status of women in society, Ms Ali says.

It was on this basis that Waqfa Jin started work in Hol Camp, setting up a dedicated office within the camp soon after the reopening of the camp in 2016. As the camp started to play host to more and more women, children and men evacuated from former ISIS strongholds, Waqfa Jin continued its work with the Iraqi and Syrian women (though not in the Annex hosting third-country nationals).

Waqfa Jin regularly organizes “consciousness-raising” meetings in Hol Camp, with around 20 women per session. During such sessions, movies that highlight the importance of women’s education and female self-confidence are shown. They are followed by discussions and debates. Other sessions simply involve “drinking coffee, popular and cultural fashion shows, and handicrafts such as sewing or making jewelry,” according to Ms Ehlam Ebidulah Ismail, a member of Waqfa Jin who coordinates their education programs in Hol Camp.

Approaching inmates was difficult: **“Some of them accepted us, others did not accept us, but this did not stop us. We wanted to stand by ourselves, [as] women, side by side, no matter our ethnicity or our faith.”** says Ms Ali.

Ms Ismail explains: “The difficulties that we face at work are their frame of reference and the culture that they lived in before their arrival to the camp. Their culture and those references were linked to ISIS’ ideology”.

Ms Ismail highlights the time it takes to build up relations of trust. In order to develop a relationship with the camp inhabitants, Ms Ali also stresses the necessity of Waqfa Jin not interfering in religious, political, and military matters. With this approach, “over time our relationship has become even closer,” even if difficulties remain. Following sessions in which the women learn vocational skills, they are awarded a diploma. This also helps to create a positive relationship between the women and the organization, and boost participation, as the participants get something concrete out of the seminars with practical applications in day-to-day life.

Participation happens on a voluntary basis, and is open to any woman who is interested, Ms Ali says. Programs are then scheduled according to the women’s educational level. Lessons encompass psychological, philosophical and societal affairs, with the overall aim of empowering women and to prepare them for their life after the camp, such that “when they leave the camp they will be able to work and continue their lives”.

Other organizations, including the Mala Jin (Women’s House) in the neighboring town of Hol and the AANES-linked Women’s Council of Syria, meet with women in Hol Camp and give seminars on various topics on a more ad-hoc basis.⁷⁵

As noted above, Roj Camp has a much better humanitarian and practical infrastructure than Hol. Camp manager Nura Abdo also explains that certain rules apply, which aim at fostering a move away from ISIS’ culture: “Our system is not exactly like other camps. For example, when women come to us, black clothes are forbidden. The niqab is forbidden [ie. women can have their head covered but not the full face]”.

To complement these rules, Ms Abdo emphasizes that camp staff are working on creating a culture of dialog and bonding with the camp inmates: “As you saw, when you came today I was there among the camp residents. We want to overcome the limits of our thinking - I myself don’t want to think, ‘Will they kill me? Will something happen to me?’ We are here together and we can sit together, speak together. This is our approach”.

Our aim is that these women come to learn with us, rather than conducting their own meetings among the tents: that they come and open their minds. — Nura Abdo, Roj Camp manager

Waqfa Jin also delivers education programs in Roj Camp. They comprise of educational cycles of 40 days which focus on a specific skill, with 20-25 women participating at a time.

⁷⁵ At the beginning of September 2020, for example, the Heseke office of the Syrian Women’s Council held a seminar in Hol Camp on ‘Violence against women’ during the war. A documentary on the topic was also presented during the seminar: <https://www.facebook.com/syrianwomenscouncil/posts/621825888522287>

“Our aim is to help the women find work after. For example, women who study sewing can use this skill when they go back home, rather than having wasted their time here” says Rojin Hamid al-Ali, responsible for Waqfa Jin’s programs in Roj Camp.

4.3.2 THE WOMEN’S MOVEMENT IN FORMER ISIS STRONGHOLDS

Several institutions to defend women’s rights and gender equality have been established in territories formerly held by ISIS. Women’s councils and academies have been created, along with branches of Mala Jin, where women can seek support for the resolution of domestic problems or conflict. AANES’ co-chair system – whereby each political and civil society institution is jointly led by at least one woman and one man, or two women – is also implemented across these regions.

