ISIS AND THE POTENTIAL FOR DEFECTION IN SYRIA

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Rojava Center for Strategic Studies

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Introduction

ISIS represents a new model emerging from the crises resulting from the failure of the nation-state project that emerged at the beginning of the 21st century. This project, which sometimes aligned with liberalism and at other times with a form of socialism, failed to create a creative and new civilizational pattern for the Middle Eastern countries. Instead, it veered towards despotism and attempted to assimilate other cultures into a nationalist ideology that sought to expand into the territories of neighboring states. This is evident from the human rights record, the negative nature of relations, and the low levels of development, prosperity, and transparency in nation-states such as Turkey, the Arab states, Israel, and Iran.

This project also built on the failure of the theocratic state (*1), exemplified by the Ottoman Empire, which caused significant crises for the peoples it dominated due to European debts (1↓) and the increasing dominance of feudal lords. This led to growing corruption among officials and the oppression of the poor.

Most societies in the Middle East continue to suffer from the crises of both projects, and the bloody conflict between supporters of these projects has exacerbated crises in the region (2↓). The situation became even more severe with the attempted fusion of these two projects, leading to the emergence of ISIS. The group's embryonic phase began during the "Faith Campaign" launched by the former Iraqi regime in the 1990s, continuing until its fall in 2003. This period saw a merger between Ba'athist nationalist thought and jihadist Salafism as a new strategy to confront its enemies—both the populations it had harmed, Western countries interested in its geopolitical position, and neighboring regional states with differing ideologies.

Since ISIS is a product of these crises, every behavior, activity, and policy stemming from it is a crisis in itself, exacerbating its internal situation. This has led to the activation of the theory of *"disagreement leading to division, then discord and enmity, and finally accusations of takfir."* The initial steps of this process appear to be taking shape in its Syrian branch.

The theory of "disagreement leading to division, then discord and enmity, and finally accusations of takfir" is a common phenomenon in the history of political Islamic movements, particularly since the assassination of Caliph Uthman ibn Affan (3↓). Similar to what occurred with the followers of Judaism and Christianity, the political ambitions of Muslim leaders have fragmented Islamic political doctrine into dozens of sects, groups, and parties (4↓). These are now metaphorically referred to as political Islam movements or organizations, estimated to number over a hundred, representing various sects and schools of thought. Each organization has its own ideology formulated by its leaders who claim to be the "saved sect." Due to the numerous legal arguments and pretexts among them to validate their ideologies, demagogy

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*1 Theocracy is a political doctrine that interprets the establishment of the state on a religious and ideological basis, asserting that authority comes from God. It posits that kings are chosen directly or indirectly by God, a theory known as the "divine right" or "divine mandate." The term "theocracy" is a Greek compound of "theo," meaning religious, and "kratis," meaning rule. The concept is ancient, recognized by the ancient Egyptians and others, and it flourished among Christian states in Europe during the Middle Ages. By its nature, theocracy contradicts democratic doctrines, which view the formation of the state as based on a social contract, where its legitimacy arises from the will of the people.
Political Encyclopedia; The Concept of Theocracy.

(*²), hypocrisy (*³), justifications, and violence have become tools for seducing and attracting followers.

These dynamics are evident in the ideological, political, and security crises currently facing Syria and Iraq, as seen in the fragmentation of the Salafist jihadist movement into groups such as Al-Qaeda, the Al-Qaeda branch in the land of the two rivers, the Islamic State, Jabhat al-Nusra, and Harakat Hurras al-Din, among others.

For ISIS, the topic of our research, it represents another link in this chain of splits, including its break from Al-Qaeda and its internal divisions following its defeat in Baghouz in 2019. During the period when the organization was relatively strong, there were reports in 2016 from defectors about internal disagreements concerning the takfiri fatwas of some of the organization's extremist jurists. These jurists had adopted the views of Saudi Sheikh Ahmad bin Omar Al-Hazmi, who was extreme in declaring the inhabitants of the lands of disbelief (*⁴) as infidels, including those who claimed ignorance or were excused for unintentional violations of Islamic law. These individuals were referred to as "Al-Hazmis (5↓)".

It is said that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi eliminated the Al-Hazmis from the ranks of the organization. There are also unconfirmed reports that those who managed to escape joined the so-called "Jund Allah" (the strict Azerbaijani Salafi group) believed to be based near the mountains of Latakia near the Idlib governorate border (6↓).

This situation, along with other factors that will be discussed later, indicates that ISIS is susceptible to the phenomenon of "disagreement leading to division, discord, enmity, and finally accusations of takfir." This forms the main hypothesis of the research, which will be used to determine its indicators and analyze its factors to develop an understanding of the potential for a leadership fracture within ISIS in Syria and Iraq.

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*² Demagogy: The term "demagogy" comes from ancient Greek, composed of two parts: "demos," meaning people, and "gogia," meaning leadership. Thus, demagogy is a strategy to persuade others by appealing to their fears and preconceived notions through emotional speeches and propaganda, often using nationalistic and populist themes to stir the emotions of the masses. According to the prevailing definition today, it refers to a set of techniques, speeches, maneuvers, and political tricks used by politicians to entice the public or masses with false or deceptive promises. While it may appear to be for the benefit of the people, it is often used to gain power.
— Political Encyclopedia; Demagogy
*³ Hypocrisy: Linguistically, hypocrisy is the act of pretending to be different from what one truly is. It is derived from the word "vision," implying performing actions to be seen by others, making one's deeds for their sake. To hypocritically show off to people means to be deceitful, displaying a facade that contradicts one's true self.
"Hypocrisy: It is the act of a person pretending to possess virtues that they do not have. The hypocrite is the deceiver whose outward appearance differs from their inward reality. It is said that hypocrisy involves abandoning sincerity in one's actions by considering others besides God in those actions" (Jurjani's Definitions).
— Birzeit University Dictionary; Hypocrisy.
The tendency for justification is considered by psychoanalysts as an unconscious defensive mechanism that emerges when an individual faces their conscience or a situation of accountability, or when explaining their behavior or shortcomings, offering excuses and justifications.
*⁴ According to ISIS's general concept, a land of disbelief (Dar al-Kufr) is any area not under the authority of the organization and its Sharia. Anyone who remains there is considered an infidel, even if they are Muslim, according to the organization's ideology.

To gain insights into this issue, it is beneficial to revisit the political history of the region and observe the impact of the geopolitical situation on the power struggle over the geography of the Levant and Mesopotamia, which often appear to be in political discord. In contemporary history, these regions were divided into Syria and Iraq under the well-known Sykes-Picot Agreement. Northeastern Syria, which is a significant part of Mesopotamia, was annexed to the Syrian state. This state failed or was unwilling to integrate it politically and culturally with the Levant, instead treating it as a colony governed by a military-security ruler behind the facade of local administration institutions. Most of its resources were diverted to develop the part of the Levant under its control.

Strategically, it can be assumed that whoever dominates northern and eastern Syria will ensure their dominance over Syria and Iraq. This is clearly observed in the American strategy for the region. Interestingly, ISIS also shows concern for this matter, and there are indications that Iranians, Russians, and Turks have relatively belatedly become aware of this strategy.

Historically, most attempts by kings, emperors, caliphs, sultans, and presidents to create a sustainable voluntary political unity between the Levant and Mesopotamia, to the level of a single nation, have failed due to the unique cultural, social, and political characteristics of each region. Many historical examples illustrate this point. For instance, the establishment and construction of Baghdad and its transformation into a power center during the Abbasid era were efforts to distinguish themselves from their Umayyad rivals who had taken Damascus as their stronghold. Many other historical events reflect this reality.

In contemporary history, the Hashemites attempted to establish a state encompassing the Levant and Mesopotamia under their crown following the success of the Great Arab Revolt against the Ottoman occupation. However, they failed. The analyses often focused on the external factors, such as the colonial ambitions of France and Britain in Syria and Iraq, while neglecting the internal factors behind this failure.

Similarly, the Arab Socialist Baath Party, after taking power in both Damascus and Baghdad, sought to unify the regions under a single Arab nation but failed, leading to mutual hostility and the split of the Baath Party into two conflicting factions in Syria and Iraq. This was despite the temporary and relative success of the unity project between nationalists in Syria and Egypt.

Al-Qaeda, through the ideology of the Islamic State, attempted in 2013 to create a relative political unity between the regions by merging the Salafi organizations in Syria and Iraq, namely Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq, into a single organization under the name "The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant" (later abbreviated to ISIS). However, the first step failed when the Iraqi branch imposed their leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, as the caliph of this state, leading to protests and the defection of Jabhat al-Nusra, which withdrew to its strongholds in the Levant (7↓). This split evolved into a rift and hostility between the new organization and its parent, Al-Qaeda, reaching the level of mutual excommunication (8↓).

