



Averting an ISIS Resurgence in Iraq and Syria

Middle East Report N°207 | 11 October 2019

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Principal Findings

What's new? In Iraq and Syria, ISIS is down but not out. The group remains active but reduced and geographically circumscribed. Keeping it down requires sustained effort. Any of several events – Turkish intervention in north-eastern Syria, but also instability in Iraq or spill-over of U.S.-Iranian tensions – could enable its comeback.

Why does it matter? Iraqis, Syrians and their international partners paid a heavy price to dislodge the militant organisation from its territorial “caliphate”. Yet even as an insurgency, it still threatens Iraqis and Syrians locally, and, if it manages to regroup, it could pose a renewed threat globally.

What should be done? Keeping ISIS weak will require avoiding new conflict in either Iraq or Syria that would disrupt counter-ISIS efforts – most immediately, Turkish intervention in north-eastern Syria. Syrians and Iraqis need a period of calm to pursue ISIS insurgents and stabilise their respective countries.

Executive Summary

The Islamic State (ISIS) has not made a comeback in Iraq or Syria – yet. The jihadist group survives as a deadly insurgency in both countries, but one that, compared to its earlier iterations, is weak and geographically circumscribed. Local conditions, particularly in Iraq, have militated against its return. Yet both Iraq and Syria face internal dangers and external threats, most imminently Turkish intervention in Syria's north east, that could destabilise both countries. If internal instability or external shock interferes with counter-ISIS efforts in either country, the organisation seems likely to attempt a return. Preventing its resurgence requires continued local efforts to combat the group and stabilise the situation, even as all sides engaged in counter-ISIS efforts – local and international – need to avert disruptive new conflicts among themselves, whatever their differences.

ISIS has fallen far from its 2015 peak, when it was on the offensive against its many enemies and controlled a militant proto-state spanning Iraq and Syria. Faced with an overwhelming military campaign waged by an array of local and international foes, ISIS lost its last territorial foothold in Iraq in 2017 and in Syria in early 2019. In both countries, it has survived by shifting from semi-conventional warfare to hit-and-run insurgency.

In Iraq, the group operates as small, largely autonomous guerrilla units spread across the country's most inhospitable terrain, including its mountains and deserts. From these hideouts, ISIS militants emerge to prey on rural areas, kidnapping and extorting residents and killing state representatives. The group's operations are simple; it has only infrequently carried out more complex or large-scale attacks. So far, it seems not to have penetrated Iraq's major cities.

Iraq has changed in ways that might prevent ISIS from returning in force. The nationwide sectarian polarisation from which ISIS benefited has faded. Additionally, now that many Sunni Arabs have experienced the dual trauma of ISIS's draconian control and the military campaign to recapture their home areas from ISIS, most want nothing more to do with the group. The Iraqi security forces, for their part, have curbed their excesses and forged a more functional relationship with Sunni Arabs.

Yet despite these reasons for optimism, there are also threats. Securing peripheral areas still bedevilled by ISIS will be a major challenge. The government has yet to rebuild and jump-start the economies of these and other areas that were damaged by the war against ISIS, discouraging the displaced from returning. Healing society's wounds seems similarly difficult. Iraq's retributive approach to post-ISIS justice risks widening the country's divisions. "ISIS families" – civilians with alleged family ties to ISIS militants and who have been exiled from their hometowns – appear in danger of becoming a permanently stigmatised underclass. Too, U.S.-Iranian tensions could spill over into Iraq, potentially leading to attacks by Iran's local paramilitary allies on U.S. targets. The results would be unpredictable but could imperil the continued presence of U.S.-led Coalition forces and trigger greater instability.

ISIS could also stage a return in neighbouring Syria, whose stability seems threatened by a newly-launched Turkish intervention in Syria's north east. On 6 October, U.S. President Donald Trump announced that Turkey would launch a military

operation in northern Syria and that U.S. forces “will no longer be in the immediate area”. Trump’s statement – since then nuanced, muddled and contradicted – appeared to give a green light for unilateral Turkish intervention in Syria’s north east against the U.S.’s primary Syrian partner in the fight against ISIS, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The SDF is led by a mainly Kurdish force closely linked to the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), a group that has waged a decades-long war with Turkey. After the few U.S. troops present on the border left their positions, Turkey announced that the intervention had begun on 9 October, though its full scope remains unclear.

Conflict between Turkey and the SDF along the Syrian-Turkish border almost certainly will relieve pressure on ISIS, which lost its last territorial foothold in eastern Syria in May 2019 but persists as a deadly insurgency. Since May, the SDF has continued to pursue ISIS remnants across the north east and to hold thousands of ISIS detainees and ISIS-affiliated family members. Yet the SDF has warned that it will be forced to redirect its forces toward Syria’s northern border should Turkey attack. The consequences may be disastrous for areas farther south, where ISIS is most active, and for prisons and camps that hold ISIS militants and were already vulnerable to attack before the latest events.

Even if ISIS likely will survive in some form in both Iraq and Syria, its many enemies ought to be able to contain or even further degrade the group. For that, however, both countries need to be spared new external shocks that could disrupt counter-ISIS efforts. Most urgently, the U.S. and its allies should work to convince Turkey to halt its invasion of the north east, which could damage Turkey’s international political standing and its domestic security. That could allow time for a new interim arrangement that addresses Turkish security concerns pending a final agreement on the area. Failing that, the alternative is for the SDF, likely with Russian mediation, to negotiate a settlement directly with the Syrian regime that might forestall a Turkish attack. Governments should also repatriate as many of their civilian nationals as is feasible from the north east’s displacement camps, before children in the camps are engulfed by conflict.

Local actors need to take steps, too. With help from its international partners, the Iraqi government ought to redouble its efforts to secure ISIS-affected rural areas if neighbouring Syria devolves into chaos. Baghdad should also prioritise reconstruction of war-damaged areas and return of the displaced, including “ISIS families”. If Turkey’s attack can be put off or limited, the SDF will still have to allow its local partners to play a more active role in governance and security, including in Deir al-Zour, and help defend them against ISIS predation.