Mala Jin run multiple ‘women’s houses’ across Deir-ez-Zor, Raqqa, Manbij, Tabqa, Sheda-di, Hol, and other communities liberated from ISIS’ rule. Through dialog with all parties involved mediated by respected local women, they try to find solutions for women or men who seek help because they face problems within their family life – particularly divorce, forced marriage, domestic violence, and other issues affecting women. They also take on the challenge of reaching and discussing with radicalized women, and those at risk of radicalization.

To get a picture of how this works in practice, RIC spoke with Semira Eli, coordinator of Mala Jin for the city of Tabqa and the nearby IDP camps of Sweydiya and Mahmudli, a region formerly under ISIS’ control. She says: **“Right after the liberation [of Tabqa] in 2017, our first step was to develop women’s organizations. Our goal is to work among women and solve their issues, or issues that affect women in the camps.”**

Ms Eli is also responsible for delivering education programs in Mahmudli Camp, which hosts mostly women and children. Before the Turkish invasion in October 2019, the camp was home to about 5500 people displaced from across Syria. During the 2019 invasion, Turkish shelling around another camp in Ain Issa forced camp authorities to evacuate thousands of civilian IDPs, while around 750 foreign ISIS-linked women were able to flee from a separate, secure section of the camp. 1300 IDPs from Ain Issa were therefore transferred to Mahmudli Camp.⁷⁶

“Many of the women in Ain Issa were very supportive of ISIS’ ideology. We try to change their ideology and mindset by giving them seminars and holding discussions with them, in order to better understand their life before and their life now,” Ms Eli says.

⁷⁶ <https://www.hawarnews.com/en/haber/mahmudli-camp-management-camp-does-not-accommodate-new-arrivalswe-are-on-brink-of-real-disaster-h12331.html>

Seminars cover sensitive topics such as child marriage and polygamy, but also more mundane subjects such as hygiene. Other seminars are developed on the basis of issues brought up by women living inside the camp. Women who have participated in education programs are encouraged to give seminars themselves, to share their knowledge and skills.

4.3.3 FUTURE PERSPECTIVES: IMPORTANCE OF WOMEN-LED OUTREACH

The women's movement in NES has taken up a central role within the AANES, promoting women's rights, women's autonomous organization and gender equality. It is therefore particularly relevant to highlight how the women's movement is now working with female ISIS affiliates, particularly considering the extremely submissive role assigned to women under ISIS. In Hol and Roj Camps, Waqfa Jin plays an active role, offering practical but also theoretical training sessions during which social questions are discussed. The women's movement has also been able to start working in the heart of the territories which were ISIS' former strongholds, by setting up women's councils, Mala Jin branches, and other institutions.

It is important that any such efforts be led by women, who are in a far better position to access and engage with female ISIS affiliates. Women working in this field highlight the importance of creating a bond 'as women' before opening sensitive ideological subjects, engaging with female ISIS affiliates on a level where their experiences were marginalized and discredited under ISIS and where some women may therefore prove open to engagement. Rather than directly attempting to engage in theological debates, the focus is reducing ISIS affiliates' hostility and finding common ground through shared female experience. In Roj and Hol Camps, despite significant challenges then there is a unique opportunity for women-led rehabilitation programs to reach radicalized women, away from the male heads of household who would normally preclude or obstruct any such conversation.

Woman-led organizations working with ISIS affiliates also display a strong will to integrate women who formerly adhered to ISIS' ideology into their work, rather than excluding or stigmatizing them. Reaching women will also help to affect a change in the way future generations are raised, breaking the generational cycle by which ISIS' ideology is passed on. In time, the aim should be for former female ISIS affiliates to work themselves within their own communities, as it is their voices which stand the best chance of being heard.