Jabhat al-Nusra, after losing its strongholds in central and southern Syria and retreating to northwestern Syria due to a deal struck between the Sochi and Astana quartet (Turkey, Russia, Iran, and the Syrian regime), and failing to resolve its disputes with the Salafi group Jaysh al-Islam led by the Alloush family in Ghouta, adopted a pragmatic defensive policy. This included appeasing the West, allying with Turkish forces, and formally splitting from Al-Qaeda in July 2016 by rebranding itself as Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham. Meanwhile, Hurras al-Din, which split from it, became the Syrian branch of Al-Qaeda, leading to a crowded and conflicted landscape of Salafi organizations in northwestern Syria.

As for the status of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, information remains scarce. However, the preference of most Iraqi ISIS leaders to reside in northwestern Syria after their defeat suggests that the security environment in Sunni-dominated Iraqi regions is too unstable for them. This can be considered an indicator of the growing activity of Al-Qaeda in these areas.

The rapid pace of internal splits within the Salafi jihadist movement between Syria and Iraq is clearly evident (9↓). This observation brings us back to the hypothesis that the efforts to create a sustainable voluntary political unity between the Levant and Mesopotamia, within a single nation, have failed. It seems that such unity might never be achieved except in the form of a democratic confederation. This implies the potential for a split within ISIS between its Syrian and Iraqi cadres. Consequently, this could lead to the emergence of a separate Syrian organization and an Iraqi one, especially given the existence of what resembles an infrastructure in both regions that does not directly adhere to the central leadership of the organization.

There have been various opinions regarding the occurrence of splits within ISIS for numerous reasons. However, the significance of this research lies in its focus on the potential for increased independence of the Syrian branch of ISIS, currently managed under the name "Blessed Land Office (*[5])(10↓)," which oversees the so-called Wilayah al-Sham, from the Iraqi branch managed under the name "Land of the Two Rivers Office (*[6])," which oversees the so-called Wilayah al-Iraq. This hypothesis is based on a range of indicators, factors, and information from open sources and some interviews conducted with ISIS members in 2019.

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*[5] Security Council; Thirty-second report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2610 (2021) concerning the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) and Al-Qaeda and associated individuals and entities; S/2023/549; 25 July 2023; p. 15.

*[6] To facilitate the management of its combat and organizational activities, ISIS established a network of offices representing regional administrations responsible for the so-called "wilayas" (provinces). These offices are connected to what is referred to as the Administration of Distant Wilayas, also known as the General Administration of Wilayas. These offices include:
- The Office of the Wilayah of Al-Sham, also called the Office of the Blessed Land, which oversees most of the other offices and manages the regions of Al-Sham (Syria), Lebanon, and their neighboring countries.
- The Office of Al-Siddiq, which supervises Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Iran, Tajikistan, and others.
- The Office of Al-Furqan, located in Nigeria, which supervises the Sahel, the Sahara, the Lake Chad Basin, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon.
- The Office of Al-Farouq, which supervises Turkey.
- The Office of the Wilayah of Iraq (Office of the Land of the Two Rivers), which supervises Iraq.

The research will employ a descriptive-analytical methodology, supported by inferential methods, to reach conclusions that support the hypothesis and predict the future of the organization. The study will systematically and hierarchically focus on the new operational status of the organization, its organizational structure, and its security doctrine, with a special emphasis on security events related to its conspiratorial operations. This will lay the groundwork for the second part of the research, which will involve categorizing and analyzing numerous indicators and evidence of internal division, as well as factors that enhance the potential for splits, based on related observations and opinions.

Based on this analysis, the third section of the research will be divided into two parts. The first will address the organization's expected policy response to its internal crisis through efforts to mend internal fractures. The second part will explore the responses of local institutions and communities to the organization, considering it both as a crisis in itself and as a source of regional crises. This will involve examining local defensive policies as challenges that threaten the organization's survival. The conclusion of the research will present a summary, key findings, and preliminary recommendations.

➤ Field Situation of ISIS: A General Overview

ISIS capitalized on the political and economic crisis, as well as the escalating sectarian divisions that plagued Syria and Iraq during its formative phase. The group's advantage was further enhanced by the local communities' lack of self-defense mechanisms after state regimes abandoned them, having previously stripped them of these means to consolidate their own authoritarian control over these communities. ISIS adopted extreme and violent interpretations of religious rulings, eliminating tolerance and excessively interpreting and applying these rulings to a level of brutality.

The organization treated local communities as an occupying force, unleashing the aggressive tendencies of its members through fatwas (*[7]) declaring anyone outside its ideological boundaries as infidels. This resulted in horrific atrocities and massacres, with executions filmed in ways that contradicted the moral claims of Muslims in war. However, ISIS soon faced devastating blows in Syria and Iraq from local forces backed by the Global Coalition to Defeat Terrorism, culminating in its field defeat at its last stronghold in Baghouz in 2019.

Despite numerous attempts to launch coordinated attacks on key security centers in Syria and Iraq and establishing a "virtual caliphate" (11↓) on the internet and social media along with its covert field activities, ISIS failed to create a secure environment that would allow it to regroup and relaunch. Its key leaders were killed, severely injured, or captured. By 2023, the activities

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*[7] In particular, ISIS formulated its own concept of takfir (excommunication), for example: anyone who does not declare as infidel those whom the organization declares as infidel is themselves an infidel. Consequently, it excommunicates other jihadist organizations that have their own takfiri methodology, including Al-Qaeda. It also excommunicates those who live in the land of disbelief (i.e., countries not ruled by the organization), those who plead ignorance, those who do not resist infidel regimes and assist the organization in its war, those involved in democracy and those who associate with supporters of democracy, and those who do not pledge allegiance to the caliphs appointed by the organization.

of its covert cells had significantly decreased (*8), losing the offensive initiative, which weakened the execution of its "attrition and empowerment (*9)" strategy declared after its defeat.

Moreover, ISIS failed to rescue its prominent surrendering and detained members, leading to the deaths of dozens in its failed attack on Ghuwayran prison in Hasakah in early 2022 and its repeated attempts to dominate Al-Hol camp. Its supporters were also unable to carry out global terrorist operations, and its cells were being pursued almost daily in Syria and Iraq, resulting in arrests or eliminations of the targeted individuals. The attractiveness of its recruitment ideology began to wane as local communities increasingly wanted to close this chapter, focusing on addressing drought and high living costs, and protecting themselves from futile ideological wars. One such recent attempt was by a group led by Ibrahim al-Hafl to establish an emirate in the eastern countryside of Deir Al-Zor in early September 2023, with a Baathist-ISIS character, in areas traditionally active for ISIS, like Dhiban, Al-Basira, Al-Shuhail, Hawija, and Al-Tayana. In an audio recording, Ibrahim called on the Global Coalition to intervene on his behalf against the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) (12↓). Simultaneously, his brother Musab al-Hafl flew from Doha to Erbil Airport, seemingly to coordinate efforts with Turkish intelligence, Barzani's intelligence service (Parastin) (*10), and Qatari intelligence (13↓) to support Ibrahim's venture and pressure the Global Coalition. However, the Coalition's response was to insist on continued support for the SDF as a strategic partner against ISIS mercenaries.

Notably, Ibrahim al-Hafl had pledged allegiance to ISIS during its occupation of the Deir Al-Zor countryside but claimed to have abandoned the group after its defeat. The chaos caused by his actions, while under house arrest in the Yaafour area of Damascus (14↓), further indicated the Syrian regime's involvement.

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*8 A report issued by the United Nations Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team provides another interpretation of this matter, stating, "... In the assessment of many Member States, the decrease in the group's activity is both imposed on it and a deliberate action. The group has adapted its strategy and exercised caution by choosing to engage in battles that are likely to result in limited losses, while at the same time rebuilding and recruiting in camps and vulnerable local communities..."