An ISIS resurgence in Iraq and Syria can still be prevented. But it requires sustained efforts by the group’s local and international adversaries, who must avoid deadly conflict among themselves that could give ISIS new life.

Beirut/Istanbul/Baghdad/Deir al-Zour/Brussels, 11 October 2019

Averting an ISIS Resurgence in Iraq and Syria

I. Introduction

The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has been “defeated” more than once. In 2010, the U.S. announced that U.S. and Iraqi forces had killed or captured most of the group’s leadership, calling into question its ability to regroup.¹ But just three years later, ISIS expanded from Iraq into Syria and founded a militant proto-state. In 2014, it proclaimed a global “caliphate” and unleashed attacks worldwide, even as it went on murderous rampages in both Iraq and Syria.² World powers responded by teaming up with Iraqi and Syrian forces to defeat the central ISIS organisation. In December 2017, the Iraqi government declared victory over the group, while the U.S. and its Syrian partners announced they had eliminated its last pocket of territory in eastern Syria in March 2019.³

Even as ISIS was losing its physical “state”, however, it had begun to shift from open, semi-conventional combat to guerrilla warfare. It has since waged asymmetric campaigns in both Iraq and Syria, with the avowed aim of depleting its enemies’ ranks before, eventually, returning to claim territorial control.

When ISIS announced its “caliphate”, it claimed dominion over Sunni Muslims worldwide and renamed itself simply “the Islamic State”. With this move, the group ostensibly decoupled its identity from any given territory and from its original home base in Iraq. As ISIS has lost territory in both countries, it has shifted its media focus to some of its more far-flung “provinces” in places such as Nigeria and Afghanistan, where it can demonstrate momentum.⁴ Notionally, the writ of ISIS’s “caliphate” extends everywhere, and its command can be anywhere.

¹ Thom Shanker, “Qaeda leaders in Iraq neutralized, U.S. says”, *The New York Times*, 4 June 2010.

² ISIS perpetrated a genocide against Iraq’s Yezidi minority, in addition to its many offences against other Iraqi and Syrians, including against Sunni Arabs who opposed the organisation or transgressed its draconian behaviour codes. For UN experts’ finding that ISIS committed a genocide against Iraq’s Yezidis, see Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, “‘They Came to Destroy’: ISIS Crimes against the Yazidis”, 15 June 2016. Crisis Group’s previous reports on ISIS include Crisis Group Middle East Report N°144, *Make or Break: Iraq’s Sunnis and the State*, 14 August 2013; Crisis Group Middle East Report N°150, *Iraq: Falluja’s Faustian Bargain*, 28 April 2014; Crisis Group Special Report N°1, *Exploiting Disorder: al-Qaeda and the Islamic State*, 14 March 2016; and Crisis Group Middle East Report N°204, *Squaring the Circles in Syria’s North East*, 31 July 2019.

³ “Al-Abadi announces ‘liberation’ of Iraq from ‘Islamic State’ organisation, Washington welcomes”, France 24, 9 December 2017 (Arabic); Syrian Democratic Forces, “Breaking news: our forces (SDF) are flying their flags over [Baghouz] and declare victory over ISIS”, 23 March 2019; White House, “The United States and Our Global Partners Have Liberated All ISIS-Controlled Territory”, 23 March 2019.

⁴ For more on ISIS affiliates in the Lake Chad basin, see Crisis Group Africa Report N°273, *Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa Province*, 16 May 2019.

In practice, though, Iraq and Syria remained the transnational organisation's effective centre. Officials believe that ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, an Iraqi national, and the rest of the group's top leadership are somewhere in Iraq or Syria.⁵ Per ISIS's own reporting, its operations are concentrated in these two countries.⁶ U.S. officials believe that ISIS's central command issues broad guidance to the organisation's affiliates and supporters around the globe, though it does not direct them on a day-to-day basis.⁷

Since 2017, officials and experts have regularly warned of a resurgent "ISIS 2.0" in Iraq and Syria, yet the organisation's strength in each country has been difficult to gauge.⁸ It can no longer be measured in mechanised columns or in square kilometres of territory. From the ground, ISIS's "resurgence" has seemed overstated.

That could change. The most imminent threat is in Syria, where Turkey has launched a military intervention in the north east against the U.S.'s main Syrian partner in the fight against ISIS, following U.S. President Donald Trump's abrupt 6 October decision to step aside. But even beyond that, other dangers loom.

This report looks at current ISIS activity in Iraq and Syria, as well as the risk of its return. It is based primarily on Crisis Group field work in Iraq and Syria, including more than 150 interviews in cities in those two countries, Washington, Beirut and Amman, with civilian and security officials, local and foreign; civil society and communal leaders; humanitarian aid workers; and others. It also builds on Crisis Group's previous reports and briefings on both Iraq and Syria.

⁵ Crisis Group interviews, U.S. officials, Washington, April 2019.

⁶ ISIS, "In the company of the leader of the faithful", Al-Furqan Media Foundation, 29 April 2019 (Arabic).

⁷ Crisis Group interviews, U.S. officials, Washington, January and April 2019.

⁸ For example, see Phil Stewart, "U.S. to fight Islamic State in Syria 'as long as they want to fight': Mattis", Reuters, 14 November 2017.