5. PROMOTING A NEW RELIGIOUS CULTURE: DEMOCRATIC ISLAM IN NES

Under ISIS, the population was indoctrinated with the Salafist interpretation of Islam on a daily basis. Today in NES, Sunni Islam remains by far the majority religion. The AANES is therefore trying to implement new forms of Islam in the territories it administrates, in an attempt to combat more radical interpretations of the region's predominant religion.

5.1 THE RELIGIOUS ASSEMBLY AND ACADEMY FOR DEMOCRATIC ISLAM

NES' Religious Assembly was established in 2014 by members of the local Christian community, the Yazidi House and the Union of Muslim Believers, uniting representatives of the region's three major faith groups. The Assembly works to promote interfaith harmony and understanding, organizing social and institutional visits between members of different faiths. It delivers educational programs on faith and mutual understanding, including in communities liberated from ISIS, and appears regularly on local TV and radio networks to discuss faith matters.

The Religion and Beliefs Office began its work at the same time as the Religious Assembly, but as part of the executive body. Nowadays it is a part of the AANES. Sheikh Qadri, a Muslim religious leader who is co-chair of the Religion and Beliefs Office and also one of the founders of the Religious Assembly, tells RIC that the Assembly "promotes respect between religions, for example encouraging members of the different communities to join the holy celebrations of other communities, such as Ramadan (a Muslim celebration), Easter (Christian) or Çarsema Sor (Yazidi)".

Our military forces have succeeded in defeating ISIS, but their ideology and way of thinking remains. We want this mentality to be cleansed from our lands as well, and achieve a further, ideological victory. - Sheikh Qadri, member of the Religion and Beliefs Office

The office actively approaches and discusses with the mullahs who deliver the Friday sermons from the mosques, in order to persuade them to deliver a "democratic message, and not one which is radical". Some mullahs have been removed from their work after preaching a version of Islam that was close to ISIS' ideology.

These religious institutions are seeking to develop and promote a new interpretation of Islam, which interviewees refer to as "Democratic Islam".

An academy for training imams (Muslim religious teachers) is under construction. Here, imams will participate in a two-year training course in order to spread this interpretation of Islam in mosques across NES.

Muhamad Xerzani is an imam who is part of a team preparing religious seminars to be delivered in prisons holding ISIS affiliates, in coordination with the AANES. He tells RIC that the interpretation of Islam they aim to promote is based on the freedom of beliefs and the separation of religious from political affairs. Islam and the Quran can give moral, ethical and spiritual guidance, Mr Xerzani says, but it is not the role of the clergy to interfere in legislation, which should be defined by political institutions that include all ethnicities and religions.

5.2 PROMOTING DEMOCRATIC ISLAM IN FORMER ISIS STRONGHOLDS

After the liberation of former ISIS strongholds and the progressive integration of these areas into the AANES, the task of promoting a new version of Islam has become particularly important. In many of these regions, there was previously broad support for ISIS, and the AANES' vision of how Islam should be integrated into civil and political discourse is of course very distant from the perspective of conservative, often rural or tribal, Muslim communities in regions like Deir-ez-Zor.

As such, education programs were an immediate priority. As these regions were liberated, the Religion and Beliefs Office organized education programs for the Military Councils being newly established under the umbrella of the SDF. The Religion and Beliefs Office also addressed the broader population and organized seminars in Ain Issa, Tabqa and Raqqa, along with a group of three or four people from the local area. One would be a community figure or tribal leader, another a member of the respective Civil Council of the AANES. Two or three seminars were delivered in each location, with the aim of explaining the AANES' new vision of Islam and engaging with local populations.

Sheikh Qadri participated in these programs across regions liberated from ISIS' rule. He emphasizes the importance of arguing on the basis of the Quran, in order to reach ISIS' adherents and other religious believers who may be at risk of radicalization, saying "It's important to base the lesson on quotations from the Islam and to present it in a positive way, and then they will listen. If you go there and say 'you are a murderer, you are blood-letters,' of course they won't listen".