*9 Attrition Warfare**: The goal is to inflict pain on the enemy, provoke them, harm them, and terrorize them, or to free prisoners, even if the enemy is not defeated. On the other hand, **Empowerment Warfare** aims to establish control over the targeted area of combat. For more on the concepts of attrition and empowerment warfare among supporters of extremist groups, refer to the book: "Standing with the Fruits of Jihad" by Abu Muhammad Asim bin Muhammad bin Tahir al-Barqawi; published by Al-Maktaba Al-Shamela Al-Dhahabiya; no edition number or date. You can view the relevant pages of the book on this topic at the Islamic Books Collection website at the link:
https://ketabonline.com/ar/books/28048/read?part=14&page=41&index=4826042
EuphratesPost; Sheikh Ibrahim Al-Hafl, Sheikh of the Al-Akidat tribe, calls on the International Coalition to form a Military Leadership Council; published on: 2023.08.31; link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YXiuADzJMmg

*10 A recent audio leak from the last week of September 2023 features one of the leaders of the Kurdish National Council (Ibrahim Bro), who is reportedly under the influence of Turkish intelligence and the Peshmerga, according to many who know him. He discusses the negative stance of the Prime Minister of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (Masrour Barzani) toward the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the council's request to play a role in the Deir Al-Zor crisis, while portraying the SDF as not representative of the region's constituents. The audio leak can be listened to at the following link: https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1013265563339707

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*Ibrahim Al-Hafl during the announcement of
his allegiance to the mercenaries of ISIS (15↓)*

This year, the American forces, with intelligence support from the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), managed to kill a senior ISIS operative named Abdul Hadi Mahmoud Al-Haj in the countryside of Jarabulus, which is under Turkish occupation. He was accused of planning attacks in the Middle East and Europe, including the kidnapping of foreign officials. At the same time, reports emerged from the occupied areas about the killing of the general security officer for the province of Sham and the first deputy to the Wilayat al-Sham, Ibrahim Al-Maan (Ibrahim Sheikh Moussa), during the same American operation that took place in the village of Suwayda, which is part of the Ghandora district in the Jarabulus countryside. It is worth noting that this area is under the control of the "Saqour al-Sham" Syrian mercenaries loyal to the Turkish occupation army, who are accused of harboring ISIS leaders.

In September 2023, the Global Coalition forces arrested the ISIS operations officer "Abu Hillel Al-Fidani" in the village of Um Jlood in the occupied countryside of Serê Kaniyê/Ras al-Ain. Along with him, two other leaders, who were officials in the "Blessed Land Office" (the Syrian branch of ISIS), were also detained. They were handed over to the SDF according to a statement issued by their media center (16↓).

On the other hand, the Turkish occupation army and its mercenaries continue to obstruct the efforts of the SDF in countering ISIS attacks, while the Syrian regime and its allies also hinder these efforts. In the Al-Hol camp, the foreign women's sector continues to cling to the extremist ideology implanted by the organization, still believing in the delusions of rebuilding the organization's state. According to reports from the Al-Hol camp, teenage boys are being forcibly married to foreign women under the pretext of having children who will inherit the organization's ideas. Attempts to escape persist, and the forces tasked with guarding and protecting the camp are trying to manage the situation there.

At the same time, Iraqis who wish to leave are being relocated to safe camps in the Nineveh Governorate in Iraq. Additionally, ISIS cells are attempting to dig tunnels between the camp's sectors on one hand and between the camp and the outside on the other (17↓). They are also

securing hideouts and smuggling weapons and communication equipment either through tunnels or through intermediaries. This information is based on security reports issued following operations conducted by the camp Protection Forces, Counter-Terrorism Units, and Asayish forces within the camp from time to time.

There have been reports, though not confirmed with certainty, suggesting that Abu Hafs Al-Qurashi has taken over the leadership of the organization following the death of his predecessor in Jindires last April.

According to the channel "Expose the Worshippers of al-Baghdadi and al-Hashimi," Abu Hafs al-Qurashi al-Hashimi is the new leader of ISIS after the death of Abu al-Husayn al-Qurashi al-Hashimi in Jindires in April 2023. The channel believes that Abu Hafs is the same person as Abu al-Muthanna al-Janubi and Abu Khadijah al-Iraqi, and that his real name is Abdullah Maki Mislah al-Rifa'i, who is described as the "Sinjar Executioner" and one of the officials responsible for the atrocities committed against the Yazidis. He is a military figure and a dangerous bomb maker. According to a UN report (*), he "supervised the Iraqi-Syrian region alongside the (Land of the Two Rivers) regional office. His role within ISIS has grown in importance."

(*) Security Council; the thirty-second report submitted by the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team pursuant to Resolution 2610 (2021) concerning the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) and Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities; S/2023/549; July 25, 2023; p.14.

The organization is taking advantage of Idlib's transformation into a stronghold for Salafists and the diminishing influence of the Muslim Brotherhood there, along with the increase in its population to around three million due to the large displacement from within Syria. This region also serves as a safe gateway to and from Turkey according to international reports (*[11])(18↓).

Currently, many of the organization's leaders and members find in the areas occupied by the Turkish army and the Syrian desert under the control of the Syrian regime and its Iranian ally a safe environment for their activities. This area serves as a base for planning and carrying out attacks, which appear to be primarily focused on northeastern Syria.

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*[11] Twenty-fifth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2368 (2017) concerning the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) and Al-Qaeda and associated individuals and entities; S/2020/53; 20 January 2020; pp. 19-20.
Twenty-seventh report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2368 (2017) concerning the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) and Al-Qaeda and associated individuals and entities; S/2021/68; 3 February 2021; p. 7.

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5.أبو سارة العراقي
تم قتله على طريق
"قاح- دير حسان"
في ريف إدلب
بمحاذاة الحدود
التركية
بتاريخ 24شباط
2023م.

4.أبو الحسين
القرشي الهاشمي
تم قتله في بلدة
جنديرس في إقليم
عفرين المحتل
بتاريخ
30 نيسان عام
2023م

3.أبو الحسن
الهاشمي القرشي
تم قتله في بلدة جاسم
بريف درعا الشمالي
الغربي
بتاريخ
16 تشرين الأول
عام 2022م

2.أبو إبراهيم
الهاشمي القرشي
تم قتله في قرية أطمة
في ريف إدلب
الشمالي
بتاريخ
3 شباط 2022م

1.أبو بكر البغدادي
تم قتله في قرية
باريشا بريف إدلب
الشمالي
بتاريخ
27 تشرين الأول
2019م

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<div dir="rtl">

يلاحظ أن معظم القتلى سقطوا على امتداد خط عرض واحد تقريباً (باريشا- أطمة- قاح- جنديرس) وبمحاذاة الحدود التركية. وهي منطقة جبلية خاضعة لهيئة تحرير الشام (جبهة النصرة) ومحمية من قبل جيش الاحتلال التركي، وتنشط فيها جماعات موالية للقاعدة.

هناك اعتقاد كبير بأن أبو الحسين القرشي الهاشمي هو نفسه أبو سارة العراقي (علي جاسم سلمان الجبوري). اعتبره تقرير فريق الدعم التحليلي ورصد الجزاءات الأممي "زعيم الظل للتنظيم ويؤثر في استراتيجيته، وكان يقوم بدور رئيسي في تعيين الأفراد بما في ذلك الزعيمان السابقان لداعش، وكان يدير العمليات الخارجية وشؤون التمويل" ومدير أفرع تنظيم داعش الخارجية، تولى مسؤولية مكتب الولايات البعيدة بالتنظيم، والمسؤول عن مجمل أفرع التنظيم بدول العالم، والمنسق بينها وبين القيادة المركزية

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In Iraq, most of ISIS's activity has become confined to the crescent extending from Anbar to the mountainous region separating the administrative borders of the Kurdistan Regional Government and the Iraqi government. It appears that the group has lost the support of much of the Sunni community in Iraq due to pressures from Al-Qaeda, the Popular Mobilization Forces (Hashd al-Shaabi), and the suffering it has caused to the Sunni population in Iraq.

Generally, based on field data in Syria, ISIS elements and leaders are active in a crescent extending from the northern countryside of Idlib, through the Jebel Bashri area in the southeastern countryside of Raqqa, and the desert region, especially the mountainous and desert area between Al-Sukhnah and Palmyra, ending in Daraa. This region is characterized by its rugged terrain, numerous mountains, deep limestone caves, and frequent dust storms that obscure visibility and erase traces of the group's movements, in addition to the tunnels and hideouts they have built. It provides an ideal military geography for the group's presence and constitutes about one-third of Syria's area.

In Iraq, ISIS is strongly present in the area stretching from the Anbar desert, Salah al-Din, northern Baghdad (Tarmiya), Diyala, Kirkuk, and southern Mosul. Notably, in the Hamrin Mountains south of Kirkuk and northeastern Diyala, where it is believed that most of the ISIS

branch leaders in Iraq are located (*[12])(19↓), the region is also characterized by numerous mountains, valleys, and orchards.