II. Iraq: The New ISIS Insurgency

In Iraq, ISIS is waging an active, deadly insurgency. Yet it is an insurgency that is diminished, not just from ISIS's capabilities at its height in early 2015, but also from the long campaign that preceded the group's 2014 surge. ISIS's current war is also one limited mostly to the country's rural periphery. In much of Iraq today, security is better than it has been for years – despite the violence amid recent protests, which has marred the relative calm.⁹

ISIS is now mainly active along a rural spine that runs across the northern third of Iraq from southern Ninewa to northern Diyala province, including the Hamrin and Makhoul mountains. It also operates in the Jazira and Anbar deserts in Iraq's west, as well as scattered pockets elsewhere.¹⁰ ISIS units have taken refuge in some of Iraq's most forbidding terrain, including mountains and caves, remote desert, orchards, river groves and islands. They also shelter in destroyed and abandoned villages. These rugged areas give ISIS natural cover, allowing fighters to hide by day, then move by night in small groups on foot or by motorbike.¹¹ For sustenance and armament, they rely on hidden caches of food and weapons, as well as supplies from collaborators.¹² In the desert, ISIS disappears into subterranean bases, with some militants reportedly traversing open expanses posing as shepherds.¹³

This terrain can be nearly impassable for Iraqi security forces' vehicles or so exposed that these forces cannot approach without alerting insurgents far in advance.¹⁴ These areas cannot be permanently "held" by Iraqi forces, only watched and periodically patrolled and cleared. Many are traditional insurgent havens, only tenuously under the government's control.¹⁵

From these natural redoubts, ISIS units can prey on civilians in lightly policed outlying areas. In bands of five to ten, they can support themselves by kidnapping and extorting civilians at night.¹⁶ "It's not big groups", said a Ninewa military official.

⁹ A senior Western diplomat said: "Everyone says it's a fragile situation. Nobody denies that, given recent Iraqi history. And the security situation is the product of endogenous and exogenous effects. But the facts are that ordinary Iraqi citizens have less possibility of being wounded or killed in an explosion or a terror attack than at any time in the last fifteen or sixteen years". Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, February 2019.

¹⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Iraqi officials and Western diplomats, Iraq, February, March and June 2019.

¹¹ Crisis Group interviews, Baghdad, Kirkuk, Erbil, Baquba, February, March and June 2019.

¹² Crisis Group interview, Iraqi security official, Baghdad, 27 February 2019.

¹³ According to an Anbar security official, ISIS buried large containers in the desert and now uses them as underground hideouts invisible to passing patrols. They additionally shelter in trenches and Bedouin camps. Crisis Group interview, Ramadi, June 2019. The head of Iraq's Hawks intelligence cell has described a tunnel network ISIS dug in south-western Ninewa province. Saad al-Sammak, "Hawks Cell foils largest terror plot in 2019", *al-Sabah*, 28 July 2019 (Arabic).

¹⁴ A Ninewa military official said: "These are areas that are difficult to reach, where they can hide. ... When aircraft come, they can retreat; they have their intelligence network. It takes us a day to get to Baaj, and their vehicles are faster than ours, which are heavy and armoured". Crisis Group interview, Mosul, March 2019.

¹⁵ An Iraqi presidential adviser said: "Hamrin was always a place for rebels; even under Saddam, the state didn't have full control". Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, 26 February 2019.

¹⁶ Crisis Group interviews, security officials, Kirkuk and Ramadi, March and June 2019. According to a Kirkuk security official: "They threaten people [in rural areas] and demand food. If someone

“They work like thieves, killing and taking money”.¹⁷ Indeed, some ISIS activity is nearly indistinguishable from banditry.¹⁸ ISIS is said to have accumulated large amounts of money during its period of territorial control, some of which it may have stashed inside Iraq or abroad.¹⁹ For now, though, the group likely does not need much – its level of violence seems both inexpensive and self-sustaining.²⁰

ISIS units also engage in violence that is more overtly political. They systematically kill local state representatives, including *mukhtars* (village headmen) and members of the security forces. The seeming aim is to terrorise residents into non-cooperation with the Iraqi security forces.²¹ Militants additionally attack checkpoints and target security forces with roadside bombs, ambushes and sniper attacks. According to a senior Coalition officer:

[ISIS attacks] tend to be more basic, which marries up with them moving to insurgent-type tactics. More complex attacks require more people, experience, materials. ... With these insurgent-type tactics, they’re working in small, dispersed groupings, which are harder to detect.²²

ISIS attacks are often propaganda of the deed, in that their violence also carries a political message aimed at multiple audiences.²³ Its assassinations of *mukhtars* are one example of operations that have both functional and performative value. *Mukhtars* are responsible for knowing the residents of a city neighbourhood or town and managing their interactions with the government.²⁴ They also serve as a key node of communication between residents and Iraq’s security services, giving the latter insight

has collaborated with the security services, they abduct him or blow up his house”. A resident of Hawija in Kirkuk province told Crisis Group that hungry ISIS members “use their weapons to get a sandwich, like cowboys”. Crisis Group interview, Kirkuk, February 2019.

¹⁷ Crisis Group interview, Mosul, March 2019.

¹⁸ ISIS also reportedly extorts the trucking companies plying Iraq’s highways. Crisis Group interviews, Hisham al-Hashemi, ISIS expert, Baghdad, 24 February 2019; and Iraqi journalist and security analyst, Baghdad, February and June 2019.

¹⁹ Some governments estimate that ISIS still has as much as \$300 million. UN Security Council, “Twenty-fourth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2368 (2017) concerning ISIL (Da’esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities”, 15 July 2019. In one high-profile case, Iraqi and Kurdish special forces, with Coalition assistance, disrupted a money transfer network that was moving millions of dollars around the world for ISIS. U.S. Department of the Treasury, “Treasury designates key nodes of ISIS’s financial network stretching across the Middle East, Europe and East Africa”, 15 April 2019.

²⁰ See Lead Inspector General, “Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General report to the United States Congress”, 6 August 2019, p. 16.

²¹ A Diyala journalist said: “There’s still this fear. For these people, the organisation is closer to them than the security forces are”. Crisis Group interview, Baquba, June 2019.

²² Crisis Group phone interview, July 2019.