5.3 FUTURE PERSPECTIVES: PROSPECTS FOR OUTREACH IN NEWLY-LIBERATED AREAS

But as Sheikh Qadri points out, such programs have until now lacked the consistent and systematic approach needed to make real inroads. For example, Sheikh Qadri and other religious leaders worked together to deliver seminars in Ain Issa Camp, home to IDPs and former ISIS affiliates. When a woman expressed her interest in the seminars delivered in the camp, Sheikh Qadri says, she would be threatened by more radical female inmates. In order for such seminars to be successful, it is necessary for more radicalized individuals to be sorted out from the general population – or for less-radicalized individuals to be removed to another location.

Finally, it is worth noting that such programs need considerable amounts of time to be effective, with Sheikh Qadri saying that **it will take at least one or two years' continuous effort to produce a change in the mindsets of individuals who subscribed to ISIS' ideology.** Until now, Turkish attacks, Coronavirus and a general lack of stability and funding have prevented the wider implementation of such programs. For example, the program in Ain Issa Camp was brought to an abrupt halt by the Turkish invasion in October 2019, allowing ISIS affiliates to escape from the camp.

Efforts at promoting 'Democratic Islam' in these regions will require security, stability, and guarantees against further military operations against NES. Moreover, such efforts must also occur alongside the supervised reintegration into society of low-level, and ultimately even high-ranking, ISIS affiliates. If the AANES is able to win the support of Arab tribes with this and other concessions, it will be in a stronger position to transform the religious culture in former ISIS strongholds in the long-run, as the Religion and Beliefs Office and the Religious Assembly seek to promote dialogue and understanding between the different religions practiced in NES.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This report has offered an overview of how the enduring legacy and impact of ISIS' rule and ideology is approached in NES. Despite harsh material conditions – overcrowding in detention facilities, political instability due to regular military incursions by the Turkish state, sleeper cells attacks by ISIS and other actors, and the continued political and economic isolation of the region – several organizations linked to the AANES are attempting to address this problem by offering education programs, discussion sessions and other

activities to former ISIS affiliates. The AANES' own program of justice reform is also intended to break the cycle of violence and retribution which contributed to ISIS' rise.

Overcoming ISIS' ideological legacy is a slow, long-term process where the outcomes will always be uncertain, and never complete. Those working in rehabilitation programs have mentioned both cases of former ISIS affiliates who started working with the AANES after serving their sentences, and others who were caught reengaging with ISIS after their release. Though there are anecdotal instances of successful reintegration of some individuals into society, it is extremely difficult to evaluate at this point how successful the methods and approaches being trialed by AANES will prove in the long-term.

Though there are shortcomings, the approach taken by these actors is grounded on the political principles which also characterize the AANES' political vision: decentralized governance, cultural diversity and secularism combined with the protection of religious minorities and promotion of gender equality. This conclusion will highlight several positive aspects of this approach, indicate the difficulties which remain, and suggest steps which the international community can take to assist AANES in coping with this enormous challenge.

6.1 ACHIEVEMENTS

Initiatives developed by the AANES and highlighted in this report have several positive characteristics which should be highlighted and expanded upon in future deradicalization efforts. If AANES is able to continue working along these lines, it stands the best chance possible of not repeating the misguided policies of regional and international actors which led to the rise of terror groups such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS:

- 1) Developing specific programs targeting radicalized youth in order to avoid the rise of a new generation of ISIS, teaching them tolerant & democratic behavior and approaching them as victims rather than culprits.
- 2) Favoring reconciliation over retribution when it comes to adult ISIS captives, with a perspective towards community-building and long-term social reconciliation.
- 3) Developing political structures that include all religious and ethnic groups living in the region, in order not to reproduce cleavages such as the marginalization of Sunni Arabs which enabled the rise of ISIS.

- 4) Having Islamic faith leaders play a key role in promoting a religious culture which encourages dialogue between groups of different faiths and which reconciles democratic values and Islam, instead of stigmatizing Islam and Muslims as inherently violent in nature.
- 5) Focusing on female ISIS affiliates as a key group marginalized by ISIS, but with the ability to influence community religious practices and break the generational cycle of Islamist violence, and having women-led organizations play the leading role in engaging with these women.