The shortest distance between the two regions seems to form a preferred corridor for the group's leaders and members to cross between Syria and Iraq. Based on this, the area between Hasakah and Deir Al-Zor in Syria and the southwestern region of Mosul, as well as the area between the Syrian desert on the southeastern side of the Palmyra mountains and northwestern Anbar, can be considered the closest geographic routes. These north-south routes offer the most clandestine means of movement between Syria and Iraq. It is likely that the southern route, being shorter and relatively safer, is preferred for these transitions, potentially using tunnels for a more secure passage.

A rough map of ISIS cell activity areas
in Syria and Iraq, and potential corridors between them

> ➤ **Indicators and Signs of Division Within ISIS**

The organization's abandonment of direct central leadership over its branches in various countries, due to geographic dispersion and security pressure from adversaries, has granted those branches greater autonomy in planning and execution. In the absence of oversight from senior organizational legislators, emerging scholars within these branches have wider latitude for ideological debates aligned with the ISIS's doctrine, which may lead to differing opinions regarding the ISISs past doctrinal failures in military, administrative, economic, and political domains, marking a potential first step toward division.

As for the ISIS in Syria and Iraq, the liberated area of eastern Euphrates has created a spatial division between leadership in both regions. The Syrian Democratic Forces and the International Coalition present obstacles to communication among these leaders. Concurrently,

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*[12] Security Council; Thirty-second report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2610 (2021) concerning the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) and Al-Qaeda and associated individuals and entities; S/2023/549; July 25, 2023; p. 14.

they are facing significant pressure from al-Qaeda and other Salafist groups along their western front in Syria and eastern front in Iraq. This situation compels the "Blessed Land Office," representing the Syrian branch of the ISIS, to operate more independently, with similar pressures on the Iraqi branch known as the "Land of the Two Rivers Office".

Reports from the UN's Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team highlight a form of division or administrative duality or operational independence within the ISIS regarding Syria and Iraq. This suggests the existence of two entities operating under the ISIS's banner. The insistence of Iraqi leaders on maintaining a presence in Syrian territory also indicates attempts to prevent the leadership of the "Blessed Land Office" from managing organizational operations and planning independently, which could further enhance its de facto autonomy. Any emerging organizational or ideological disputes could quickly lead to division and discord, especially given the prior jihadist climate in Greater Syria fostered by the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (20↓).

Overall, several indicators suggest the potential for divisions within the ISIS, which could soon become a source of contention and defection. Some of the most notable indicators include:

1. Previous attempts to stage a coup (21↓) against Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi by the legalists and zealous leaders from both Abu Ja'far al-Hatab (the Hazmi current), a member of the Shura Committee, and Abu Muhammad al-Furqan, who were both eliminated, plus al-Julani's defection from him at the onset of his rise, highlight instability within the ISIS.

2. The ISIS's inability to establish a national identity for its alleged state became evident when Syrian tribes did not respond to the ISIS's call for support during its retreat against the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), despite their coerced allegiance to it. Additionally, most of the regions in which the ISIS operates are characterized by tribal social structures, with the loyalty of members primarily directed towards tribal leaders within the ISIS; they follow their leaders wherever they go. The ISIS failed to comprehend the deeply-rooted tribal sentiment in the area, particularly after torturing, killing, and burning prisoners from the local population and desecrating their bodies. Tribal, ethnic, and national issues have been at the forefront of societal concerns in the Middle East throughout history, intensifying as the civility of the state hooding developed, such issues have spread and deepened (22↓).

3. By naming itself "the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria," the ISIS positions Iraq as a primary focus before Syria, indicating a hierarchy in priorities. This is reflected in the prohibition against Syrian elements assuming the caliphate within the ISIS (*13). Notably, both Abu Umar al-Baghdadi and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi previously sidelined Jordanians from leading their parent ISI (the Islamic State of Iraq) following the death of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in 2006. After the declaration of ISIS, there was a noticeable scarcity of news regarding Jordanian leaders (*14).

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*13 Iraqi Ba'athists comprised more than 60% of the leadership elements of ISIS, including Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi himself; most of them were from security and intelligence agencies, as well as formations known as Saddam's Fedayeen, the Republican Guard, and party members.Saba Kanji; The Role of the Ba'ath Party in ISIS Terrorism; Publisher: Al-Hewar Al-Mutamaddin; Date of Publication: March 16, 2019; Link: https://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=631257

*14 When al-Zarqawi established himself in the southern mountainous region of southern Kurdistan, with the assistance of Mullah Krekar, he attracted several Jordanian Salafists to his new organization, (Soldiers of Islam), who had left Afghanistan

The circumstance surrounding the killing of the ISIS's leader Abu al-Hassan al-Qurashi in the town of Jasim in northern Daraa—a region with interwoven sectarian and tribal ties between Syrian and Jordanian Arabs—by jihadist factions opposing the Syrian regime suggests that southern Syria presents an unsafe environment for the ISIS's leaders, unlike Idlib, where jihadists with diverse Turkish roots (Turkmen, Uyghurs, and Turks) (*[15])(23↓) and displaced Syrian Salafists exert control.

4. In an interview with some foreign members of the ISIS, it was confirmed that most of the leaders were Iraqis, who were deploying them and Syrian fighters to the front lines to engage in dangerous combat operations. Many complaints were made to the ISIS's leadership, but they went unaddressed. There is a video captured by a camera worn by an Iraqi ISIS leader, which was seized by the (SDF) after they managed to kill him. The footage shows his fighters fleeing and leaving him alone after he was injured (24↓) near the town of Hajin. This incident carries significant implications about the true nature of the relationship between the Syrian fighters and their Iraqi leaders.

5. The defection of thousands of elements from the ISIS is evident as many Syrians have ceased their activities and the tasks assigned to them by the ISIS, facilitated by tribal mediations with the (SDF) and through security settlements with the Syrian regime. Others have returned to the ranks of both Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra) and al-Qaeda, while some have engaged in mercenary activities on behalf of the Turkish occupation army. The conspiratorial operations launched against regions in northeastern Syria indicate precise coordination between Syrian cells of the ISIS and intelligence agencies affiliated with both the Turkish regime and the Syrian regime and its allies. This was clearly demonstrated in the attack on al-Sina'a prison in al-Ghuwayran neighborhood and the destabilization of the eastern Deir Al-Zor countryside. Such coordination is unwelcomed by the Iraqi branch due to its ideological

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after the fall of the Taliban regime. Among them were Raed Khreisat, known as Abu Abdulrahman al-Shami, Mahmoud Nasour, Mo'tasem Dradka, and Ibrahim Khreisat.

Dr. Azad Ahmed Ali; The Premises for the Emergence of ISIS as a Military and Ideological Force and Its Potential for Recurrence; a lecture presented at the International Forum on ISIS: Dimensions, Challenges, and Strategies for Confrontation held by NRLS in northeastern Syria in 2019.

*[15] Turkmen extremists are organized into militias such as Sultan Murad, Suleiman Shah, Fatih, and Melik Shah, most of whom hold Syrian citizenship and reside in northwestern Syria.

Uyghur extremists are organized in the Turkistan Islamic Party and originate from Xinjiang province in northwestern China, which the party refers to as East Turkistan. This group is banned in China, which fiercely combats it.

Turkish extremists are part of the "Gray Wolves" group, also known as the "Idealist Youth Movement," which is a far-right religious organization linked to the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) in Turkey. Established in the late 1960s, the group engaged in the political violence that swept Turkey in the 1970s, targeting leftist activists and ethnic minorities. German lawmakers assert that the organization espouses a "nationalist and racist ideology," as it fundamentally glorifies the Turkish people and seeks to reclaim their alleged historical glory. The group strongly supports the official narratives hostile to Armenian and Kurdish issues, having called in its publications for ethnic cleansing of these two peoples. It also fervently supports Turkey's expansion in its geographical surroundings.

For more about this organization, see: Dr. Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak & Dr. Jonathan Spyer; The Deep State in Turkey: Gray Wolves and the Syrian National Army; Translation and Publication: ASO for Studies; no edition number.

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animosity toward the Syrian regime (*16), which dates back to the era of the former Iraqi regime, owing to the conflict between the Ba'ath parties. Many influential Iraqi figures from that regime joined ISIS during its establishment phase.

6. The assassination of prominent Iraqi leaders of the ISIS in areas of Syria that were supposed to be secured by the Syrian branch (Blessed Land Office).