²³ A Kirkuk security official said: “[ISIS] conducts operations that have a media impact, so it can restore terror to people’s hearts and say it’s present on the battlefield”. Crisis Group interview, Kirkuk, March 2019.

²⁴ A *mukhtar* described his cooperation with the security services, including maintaining records of residents, supervising new arrivals and facilitating law enforcement. “Anything that happens, I hear about it first, before the government”. Crisis Group interview, Ramadi, June 2019. ISIS has highlighted the security role played by *mukhtars* in its media releases. See ISIS, “May God grant you victory”, Iraq Province-Diyala media office, 14 April 2019 (Arabic).

into what is happening locally. When ISIS kills *mukhtars*, it both blinds the state and intimidates civilians. The group then amplifies the murders' effect with media releases that publicise them and sometimes even include video footage of the killings, bringing the organisation's night-time home invasions in rural Iraq to national and global audiences, including its own members and supporters.²⁵

Since 2017, ISIS has carried out few complex, multi-stage attacks, such as car bombings and mass-casualty suicide attacks, that require developed logistical networks.²⁶ The group's reluctance to expend men in suicide attacks may indicate that it is conserving manpower.

Many active ISIS militants seem to be Iraqis and natives of their respective areas of operation. There are few foreigners left in ISIS ranks in Iraq; as aliens, they cannot easily survive.²⁷ Locals, on the other hand, are intimately familiar with the human and physical terrain – who is who and where to run. In Kirkuk, residents say they can distinguish between ISIS assaults and normal criminality because they know these ISIS attackers individually as local ISIS fugitives.²⁸ These ISIS fighters themselves know area residents, and in some places can rely on family to supply them.²⁹

Among ISIS's Iraqi guerrillas, some may be committed ideologues, but all are wanted men, whatever their motives. They have few obvious alternatives to militancy, aside from the gallows. According to a Diyala journalist: "These are local ISIS, who got involved with the organisation, and for whom there's now no going back".³⁰ ISIS's ranks are much diminished since the days when it was a de facto governing

²⁵ ISIS evidently wants to communicate that these killings are systematic, even if, in practice, some may be more opportunistic. In a June 2019 video, for example, ISIS staged a scene in which its militants scroll through a spreadsheet of assassination targets. The narrator says: "They prepared the silencers and worked their way down these lists of criminals". ISIS, "The splitting of heads 2", Iraq Province-Dijla media office, 11 June 2019 (Arabic). ISIS has previously highlighted its killing of *mukhtars* as a key operational metric, as in an infographic in the 6 September 2018 issue of its weekly newsletter, *al-Naba*. "However many of you *mukhtars* there are, we'll liquidate you all soon", an apparent ISIS member wrote to one *mukhtar* in a text message the *mukhtar* showed to Crisis Group. Crisis Group interview, June 2019.

²⁶ ISIS has claimed a handful of high-casualty attacks, including one by two suicide attackers in a Baghdad suburb that ISIS said killed and wounded 70. *Al-Naba*, 18 July 2019. Local reporting does not back up these purported body counts.

²⁷ Hisham al-Hashemi estimates there are still 200 to 300 foreigners fighting with ISIS in Iraq, mostly in Anbar. Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, 24 February 2019. Senior Iraqi security officials and a senior Coalition officer said the flow of foreign fighters into Syria and Iraq has slowed to a trickle. Crisis Group interviews, Baghdad and by phone, February and July 2019.

²⁸ Crisis Group interviews, officials and residents, Kirkuk, February-March 2019. A Kirkuk security official told Crisis Group: "[Residents] can tell the difference. Most of these people are known to them as ISIS, wanted men. ... There will be four or five locals, with two or three strangers. ... Locals know the roads, how to get food and drink, how to disappear". Crisis Group interview, Kirkuk, March 2019.

²⁹ Crisis Group interviews, officials and residents, Baghdad, Baquba and Kirkuk, March and June 2019. According to a Kirkuk tribal sheikh: "[ISIS members] return to their families to get bread and water. ISIS members in the area are in the places they lived. They're all sons of the area; maybe two or three per cent are outsiders. ... These locals are more difficult to eliminate. They have some safe haven". Crisis Group interview, Kirkuk, March 2019.

³⁰ Crisis Group interview, Baquba, June 2019.

authority and semi-conventional military force. But at least some of its cadres have survived and could be the base for a future large-scale mobilisation.³¹

Many Iraqis interviewed by Crisis Group said ISIS is not winning recruits at present, though some thought it was trying.³² One Kirkuk official said ISIS cells seem not to regenerate after being hit by Coalition airstrikes, in part because they are not recruiting and cannot easily bring reinforcements from elsewhere: “Groups that have been bombed go quiet. They come back, but not like they were”.³³ ISIS militants have difficulty travelling long distances undetected, though they may have greater freedom of movement in open desert.³⁴ Some have infiltrated Iraq via its desert Syrian border, which has remained to some extent porous.³⁵ ISIS units seem to be in communication with one another and follow top-level guidance – in one likely example, the targeting of *mukhtars* – but to operate largely autonomously.³⁶

ISIS also benefits from its enemies’ failures of coordination, including along the disputed internal boundaries between Baghdad-controlled Iraq and the Kurdish region.³⁷ ISIS exploits ungarded spaces between hostile Iraqi and Kurdish forces, from which the group can attack both sides.³⁸ Federal Iraqi and Kurdish forces have maintained some coordination since the former expelled the latter from disputed areas in October 2017.³⁹ Still, distrust runs deep between the two sides: Kurdish officials accuse Baghdad of allowing ISIS to run amok in formerly stable areas, while some

³¹ A senior Iraqi security official distinguished between the organisation’s ideological elite and a larger group who might be enlisted by that core under the right circumstances. “It’s based on conditions. Since ISIS’s defeat, you have a higher proportion of ideologues. But it was different when ISIS was on the advance, when it was victorious, when it had *tamkin* (territorial and administrative control)”. Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, 27 February 2019. According to a diplomat from a Western Coalition member country: “The most worrying thing is [ISIS’s] cadre structure. They will always find soldiers to work for it, labour. What they need is a management and planning capacity, and that’s something they’ve kept. We haven’t managed to neutralise everyone”. Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, February 2019.