6.2 CHALLENGES

Yet all of these initiatives face significant shortcomings, namely:

- 1) There is a lack of capacity to offer adequate security and humanitarian conditions in prisons and camps holding ISIS affiliates – both to prevent breakouts, and to create the living conditions in which a change of mindset becomes possible. In the past, radical Islamists have been crowded together in under-resourced prisons. This has proven fatal, giving them time to network, radicalize other inmates and organize breakouts.⁷⁷ There is a need not only to improve the hosting facilities, but also to build separate detention centers for the most radical elements in order to prevent them from influencing others. The extension which is planned for Hol Camp and the transfers to Roj are a step in the right direction.
- 2) In the prisons and camps, rehabilitation initiatives lack a systematic approach which would allow case-by-case assessments and follow-ups. As pointed out earlier in this report, the diversity of motivations and extent of radicalization among ISIS affiliates must be addressed adequately, in order to sort out the most radical elements, but also to offer support to those who want to move away from the organization. Such holistic rehabilitation programs are costly and require expertise and a calm, stable working environment.
- 3) The thousands of third-country nationals in the camps and prisons still constitute a major unsolved challenge. Uncertainty over their fate renders their effective integration into any rehabilitation program extremely difficult.

⁷⁷ It is estimated that “17 of the 25 most important Islamic State leaders running the war in Iraq and Syria spent time in US prisons between 2004 and 2011. Some were transferred from American custody to Iraqi prisons, where a series of jailbreaks in the last several years allowed many senior leaders to escape and rejoin the insurgent ranks.”

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/dec/11/sp-isis-the-inside-story>

6.3 PROPOSALS

There are therefore several steps that the international community can take in order to address the legacy of ISIS' ideology in NES and prevent the group from regaining strength with disastrous security consequences not only for the region, but for the whole world.

- 1) The international community should provide material support in order to develop new detention facilities and rehabilitation centers, especially in order to separate the most radical ISIS supporters from the rest.
- 2) The international community can offer psychological, social, and legal expertise to existing rehabilitation initiatives, while also allowing local actors to continue taking the lead in rehabilitation efforts.
- 3) In order to resolve the question of third-country nationals held in prisons and camps, the international community should engage with and support the AANES' efforts to bring foreign ISIS suspects to justice in its own court system, which has tried thousands of Syrians to date.
- 4) The region is facing huge economic difficulties, and the political and economic isolation suffered by NES both reinforces a wider crisis and shrinks the resources available for the improvement of prisons and camps. The international community must therefore ensure that NES can trade with the outside world. For example, the US could exert pressure on Iraq to open the Yaroubiah crossing to trade with NES, and also ensure NES is exempted from sanctions targeting the Assad Government by granting it a waiver to trade its oil reserves outside Syria.
- 5) New democratic institutions are still in the process of being built up in NES, and the political and security situation remains challenging, especially in ISIS' former strongholds such as Deir-ez-Zor. The international community must support endeavors toward political stability in the region. For example, the US should follow the AANES' lead and encourage Arab communities' participation in the AANES, rather than focusing solely on bringing rival Kurdish parties to the negotiating table.
- 6) In particular, previous military invasions by Turkey have severely affected NES' capacity to detain, let alone rehabilitate, ISIS affiliates. The international community, and specifically NATO members, can prevent Turkey from conducting further attacks through mechanisms including the pre-emptive threat of financial sanctions.

If these proposals are followed by the US and other international actors, there is no reason why the Coalition's successful military partnership with the SDF cannot be replicated in a second, equally successful struggle against ISIS' mentality – taking place on the 'hidden battlefields' of schoolrooms, discussion groups and rehabilitation programs across NES.

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**AUTHORS: TÎRÊJ FATMA AND LISA MICHEL
COVER PHOTOGRAPH: TÎRÊJ FATMA**

**ROJAVA INFORMATION CENTER
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**WWW.ROJAVAINFORMATIONCENTER.COM
PRESS@ROJAVAIC.COM
TEL +963 996 827 521**



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