7. Most reports indicate that the cells that attacked al-Ghuwayran prison in 2021 were from Syria, with no recorded involvement from Iraqi elements. Security analysis indicates that it was likely that the escapees from the prison would be transferred to the Syrian desert, based on accounts from civilians along the route connecting Hasakah to the southern countryside of al-Shaddadi leading to Mount al-Bashari, where they reportedly received threats of decapitation if they impeded the movements of the ISIS or supported the (SDF). Moreover, fleeing to their strongholds in Iraq would be along Mount Sinjar, encountering the Sinjar Resistance Units and the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces.

8. The attempts by both Ahmad al-Khabil, known as Abu Khawla, and Ibrahim al-Hafl to establish their own emirate in the eastern Deir Al-Zor countryside are noteworthy. The former had communications with ISIS or was at least slack in confronting it, according to a dismissal statement issued by the (SDF) leadership (25↓) on August 28, 2023. This lethargy was evident during a gathering held by the ISIS's supporters in the town of al-Izbah on July 7, 2023, to support ISIS (26↓), which seems to have been a precursor to the second individual's move, who had pledged allegiance to the ISIS before its collapse. He attempted to garner support for his project through the Ankara-Arbil-Doha axis, with indirect blessings from the Syrian regime and its allies. Syrian ISIS cells attempted to exploit the security chaos caused by the mentioned individuals; however, Iraqi ISIS members did not respond to support their Syrian counterparts. The ISIS's leadership described the battles as "battles of ignorance." A dispute emerged among sympathizers on social media about whether to pledge allegiance to the new leader of the ISIS, "Abu Hafs al-Qurashi," or to "Ibrahim al-Hafl," who is viewed as a representative of so-called jihadists in Deir Al-Zor. This led supporters to launch the hashtag #Sheikh_Abu_Hafs_al-Qurashi_represents_me_and_no_one_else_does. (27↓)

9. There was a lack of synchronization and coordination between the ISIS's operations in the Syrian and Iraqi arenas.

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*16 The Syrian regime played a role in eliminating numerous individuals from jihadist organizations that operated against U.S. forces in Iraq following the fall of the Iraqi regime. This was achieved by providing precise intelligence to U.S. intelligence regarding al-Qaeda and extremist Sunni groups. A channel for intelligence sharing was established between the CIA and Syrian military intelligence, which had not communicated since the Gulf War. The information provided by Syrian military intelligence exceeded the CIA's expectations in both quantity and quality. It later became evident that the Syrian regime exploited this intelligence and, at times, actively assisted in directing jihadists from Syria and Lebanon to Iraq. This was presented as a kind of bargain with the Bush administration, allowing them to turn a blind eye to the regime's downfall in Damascus.

Flynt L. Leverett; Syrian Inheritance: Bashar's Trial by Fire; Translation: Dr. Imad Fouzi Shuaibi; First Edition/2005; Publisher: Arab Scientific Publishers/Beirut; p. 256.

> ### The Factors that Enhance the Potentiality for Internal Defection

Indicators of division undoubtedly stem from factors created by the circumstances following the ISIS's defeat and the dispersion of its leadership between Syria and Iraq. These factors appear to remain in a dormant state and may require a relatively long period before they begin to emerge and directly influence the deepening rift in the ISIS's leadership structure. The most notable of these factors include: low confidence, the reduction of central leadership, greater authority for subordinate leaderships, and the potentiality for defection of the Salafist jihadist movement.

1. Low Confidence:

There are several reasons that reinforce the low confidence within the ISIS, both among Iraqi leaders and members on one hand, and among the leaders themselves, both Iraqi and Syrian, on the other. Perhaps the most significant of these reasons are:

- The failure of the ISIS's leaders to maintain what is known as the Islamic Caliphate and their defeat in Baghouz, which caused thousands of the ISIS's families to be displaced in camps and rural areas, living under harsh conditions. This will negatively affect them from a doctrinal perspective, as they claimed that their successes and the establishment of their state occurred "by the grace and support of God." This could imply that their defeat and the collapse of their state are due to God's anger.

- The inability of the ISIS's leaders to confront the successes of the SDF effectively. Furthermore, the strategy of "fighting for revenge and empowerment" failed and turned into a process of exhausting what remains of the ISIS's faithful members and financial resources.

- Increasing doubts regarding the loyalty of the remaining members to ISIS leaders, alongside the ISIS's exposure to fatal security breaches. This suspicion is particularly evident among Syrian members who engaged in security settlements with the SDF through local tribal leaders in northern and eastern Syria, and with the Syrian regime via members of the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party in regime-controlled areas. Others returned to Al-Qaeda, while some turned to mercenary work for the Turkish occupation army, all of whom have an interest in undermining the organization. This factor is further heightened by the deaths of senior Iraqi leaders in Syrian areas, which were supposedly to be protected and supported mainly by Syrian ISIS members as part of what is called the office of the blessed land. This indicates significant intelligence penetration within the organization by its enemies in Syria. In this context, according to a researcher specializing in terrorism, Abu Muslim al-Iraqi, the head of the ISIS in Iraq, requested to halt communication with the ISIS's branch in Syria due to its breached security (28↓).

- The continued exclusion of Syrians from the first-tier leadership positions within the ISIS, considering Iraqi nationality as a primary condition for appointing the "leaders of the ISIS" and the central leadership of military and security councils. This is evident in the identities of most of the ISIS's leaders who were killed or arrested. According to reports from defectors from the

ISIS (*17), the so-called Abu Sara al-Iraqi was considered a key figure in the ISIS, refused to allow non-Iraqis to lead the group (29↓).

- The number of foreign fighters and leaders in the operational and ideological landscape of the organization has decreased significantly. Between 2013 and 2016, their numbers were estimated to be around 40,000 from 110 different countries (30↓). After 2019, their numbers continued to decline steadily, and many dispersed across Syria and Iraq. Although some of them caused problems for the organization, those who remain are seen as the most loyal to their ideology. They are particularly concerned about maintaining trust within the ISIS by intervening to bridge the gaps between conflicting elements and preventing the rise of regional identity and tribal sentiment among members and leaders. This is clearly evident in the positions of figures like Abu Omar al-Shishani, Abu Ubaidah al-Turki, and Turki bin Ali (the Bahraini), who have addressed the intellectual and organizational crises within the group. Even now, many foreign fighters in al-Hol camp insist on denying the ISIS's defeat, claiming that "its state is enduring and expanding," and they are associated with numerous purification and torture operations within the camp against those wishing to abandon the ISIS due to a loss of trust. Based on this situation, the combat arena in Syria or Iraq that new foreign fighters may prefer is one of the factors that could enhance the likelihood of defections from within the ISIS, noting that al-Baghdadi primarily confined them to the Sharia bodies while assigning most of the leadership of military, security, and intelligence councils to Iraqis.

2. Sub-leaders have Greater Powers

Most experiences confirm that extremist organizations, as they expand geographically and operationally, often fall into a phase of weakness due to the growth of internal problems and an increase in methodological and structural disputes (31↓), especially following the loss and absence of strong leaders within the ISIS. The necessity for ISIS to grant broader powers to its branch leadership does not stem from possessing traits of smart management but rather is a result of the considerable security pressures imposed on it by both the Syrian Democratic Forces and the Iraqi forces, which are strongly supported by the international coalition against terrorism. Most of its central leadership appears to be located in the northwest countryside of Idlib, near the Turkish border, situated far from the main battlefield and missionary activity in Syria and Iraq, as evidenced by the deaths of prominent leaders in this area.

According to a study published by the Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point, the success of operations aimed at killing and capturing senior leaders of the ISIS has resulted in a stronger decentralization of its leadership. The study states (32↓), "This weakening of the caliph's office has not only turned the Administration of Distant Provinces into arguably the most powerful institution within the Islamic State's Levant-based organization, it has also positioned the institution in a key role in the global management of the caliphate. With a weakening center and

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*17 There is a channel called "Exposing the Worshipers of al-Baghdadi and al-Hashimi" that broadcasts on the TamTam Messenger app. The operators claim to be defectors from the ISIS and share news and documents they obtain. According to observers, it is a channel supportive of al-Qaeda and hostile to ISIS, and it is considered the main source of information about the internal situation of the ISIS.

the strengthening of several provinces... if the Islamic State were to experience the kind of organizational splintering that al-Qaeda has suffered from, it would be catastrophic…".