³² Crisis Group interviews, security officials and local residents, Baghdad, Kirkuk, Ramadi, Baquba, February, March and June 2019. Coalition officials, on the other hand, assert that ISIS is actively recruiting. Crisis Group phone interview, senior Coalition officer, July 2019; “Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress”, op. cit., pp. 42-43.

³³ Crisis Group interview, Kirkuk, March 2019.

³⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Anbar security official and senior Coalition official, May and June 2019.

³⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Iraqi security officials and Western diplomats, Baghdad, Mosul and Washington, February-April 2019. A senior Iraqi security official said Iraqi forces could prevent large-scale infiltrations, but not small groups crossing. Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, 27 February 2019.

³⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Iraqi security officials and Western diplomats, Washington, Baghdad, Kirkuk and Mosul, January-March 2019. The Coalition reports, however, that ISIS militants fleeing to Iraq from Syria “brought more funding for attacks, a more stable [command and control] node, and a logistics node for coordination of attacks”. See “Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress”, op. cit., p. 42.

³⁷ Crisis Group Middle East Report N°194, *Reviving UN Mediation on Iraq’s Disputed Internal Boundaries*, 14 December 2018.

³⁸ Crisis Group interviews, U.S. officials and security analysts, Washington and Baghdad, April and June 2019; “Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress”, op. cit., pp. 44-45.

³⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Kurdish security officials, Iraqi security analyst, Western diplomats, Erbil, Baghdad and by messaging app, March, June and July 2019.

local Arabs and Turkmen allege that the Kurds have deliberately destabilised these areas to justify the Kurdish security forces' return.⁴⁰

Since 2017, ISIS has seemed unable to penetrate Iraq's cities, including not only the capital Baghdad but also smaller municipalities such as Falluja.⁴¹ That does not mean the organisation is not trying; officials say they have frustrated plots targeting urban areas.⁴² What violence has occurred in cities – including several unclaimed bombings in Mosul and Kirkuk – is difficult to attribute to ISIS. Many suspect that the attackers were not affiliated with ISIS and were motivated instead by criminal rackets or local political rivalries.⁴³ Iraq's cities are crowded with armed actors, any of whom might resort to violence for various reasons. Some might be interested in exaggerating the role of ISIS, as it makes for a convenient scapegoat.⁴⁴ There are also persistent fears that ISIS sleeper cells lie in wait across the country.

⁴⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Kurdish security officials and Kirkuk and Diyala residents, Kirkuk, Erbil, Baghdad, Baquba, March and June 2019.

⁴¹ A senior Iraqi security official said: "In the mountains, it's easy for, say, four men to hide. And in Anbar, these are wide open, sprawling areas. But [ISIS] can't establish itself or operate in the cities". Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, 27 February 2019.

⁴² "Hawks Cell foils largest terror plot in 2019", op. cit.

⁴³ Crisis Group interviews, security analysts and Western diplomats, Erbil, Baghdad and by phone, March, May and June 2019. Mosul's investigative court announced it arrested an ISIS cell allegedly responsible for March 2019 bombings in Mosul. "Judiciary: Terrorists responsible for Mosul explosions arrested", *Al-Sumaria News*, 31 March 2019 (Arabic).

⁴⁴ One Diyala resident said: "So maybe there's an attack by an ISIS sniper – or maybe it's by someone from a militia, and it gets blamed on ISIS". Crisis Group interview, Baquba, June 2019.

III. ISIS's Cyclical Strategy

Even as ISIS in Iraq is much reduced from its 2015 height, Iraqis and their foreign partners are, understandably, still worried about the organisation's possible resurgence. As one Western diplomat put it:

The big question is whether this trajectory is a path or a circle. Is this the top of the circle, where things are looking good for the moment, but where we should expect a slow descent?⁴⁵

ISIS may be counting on that sort of cyclical pattern. Its leadership has warned Iraq's Sunnis to "repent", promising that it "is returning to the areas from which it withdrew, either sooner or later".⁴⁶ According to its own propaganda, its ultimate objective is a return to *tamkin* – "empowerment", or territorial and administrative control.⁴⁷ ISIS frames its struggle as protracted. "Our battle today is one of attrition and outlasting the enemy", said the group's leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in his 29 April 2019 video appearance.⁴⁸ This strategy is not novel.⁴⁹ It is a plan, however, to which ISIS has evidently devoted considerable thought.

Per ISIS's own literature, the group's approach in Iraq seems tailored to difficult conditions, with the aim of incremental progress toward *tamkin*.⁵⁰ ISIS's leaders recognise that counter-insurgency operations are meant to keep the movement off balance and prevent it from escalating its own campaign.⁵¹ If given the chance, the group will likely supplement its continuing low-grade violence with more complex, resource-intensive attacks.⁵²

Even as ISIS carries out its strategy, however, the group's success also depends on circumstance: it operates in an Iraq that has changed substantially since 2014,

⁴⁵ Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, February 2019.

⁴⁶ Abu al-Hassan al-Muhajir, "He was true to God, so [God] was true to him", Al-Furqan Media Foundation, 18 March 2019 (Arabic).

⁴⁷ One instance in which ISIS articulated this progression was in an editorial in its weekly newsletter after the fall of Baghouz in north-eastern Syria, in which it reminded supporters that it confronted the Iraqi military head on only after years of grinding asymmetric warfare. "The *mujahideen* in Iraq didn't seize cities and realise *tamkin* overnight, as some imagine, nor did they organise the caliphate's army and immediately enter a frontal war with the polytheists. Rather, they persisted in an exhausting war of attrition for years". *Al-Naba*, 18 April 2019.

⁴⁸ ISIS, "In the company of the leader of the faithful", op. cit.

⁴⁹ An Anbar security official noted that ISIS had previously come back from near-defeat: "They're trying now to rebuild themselves, and working like they did in 2010, 2009 – security detachments, assassinations, IEDs". Crisis Group interview, Ramadi, June 2019. For one distillation of ISIS's past strategy, see Craig Whiteside, "War, interrupted, part I: the roots of the jihadist resurgence in Iraq" and "War, interrupted, part II: from prisoners to rulers", *War on the Rocks*, 5 and 6 November 2014.

⁵⁰ For one example of the group's thinking, see a column in its weekly newsletter, in which it provided guidance as to the appropriate mix of low-cost, high-volume violence and resource-intensive, high-impact attacks, depending on context and timing. *Al-Naba*, 25 July 2019, p. 8, available in translation at "Islamic State: Substantial, continuous 'returns'", Abu al-Jamajem (blog), 11 August 2019.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 3, available in translation at "Islamic State: 'In the eyes of his enemies an army of heroes ...'", Abu al-Jamajem (blog), 11 August 2019.

⁵² Ibid., p. 8. The column recommends that, as the ISIS unit strengthens, it carry out a mix of high- and low-cost operations to make full use of its capabilities.

mostly to the jihadists' detriment. Key shifts in Iraqi politics, security and society may present an opportunity to prevent ISIS's cyclical return.

A. *Breaking the Cycle*

Iraqis describe a major change in the country's mood, and, in particular, in Iraqi Sunni Arabs' relationship to the body politic.⁵³

ISIS surged in 2013 and 2014 at a period of exceptional sectarian polarisation in Iraq. Sunni Arab political forces had mounted nationwide protests as part of a broad-based mobilisation against the government led by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki – "Shiite Baghdad", as many Sunni Arabs saw it. Iraqis describe a confluence of motivations among Sunni Arabs who opposed Baghdad at the time, including resentment of the security services' heavy-handed treatment; rejection of the post-2003 Iraqi political order, which apportioned power along ethno-sectarian lines and turned Sunni Arabs into a political minority; and hostility to Iranian influence. These sentiments were mutually reinforcing and, for many at the time, not easily distinguishable.⁵⁴

ISIS is a sectarian supremacist organisation; its sole constituency and recruiting pool is Sunnis. The group is strengthened if it can polarise Iraq on sectarian lines and pit the country's (non-Kurdish) Sunnis, as a bloc, against the rest of the country. Its violence has long aimed to aggravate the sectarian divisions that emerged after the 2003 U.S. invasion and reshape Iraqi politics along those lines.⁵⁵

In 2019, however, in the wake of Iraq's military campaign against ISIS, sectarian political polarisation seems to have faded. Sectarian division persists on a social level. Local controversies sometimes take on a sectarian dimension, and criticism of Iran is occasionally difficult to distinguish from anti-Shiism.⁵⁶ Still, on the whole, Iraq is moving away from sectarian politics. Iraqi politicians and leaders (with a few exceptions, most of whom live in exile) have abandoned sectarian agitation as a rhetorical theme.⁵⁷ Rejection of Iraq's post-2003 order, as a political rallying point for Sunni Arabs, also seems to have dropped off.⁵⁸ While it is debatable how much Iraqi

⁵³ ISIS presents itself as the champion of all Sunnis, regardless of ethnicity or nationality. In Iraq, though, it has traditionally drawn its strength mainly from Sunni Arabs and (to some extent) Sunni Turkmen. Sunni Kurds have been much less involved.

⁵⁴ See Crisis Group Report, *Make or Break*, op. cit.; Crisis Group Report, *Falluja's Faustian Bargain*, op. cit.

⁵⁵ Sectarian polarisation was the central premise of the strategic framework that ISIS forefather Abu Musab al-Zarqawi pitched to al-Qaeda's international leadership circa January 2004. U.S. Department of State, "Zarqawi Letter", February 2004.

⁵⁶ A dispute between Mosul's Sunni and Shiite Islamic endowments over custodianship of properties around the city has upset a larger segment of local Sunnis, for example. See Adnan Abu Zeeb, "Sunnis accuse Shiites of expanding influence in Mosul", *Al-Monitor*, 17 July 2019. One Mosul resident told Crisis Group that the Saddam-era military officers populating the city were responsible for tinging this dispute with sectarian animus: "It was planted in their minds that their first enemy is Iran, before Israel. ... Even an atheist can be sectarian". Crisis Group interview, Mosul, March 2019.

⁵⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Iraq, February, March and June 2019.

⁵⁸ ISIS tapped revisionist energy regionally, with its ostentatious erasure of the Iraqi-Syrian border and repudiation of all the Arab world's "Sykes-Picot" boundaries. See ISIS, "Breaking the borders", al-Itisam Media Foundation, 29 June 2014 (Arabic). For more on the struggle over Iraq's post-2003

political elites – of all sects – represent the Iraqi public, those elites tend now to cooperate across sectarian lines.⁵⁹ On the grassroots level, the experience of the war against ISIS also played an important role in mobilising young Iraqis to participate in cross-sectarian civic activism.⁶⁰

Iraq's Sunni Arabs also now have a clearer idea of what ISIS represents. The group existed before 2014, but before then had never managed to impose its full, draconian control on any community. In 2013 and 2014, ISIS infiltrated a Sunni mass movement led by politicians, tribal figures and clerics, one that encompassed various political trends. When protests turned to armed rebellion, some “tribal revolutionaries” and “military councils” saw ISIS as a useful ally.⁶¹ At least at the outset, ISIS coexisted with other insurgent forces.⁶² It also made effective use of general confusion nationwide; amid the chaotic collapse of the Iraqi security forces in June 2014, for example, it was not clear to some Mosul residents who had actually captured their city.⁶³ Sunni residents of these areas had an approximate understanding of ISIS as a continuation of the “resistance” and “jihad” against U.S. forces and Baghdad that began in 2004.⁶⁴ It was only after ISIS took over and imposed its total, brutal control that they grasped how ISIS differed from other opposition trends. By then it was too late.