On the other hand, this situation could lead to a relative defection in the ISIS's core combat doctrine due to differing definitions of the "near enemy" that all branches are supposed to combat together. It is important to note that during its early stages, the ISIS built its ideology and political-military structure based on the Iraqi geopolitical situation, which many Syrian and foreign elements do not fully understand. In Syria, the ISIS views the Syrian Democratic Forces as its main near enemy, and so far, no attacks have been recorded from the Syrian branch against the ISISs near enemy in the Iraqi arena, aside from a few attacks against groups affiliated with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard along the western bank of the Euphrates. The same applies to the Iraqi branch, unlike the situation that prevailed during the organization's geographic control over eastern Syria and western Iraq, where Syrian and Iraqi elements fought together in both arenas. Each branch is likely to adopt its own strategy to ensure its survival, which could lead to logistical challenges between Syria and Iraq.

The sub-leaders, based on tactical advantages or to strengthen its defensive policy, may be more open to allowing the return of individuals who had defected from the ISIS due to grievances suffered from former leaders, as well as those who express regret over the compromises they underwent, despite doubts about their loyalty. This has been observed through fighters arrested following the failed attack by the ISIS on the Ghuwayran prison in early 2022, as well as the activities of ISIS cells during the sabotage operations caused by both Ahmad Al-Khabil and Ibrahim al-Hafl in eastern Deir Al-Zor during August and September of 2023. This situation leads us to consider that the issue of loyalty doubts and the problem of intelligence infiltration within the ISIS will be a contributing factor to the growing conflict between the central leadership and the sub-leaders of the ISIS in Syria.

3. The Salafi Jihadist Movement's Potentiality for Defection (33↓)

The steady decline in the number of organizational leaders from operational, outreach, and media scenes will push local leaders in Syria and Iraq, who can present their legitimate lineage and the operational experience necessary to fill the gaps created by this decline, according to an international report (34↓); this momentum is fueled by the benefits, temptations, and worldly and eternal rewards enjoyed by those in the position of caliph. In addition to personal ambitions for glory and prestige, this is clearly evident in the issue of splintering within the jihadist movement (*18), characterized by relative competition among new leaders against their

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*18 The roots of the phenomenon of defection within political Islam movements can be traced back to the division of Islam into three conflicting currents, as noted by the thinker Ocalan. These currents include the authority stream represented by Muawiya ibn Abi Sufyan, the moderate centrist current embodied by Ali ibn Abi Talib, and the radical democratic current symbolized by the Khawarij. "These main currents have persisted since the triumph of Islam until the present day, manifesting under various names and differing conceptual frameworks. They have caused suffering in Middle Eastern societies through a recurring cycle that plays out excessively throughout their historical continuum, leading to devastating authoritarian wars, bloody sectarian conflicts, religious disputes, and serious ideological defections…". Abdullah Öcalan; Manifesto of Democratic Civilization: Volume Five / The Kurdish Issue and the Solution of Democratic Nation (In Defense of the Kurds Trapped Between the Jaws of Cultural Genocide); Translation: Zakho Shiar; Second Edition 2014; Publisher: Azadi Press; p. 104.

predecessors, showing themselves as superior and as the center around which the group should rally. Examples include the rivalry between Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and Osama bin Laden, the competition between Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and Ayman al-Zawahiri, and the contest between Abu Muhammad al-Julani and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. This dynamic enhances the appeal of the new leader, allowing them to build their own charisma, turning them into a role model to emulate. Some discontented militants dissatisfied with traditional leadership may lean toward the new leader to rectify what they perceive as a deviation in their ideology. The differences in jurisprudential debates about the concept of takfir and the legitimacy of actions that serve the organization—even if prohibited religiously—further fuel fragmentation within the groups. Prior to its fall, several members of the ISIS's Sharia Committee coalesced into factions (35↓), such as Abu Ja'far al-Hatab's wing (the Hazmi current), Abu Muhammad Furqan's wing, and Abu Bakr al-Qahtani and Turki bin Ali's wing, where most supporters of the first two wings were executed and others were subjected to repentance. Supporters remaining loyal to either of these wings providing ideological cover for the new leader might advance fragmentation into its practical phase, granted they can replicate Osama bin Laden's experience when he announced in 1998 the establishment of the "World Front for Jihad against Jews and Crusaders" and the formation of a new front conceptualized as the Jihad Front against the Rafidah and democracy.

On the other hand, there is a longing for a new jihadist leadership among new entrants into the violent jihadist ideology and those discontented with the current jihadist organizations such as al-Qaeda, ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra, and the Muslim Brotherhood, due to the calamities they have brought upon their sympathizers and their alliances with countries and powers considered traditional enemies according to the combat ideology of the Salafi jihadist movement. It is worth noting that the Syrian landscape is witnessing a division within the Salafi jihadist movement among four main organizations that are ideologically incompatible and concentrated in northwestern Syria: Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (Jabhat al-Nusra), al-Qaeda, the Sham Front (the Army of Islam), and ISIS. Undoubtedly, there are dozens of Salafis dissatisfied with this reality, and the emergence of a new figure mimicking iconic leaders could enhance the idea of a defection to form a new organization.

This factor is one of the most prominent forces that could exacerbate the fracture within the organizational and ideological structure, leading to a reformation of dissent and subsequently division. *"Disagreement in opinion leading to division, then discord and enmity, and finally accusations of takfir."*; this provides an effective means to mobilize former operatives, foster distrust, and weaken central leadership, aiming to establish a new organization with a new ideology and leadership, creating a "saved sect," and consequently giving rise to another crisis in the region that will bring new calamities to the world and Muslims.

➢ The Expected Policy for Reconciling Differences within the ISIS

There is no doubt that members of the ISIS central leadership somewhat recognize the potential fractures within the organization's ideological and leadership structures, given their experiences. Their current strategies in operational, advocacy, and media activities appear to stem primarily from a defensive policy aimed at maintaining organizational cohesion,

consolidating authority, and ensuring their own protection. Several factors somewhat support this policy, and if successfully implemented, can dampen the influences that encourage internal division. The most notable of these supporting factors include:

1. The ongoing operations of the organization's "Central Media Office," which strives to sustain the reality of the Caliphate (ISIS) in the virtual space through its publications and communication with followers. However, the media output of the ISIS has declined to 7% in early 2021, significantly lower than its levels in early 2016 (36↓), due to a global counter-campaign against it, the loss of most of its controlled territories, and the depletion of its human resources. Despite this, the media institution remains a crucial factor in portraying the organization as cohesive and enduring among its followers and sympathizers. Any weakness in this institution is mitigated by its ability to exploit the ineffective counter-propaganda, which is scattered among the conflicts of states and adversarial forces in the region. This is evident in the media directed by Turkey, Iran, the Syrian regime, Russia (*[19]), and various Syrian and Iraqi parties and factions, alongside the relatively inadequate local media response that is distant from the attention of international powers and lacks advanced support for the (SDF) and the autonomous administration in acquiring the necessary advanced resources to achieve this.

2. The common enemy to all internal factions within the organization, represented by democratic movements, Western countries, and the growing political ambitions of Shiites and other Sunni groups.

3. The rising discontent with living conditions due to feelings of injustice and increasing struggles to secure basic livelihood, attributing the responsibility for these issues to supposed enemies, while promoting the organization's agenda as the optimal solution to address these problems, based on its propaganda efforts (*[20]) and claims regarding this matter.

4. The existence of a generation made up of the remnants of the caliphate's cubs and the children of those killed, injured, and detained from the organization's ranks has embedded the ISIS's ideology in their mindset, making it difficult for them to detach from it due to the ongoing economic, political, and security crises in the region. Their desire for revenge can be easily

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*[19] "The media operations carried out by the Iranian, Russian, and Syrian regimes aim to incite hostility among the local population against the United States, which could provoke locals in eastern Syria to attack American forces or the Syrian Democratic Forces".

Andie Parry and Others; Iran, Russia, and the Syrian Regime are Coordinating to Expel US Forces from Syria; THE INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF WAR; August 3, 2023; Link:

https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/iran-russia-and-syrian-regime-are-coordinating-expel-us-forces-syria

*[20] This was confirmed by a woman named (Sara), one of the wives of a slain ISIS member, during an interview at the Roj camp located in the eastern countryside of Qamishli on August 11, 2022. She stated, "...the organization provided free services to exploit the recruitment of the poor in impoverished communities and to cater to Arab societies' search for luxury and imitation of Western luxury. It also ensured free healthcare for its members through the husband's card and via the organization's pharmacies, in addition to free services like water, electricity, landline telephones, household furnishings, housing, vehicles, and fuel, along with maintenance and repair of homes and their contents through the (Mujahideen Affairs Office) ..." All of this was available in the area she was in, while there was no information about similar treatment in other areas previously under the ISIS's control.

provoked, and they can be reorganized, in addition to the fervent desire of extremist foreign women in the al-Hol camp to give birth to more.