For most residents of areas seized by ISIS, the organisation's control was a sudden fait accompli. As ISIS recruited locals to scale up into a mass force, most of those who joined appeared not to be ideologues. Residents of these areas believe that most of the recruits were local youth with no defined ideological direction who were uneducated, aggrieved or seeking money and power.⁶⁵

order and the salience of sectarian politics, see Fanar Haddad, “The Waning Relevance of the Sunni-Shia Divide”, The Century Foundation, 10 April 2019.

⁵⁹ According to a Western diplomat: “Since 2018, the elite factions have learned to accommodate each other through a loose set of rules. ISIS is obviously excluded from that, but so is the electorate”. Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, February 2019.

⁶⁰ Activists have organised trips for Anbar youth to neighbouring Najaf and Karbala provinces, for example. Crisis Group interviews, Iraqi activists, Baghdad and Ramadi, June 2019.

⁶¹ See Crisis Group Report, *Falluja's Faustian Bargain*, op. cit. According to an Anbar tribal sheikh: “People started to be convinced that they needed an armed wing, to support the Sunnis. They said, ‘The Shiites have the army, the police, militias. And the enemy of my enemy is my friend’. So some tribal leaders began to have meetings with ISIS commanders. Not so [ISIS] could take over, but so they might back them up, as a force that's present and capable”. Crisis Group phone interview, 7 July 2019.

⁶² According to a Falluja activist, ISIS originally entered the city as “tribal revolutionaries”: “They told people, ‘I want to achieve your goals and demands – a Sunni region, separate from the central government’. And people accepted that. Then they started to impose their control”. Crisis Group interview, Falluja, June 2019.

⁶³ One Mosul resident said some locals celebrated because they thought the city's fall marked the return of the Iraqi Baath Party. Crisis Group interview, Mosul, March 2019.

⁶⁴ A Mosul resident told Crisis Group: “There had been a duality in the personality of someone from Mosul [before the city's fall]. If someone wasn't ISIS, he wouldn't want to live with ISIS. But so long as he wasn't hurt by it directly, he'd turn a blind eye. And if he saw ISIS blow up the security forces, inside he'd feel a little happiness”. Crisis Group interview, Mosul, March 2019.

⁶⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Kirkuk, Mosul, Falluja, Ramadi, February, March and June 2019. One Mosul resident said men in the city joined for a job or for status. “Just joining the organisation forced everyone to respect you. However low or suspect we knew someone had been in the past, as

Ordinary residents who were not drawn into ISIS had to survive first the group's brutal rule, and then the wrenching experience of liberation by Iraq's security forces, which left swathes of cities razed. After that, Iraqis say, most of them want no more of ISIS.⁶⁶ One Anbar native said locals would accept nearly anything else. "Even the idea of Shiite or Iranian influence is totally accepted", he said. "It's better than ISIS. They're both bad, but ISIS is worse".⁶⁷ There is little evident appetite in these shattered towns and cities for opposing Baghdad, for fear of inviting ISIS back. Next to ISIS, a dysfunctional Iraqi state is preferable.

That change in the Sunni mood has contributed to a more functional relationship between Sunni Arabs and the security forces, as those forces have, for their part, worked to deal more respectfully with the local population.⁶⁸ Iraqi officials say the security forces' previous mistreatment of Sunni Arab residents – which had included humiliating treatment at checkpoints, arbitrary arrests and sweeping terror prosecutions – had to improve.⁶⁹ According to officials, residents of these areas now cooperate with the security forces, reporting on local ISIS movements.⁷⁰ "Things are good because of the people, not the security forces", said a Ninewa military official. "The mood has changed; it's not like before. Before, people worked like an intelligence service for al-Qaeda and ISIS".⁷¹

ISIS has also lost the clandestine networks it spent years building in places like Mosul before 2014, with which it extorted, assassinated and generally terrorised local residents.⁷² When the group seized control, it pulled many of its underground agents and sympathisers to the surface.⁷³ That these people are now exposed may be one reason why ISIS has retreated to natural cover in mountains and deserts.

soon as he pledged allegiance, we were forced to pay him respect". Crisis Group interview, Mosul, March 2019.

⁶⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Baghdad, Kirkuk, Mosul, Baquba, Falluja and Ramadi, February, March and June 2019.

⁶⁷ Crisis Group interview, Ramadi, June 2019.

⁶⁸ Crisis Group interviews, February, March and June 2019.

⁶⁹ A Kirkuk security official said: "It's very important to win [people's] trust. Not for the security forces to come in and say, 'You're all ISIS, you all welcomed them'". Crisis Group interview, Kirkuk, March 2019.

⁷⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Iraqi civilian and security-military officials, Mosul, Ramadi, Falluja, March and June 2019.

⁷¹ A civilian Mosul official echoed this view: "[ISIS] used to have wells of support, people who would welcome them into their homes, and who knew they would blow up the army". Now, he said, locals readily report known ISIS elements or suspicious strangers in their neighbourhoods. Crisis Group interview, Mosul, March 2019.

⁷² One Mosul public employee recalled that when ISIS commandeered the municipal and provincial administrative apparatus, it installed the operatives previously responsible for secretly extorting employees in various public offices as those offices' heads. Crisis Group interview, Mosul, March 2019. For one account of ISIS's mafia-style control in Mosul, see Letta Taylor, "Before the Fall", *Foreign Policy*, 13 June 2014.

⁷³ Crisis Group phone interview, analyst Michael Knights, March 2019; Iraqi security official and Iraqi security analyst, Baghdad, June 2019. In areas ISIS never overran, its networks may still be intact. One Iraqi security analyst said: "In areas that were under ISIS, the sleeper cells appeared. They haven't been allowed to come back since – now they're known, and they've been cleaned out. But not somewhere like [Baghdad suburb] Tarmiya; those working with ISIS weren't exposed". Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, June 2019.