5. The conspiratorial operations orchestrated by both the Turkish regime and its mercenaries, as well as the Syrian regime and its allies, destabilize the security environment in northern and eastern Syria and other Syrian regions. The threats and attacks from the Turkish state are evident, while the other conspiratorial side, as noted in a study by the Institute for the Study of War (37↓), suggests that "Iran, Russia, and the Syrian regime give a lower priority to operations against ISIS while mobilizing forces in eastern Syria, which very likely provides ISIS with space to grow its capabilities, rest, and regenerate in the long term..." This situation compels both the central and peripheral leadership of the ISIS to remain unified by coordinating their efforts to exploit security gaps and launch attacks on both the autonomous administration institutions and military centers of the (SDF) and the international coalition, as well as to try to smuggle detained elements. Promoting this agenda makes them appear unified in the eyes of their sympathizers around the world. It is worth noting that the collapse of security stability in northern and eastern Syria due to these operations will provide the ISIS with a significant opportunity to rise again, stronger than before.

6. The central leadership of the ISIS understands the aggressiveness exhibited by the Turkish, Iranian, and Arab nationalist regimes toward both the Kurdish issue (*21) and the democratic cause that concerns the communities in the region. As a result, it aligns itself somewhat with this axis in northern Syria and Iraq, exploiting intelligence communication channels with these regimes based on confronting a common enemy to impose its relative dominance over its followers in areas under the control of those regimes. It seeks to maintain control over military, advocacy, and media activities in both the Syrian and Iraqi arenas.

7. There is an exaggeration in describing the righteousness of its ideology and in inflating its military operations in its propaganda. This is supported by surprise attacks on easy targets in security-vulnerable areas, including the desert, rural areas, and roads away from security monitoring, as well as the assassination of civilians working in service institutions. The ISIS presents itself as a cohesive force that continues its operations under a strategy of "retaliation and empowerment." This aims to boost morale and attempt to rebuild trust among disheartened

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*21 Kurdish thinker Abdullah Ocalan points out that "Kurdish phobia" has been created by dominant international powers, stating in his analysis: "... it is primarily observed that the Kurdish national microstate remains a hidden reserve card, promoted as if it will be established today or tomorrow. This is aimed at controlling the national state in the region and taming it on one hand, and neutralizing the influence of Kurdish movements that seek to preserve their existence and consolidate their freedom on the other. All their hopes are placed on the potential establishment of this entity by external dominant forces, rather than relying on their own capabilities. The Kurdish national reality has been planned to be an entity or phenomenon that only exists within capitalist relations. Moreover, the national reality, which has a revolutionary, democratic, and socialist essence, is perpetually presented as an unattainable aspiration. The most significant tool in the hands of dominance in this regard is Arab nationalism, whether Sunni or Shia, centered in Baghdad. Arab nationalism remains a persistent danger to the Kurds, forcing them to seek a safe haven. This danger also ignites the perception of threats from the Kurds towards the Arabs. Additionally, the systems of Turkey, Syria, and Iran threaten in a similar manner, hinting that a Kurdish state will be established today or tomorrow. In turn, these three or four entities remain a constant source of danger, in order to ensure the loyalty and complete allegiance of the Kurds to them..." Abdullah Ocalan; Manifesto of Democratic Civilization: Volume Five / The Kurdish Issue and the Solution of the Democratic Nation (In Defense of Kurds Caught in the Fangs of Cultural Genocide), translation: Zaxo Shiar; Second edition 2014; Publisher: Azadi Press; pp. 201-202.

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followers and sympathizers. The bombing operations targeting crowds of Iranians in memory of the Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani in Kerman, resulting in the death and injury of hundreds.

8. Both Al-Hol and Roj camps, along with the detained fighters of the ISIS, present a shared concern and disgrace for both central and branch leadership as well as followers and sympathizers. This situation compels them to remain united to address this significant problem. This issue also serves to dampen ideological disputes within the organization, relying on threats attributed to the new emir (Abu Hafs Al-Qurashi Al-Hashimi), who has threatened that he will (38↓) "plan to make Al-Hol camp the spark that ignites SDF and the eastern region, and to devise a plan for an operation similar to (al-Ghuwayran 2)". It seems the organization is attempting to create a charismatic, violent leadership figure capable of swaying the emotions of its supporters and rallying them under its banner.

9. The ISIS aims to exploit the ongoing political and security instability throughout the Syrian and Iraqi regions to its advantage, and it is expected to have plans to fill the security vacuum that may arise if governmental systems or security structures collapse in any of those areas, similarly to its dramatic rise after 2011.

10. The continued mutual animosity and conflict among Syrian jihadist organizations ensure that a united and strong front against ISIS is not established. ISIS can manage part of this conflict by providing support to certain factions, with the potential to form a coalition led by itself from among these groups.

➢ The Local Defense Policy Poses a Challenge that Threatens the ISIS's Survival

The ISIS's practice of terrorism and its brutal behavior to subjugate local communities has not been successful. Most collaborators, based on observations from the ground, confessions from detainees, news reports, and citizen testimonies, are motivated either by fear of extortion and threats from the ISIS's cells—which is evidenced by numerous reports of threats and the assassination of citizens working in the autonomous administration institutions and local councils—or by the desire for financial gain due to the deteriorating living conditions in areas where the ISIS operates. Some are also attracted by financial incentives, preferring to engage in mercenary work that provides substantial income, a trend clearly observable among the mercenaries of the Turkish occupation army. Additionally, some motivations are rooted in racial hatred toward the Kurds and a rejection of the democracy that the ISIS has described as the "great temptation of the age," (*22) influenced by the negative propaganda from authoritarian

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*22 All extremist organizations take an antagonistic stance towards democracy, labeling its supporters as infidels, and condemning anyone who engages with it or associates with its supporters without denouncing them or fighting against them. They view democracy as an idea belonging to "Jews and Christians" and characterize it as a rule of tyranny, despite the fact that democracy is not a religious concept that calls for the worship of another deity. Instead, it is a means of managing relationships according to contemporary standards. Furthermore, tyranny refers to the worship of entities other than God and those who do not adhere to God's law. Additionally, democracy contradicts the political beliefs of both Jews and Christians and primarily emerged after the French Revolution to break free from the dominance of the church during the later stages of the Enlightenment in Europe.

regimes in Syria, Iran, and Turkey, as well as extremist groups. There are leaders among the Ba'athists and Turkmen in the ISIS's leadership who harbor racist hatred toward the Kurds. This dynamic is evident in the sabotage operations carried out by the groups of Ibrahim al-Hefl and Ahmad al-Khabil on the eastern bank of the Euphrates River in Deir Al-Zor, who exploited the mentality of racial hatred toward the Kurds to mobilize their followers against the (SDF). This indicates that the ISIS cannot fully rely on the appeal of its ideology to assert its dominance in the region. The current battlefield situation of the organization, along with signs of internal division and factors that enhance the potential for internal defections, suggests a critical crisis within the ISIS, which is further exacerbated by the defensive policies of both the autonomous administration and the SDF. Most of those concerned with security, civil peace, and addressing the region's economic crisis—comprising the majority within local communities—prefer the autonomous administration and the SDF over other Syrian groups, including the Syrian state and ISIS. The international coalition against terrorism also shares this preference compared to other Syrian forces, clearly evidenced by the ongoing strategic partnership between the two sides.

The factors that may exacerbate the existential crisis faced by the ISIS includes:

1. The weakness of its management in handling the factors underpinning its policy to mitigate potential internal rifts, along with its inability to halt the growing influence of elements that enhance its susceptibility to defection.

2. The continued efforts of the international coalition against terrorism in reinforcing its strategy in the region and its insistence on creating a hostile security environment for the organization.

3. The interruption of virtual communication between the ISIS and its followers due to a serious and focused new cyberwar at the local level targeting the "Central Media Bureau" of the organization, as well as all its online sites and social media pages. This interference will become more effective following the support of the Syrian Democratic Forces with cyber warfare capabilities to confront the organization's local media activities.

4. Both the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria and the Syrian Democratic Forces are increasingly relying on implementing the paradigm of a democratic nation effectively in their efforts to apply concepts of democracy and equality, combat hate speech, and strive to provide services to citizens according to their capacities. They aim to enhance the ability of local communities to self-manage their affairs through communes and local councils, as well as to develop their external diplomacy. This is strategically important to ensure the continued support and sympathy of local communities that have suffered from the calamities caused by the ISIS after it turned their regions into war zones. This paradigm has gained relative acceptance in areas previously under the ISIS's control. It stands in direct opposition to the ideology of ISIS and nationalist racism: the more socially accepted it becomes, the less attractive the organization's ideology and racist tendencies are, decreasing their ability to recruit.

5. Difficulties in securing external funding and the inability of new foreign fighters to access the organization's operational areas have emerged, as there is no longer a concept of "House of Islam" represented by the geography previously controlled by the ISIS, to which it had encouraged sympathizers to migrate.

6. Ongoing attempts by other Salafi competitors, the Muslim Brotherhood, Baathists, and Shiite groups to conduct their activities in the environments where the ISIS operates continue. There are indications that some regional states are attempting to create tribal-based organizations with national, religious, and sectarian inclinations to destabilize security in northeastern Syria, as evidenced by the support from both Erdogan and Assad for Ibrahim al-Hafl's gang to undermine the security and peace-keeping efforts by the autonomous administration, the Syrian Democratic Forces, and the international coalition against terrorism. This situation could either benefit or harm the ISIS; the potential benefit lies in its ability to employ "war among battles" tactics to inflict maximum damage on its presumed enemies. However, the risk of further harm seems greater, as there's a possibility of a new radical organization with a nationalist-religious orientation emerging, threatening the existence and unity of ISIS.

7. The Turkish regime's exploitation of the ISIS card in its regional policy and ideological project to dominate northern Syria and Iraq continues, with signs of using this leverage in dealings with certain international and regional actors in the Middle East. Reports from the international coalition regarding military operations in northern Syria and the assassination of most of the organization's leaders in those areas can be monitored. This is due to most of the ISIS's leaders becoming exposed to Turkish intelligence after many of them sought refuge in areas occupied by Turkey in northern Syria (northwest Idlib, Afrin, Jarabulus, (Gire Sipi) Tell Abyad, and (Sere Kaniye) Ras al-Ayn), and the organization will inevitably face expulsion from those areas once its mission concludes. The same situation applies to its strongholds in northern Iraq, where there is significant intelligence activity by the Turkish state.

8. The hostile stance from remaining Salafi organizations in Syria persists. In their initial statements, they accused the ISIS of having "introduced a number of seditions and evils into Syrian society..." (39↓) ISIS has failed to attract these organizations to its ranks or subjugate them.

> ### ➢ **Conclusion and Results**

The term "Islamic State in Iraq and Syria" did not originally fit the overall structure of the organization nor did it serve as an identity framework for its branches worldwide. An African or Asian ISIS follower might struggle to relate to this term, as it raises issues related to fighting against their own communities and governments that reject their ideology and authority. It necessitates migration to this so-called state and fighting its nearby enemies, which is difficult to implement in practice. Therefore, their stance seems to be more ideological than operational and may represent a kind of liberation from the hegemony of al-Qaeda for the ambitions of extremist leaders in Africa and Asia. The jihadist organizations that pledged allegiance to ISIS existed beforehand, and most are older than ISIS itself. In this context, the Syrian branch may seek to operate more independently in its strategy from the Iraqi central leadership of the organization, potentially shaping its political and military doctrine under the concept of "Islamic State in Levant" or some similar designation. The likelihood of this increases with the ambitions of Syrian leaders for the caliphate and the growing influence of Syrian legalists within the organization (40↓), along with favorable military geography in the Syrian arena, which has weak subjugation to the Syrian regime's hegemony and is relatively distant from the main operational

areas of the international coalition against terrorism, which involves most Sunni regions in Iraq and the Sunni areas east of the Euphrates. Meanwhile, the larger part of the Syrian Sunni arena remains under the control of the Syrian regime and its allies, the Russians and Iranians, while its northern part is dominated by the Turkish occupation army and its mercenaries from the opposition factions, which are areas struggling with security fragility and militia conflicts.

The ISIS is trying to root itself in the region and resist its continuity as a rogue entity that has exploited the crises caused by the contradictory ideological projects of both the nation-state and the currents of political Islam, including Ottoman, Brotherhood, Salafi, and Shiite influences, to build its ideology and establish its claimed state. It is observed that after its battlefield defeat, its members have had to resort to secrecy in their activities and movements, hiding and concealing their identities, indicating a loss of community sympathy and mutual trust. Its futile attempts to regroup and achieve local control will only deplete its resources further, resulting in the loss of more of its members and leaders. If the central leadership does not relocate to a country facing economic and political crises with favorable military geography, its end or defection in Syria and Iraq seems inevitable, especially since Syrians will not accept that the caliphate remains exclusively held by Iraqis in the long run (*[23]), while at the same time, Iraqis will not relinquish this privilege. This situation, coupled with ongoing military and security pressures, will lead to the collapse of its organizational structure in Syria and Iraq. The resolution of issues regarding the al-Hol and Roj camps, the detention centers, and preventing northwest Syria from becoming a safe haven for the organization's leaders, along with the support of the international coalition for the (SDF) and the autonomous administration in confronting the conspiratorial actions of both the Turkish and Syrian regimes, and bolstering the economy and service institutions in northeast Syria, as well as equipping the SDF with advanced surveillance and reconnaissance technology, will accelerate this collapse. The more local communities accept democracy, the weaker the organization's ideological influence on them will become.

Based on indicators of internal divisions within ISIS and the factors that enhance the likelihood of internal defections, as well as local defensive policies, ISIS will not remain a cohesive organization in the relatively near future. It will be unable to adapt once again to the new security environment of the region. Its Syrian branch will increasingly center itself in the rugged areas controlled by the Syrian regime, which clearly opposes the international coalition against terrorism and does not wish to cooperate directly with it. Meanwhile, in the Iraqi Sunni landscape, tensions will escalate among al-Qaeda, the Ba'ath Party, Sunni Awakening councils, ISIS, and the powerful factions within the Popular Mobilization Forces. ISIS will continue to exploit the ongoing grievances of Iraqi Sunnis regarding their living conditions, which is the basis on which it was originally established.

ISIS will conduct sporadic and sometimes surprise attacks in northern and eastern Syria; however, it will realize the impossibility of re-establishing its control over the region. Yet, it possesses a single glimmer of hope: the continued presence of its members in camps and

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*[23] The arrest of Abu Maria al-Qahatani (of Iraqi nationality) by the General Security Service of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra) highlights the fact that he was accused of collaborating with hostile entities through an Iraqi intelligence officer who visited Idlib multiple times.

detention centers and the spread of thousands of its fighters in Syria and Iraq. With its current budget estimated at around $300 million and its ability to channel funds through informal money transfer companies and investments (41↓), it remains present in the region, albeit in a relatively fragmented manner.

There is a possibility that it will regroup, seize existing military centers, and reactivate its network of tunnels and hideouts if conducive circumstances arise, possibly with greater strength than before through the tactic of "building through battle." This is evidenced by the rapid and tumultuous changes in the region's security context. Any disruption of security in eastern Euphrates, significant unrest within al-Hol camp, and organized attacks on detention centers to release its members could facilitate this. Additionally, the influx of dozens of active fighters from northern areas controlled by the Turkish occupation army, western Euphrates, and western Iraq, along with the recruitment of many disgruntled individuals affected by the economic crisis and incited by nationalist and sectarian hate speech against the Autonomous Administration and the (SDF), will also contribute. There is a potential for open reconciliation for thousands who have defected from them. Indeed, part of this scenario occurred during its attack on the Ghuwayran prison at the beginning of 2022. However, it failed due to his belief in the illusory narrative he adopted in its ideological propaganda against the institutions of North and East Syria, making claims of local community persecution and the eagerness of these communities to see the return of the ISIS. The repetition of this attempt, despite its previous failure, remains a possibility from the new leadership of the organization.

The failure to achieve this depends on the vigilance of the international coalition forces and the Syrian Democratic Forces, as well as their methods of analyzing and processing information and following a strategy that can address various potential scenarios if the ISIS seeks to regain spatial control of the region, using civilians as human shields, and expanding the cycle of terror and security chaos in both Iraq and Syria. Given that violent jihadist movements have proven their ability to regenerate and proliferate in different organizational forms rapidly, the Syrian branch of ISIS could undertake this. However, achieving this relies on three pillars: a strong new leadership, the weakening of the Syrian Democratic Forces and the Autonomous Administration's control over security in North and East Syria, and a decline in the operational and intelligence activities of the international coalition forces, leading to poor information analysis or their withdrawal from Syria or a significant reduction in their presence. These outcomes seem unlikely given the current political, security, military, and cultural realities in the geopolitical landscape of North and East Syria and the Middle East.

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