Reconstituting these support networks will be a major undertaking, one that many Sunni Arabs now seem prepared to resist. Officials and residents appear confident that they know who worked with ISIS and even who, in their eyes, was too close to the group's members as friends or family to be trusted now.⁷⁴ They seem ready to keep those people out of their towns and villages. (The exclusion of those civilian residents marked as "ISIS-affiliated" poses its own risks for Iraq's social cohesion and stability – see below, on "ISIS families".) Moreover, Iraqis' tight communal ties facilitate a return of effective state control. With liaisons like *mukhtars* between the security services and ordinary people, the government can frustrate ISIS attempts to re-enter most towns.⁷⁵ With time, Iraqi Sunnis' bad memories of ISIS could fade but are unlikely to vanish entirely.

ISIS militants will not lay down their arms just because most Iraqis dislike them. Indeed, Iraqis suspect that part of the reason for the group's persistence is that it retains some base of sympathisers and collaborators.⁷⁶ But to fully reassert itself ISIS would presumably have to augment its core with new recruits – Iraqis who might become involved with the group's activities only if circumstances push them to it. An unfriendly Sunni population seems likely to hamper reconstitution of national ISIS networks, constraining its numerical and geographic expansion.

On the battlefield, the Iraqi military and security forces have kept the initiative against ISIS.⁷⁷ These forces, chronically weak since the U.S.-led Coalition Provisional Authority gutted them in 2003, collapsed before ISIS's advance in 2014. Today, they still lack key capabilities, which has limited their progress against ISIS.⁷⁸ They remain a patchwork of formal units and paramilitary forces, including al-Hashd al-Shaabi (the Popular Mobilization Forces) formed in response to Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani's fatwa in 2014. They also suffer problems of internal coordination, including among competing intelligence agencies. Still, ISIS's military defeat has boosted the security forces' morale, and Coalition support has reinforced units such as the elite Counter-Terrorism Service.

Where the Iraqi security forces lack capacity, they can rely on the U.S.-led international coalition. Coalition member countries provide training and equipment to various elements of the Iraqi security forces.⁷⁹ Coalition members also contribute to

⁷⁴ A Kirkuk security official said: "Villagers know who was ISIS and who wasn't. The ones who are known are arrested. So, in a village, we'll know there were twenty ISIS members, and who among them has been killed or detained". Crisis Group interview, Kirkuk, March 2019.

⁷⁵ According to a Ramadi *mukhtar*, "We have a system: 'No strangers live here'". Crisis Group interview, Ramadi, June 2019.

⁷⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Baghdad, Mosul and Baquba, March and June 2019.

⁷⁷ Since July 2019, for example, Iraqi security forces have carried out a series of large-scale joint operations branded Will of Victory. "Launch of Operation Will of Victory to pursue cells in several provinces. ... Statement of 'support' from Abdel Mahdi", NAS News, 7 July 2019 (Arabic).

⁷⁸ The Coalition says gains from Iraqi clearing operations have been "limited" because Iraqi security forces lack sufficient forces to hold areas that have been cleared, which allows ISIS fighters to withdraw and then later return. "Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress", op. cit., p. 43.

⁷⁹ This assistance includes specialised training in, for example, paramilitary policing. Crisis Group interviews, senior Coalition officer and Western diplomats, Washington, Baghdad and by phone, February and July 2019.

ongoing counter-ISIS operations, though their forces no longer regularly accompany Iraqi security forces on the battlefield. Instead, they play a primarily advisory role, providing Iraq with vital technical capabilities, including intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance and air support.⁸⁰ Iraqi security forces rely on these capacities to maintain pressure on ISIS in rural environs.⁸¹ Despite Coalition partners' efforts to build up Iraq's air force, for now Iraq depends on the Coalition.⁸²

B. *Or Another Turn of the Wheel?*

Still, drivers of insecurity and conflict persist in Iraq. Some of these directly benefit ISIS, while others threaten Iraq's stability in ways that ISIS could exploit.

First, Iraq will not be able to rely on Coalition assistance in pursuing ISIS for ever. Some Iraqi political and paramilitary factions have raised objections to the continuing U.S. role in Iraq, particularly after airstrikes on Iran-linked Hashd units allegedly carried out by Israel in July and August 2019. Powerful Hashd figures have accused the U.S. of complicity in the strikes, which coincided with Israeli strikes on Iran's local partners in Lebanon and Syria and came amid sky-high U.S.-Iranian tensions regionally.⁸³ Parliamentarians have previously proposed legislation demanding that U.S. and other foreign forces leave Iraq; already suspicious of U.S. intentions, they are no longer convinced of the need for a U.S. presence.⁸⁴

At present, it seems unlikely that Iraq's parliament will vote to push international forces out of the country. Still, if regional U.S.-Iranian tensions spill into Iraq, they could prompt attacks by Iraqi paramilitary factions against U.S. targets. The results would be unpredictable, but at least one possibility is that the foreign Coalition presence in Iraq could become increasingly untenable. If U.S. forces leave, so will most other international Coalition partners, which rely on the U.S. to operate in Iraq.⁸⁵

⁸⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Iraqi security officials and Coalition officials, Baghdad, Kirkuk, Mosul, Washington and Beirut, January-June 2019.

⁸¹ A Kirkuk security official told Crisis Group that the areas in which ISIS is now concentrated require overhead surveillance provided by the Coalition. "It's a wide area", said a local tribal paramilitary leader about Kirkuk's Hawija countryside. "The only way to control it is from the air". Crisis Group interviews, Kirkuk, March 2019.

⁸² Crisis Group interview, senior Coalition officer, phone, 23 July 2019.

⁸³ "Al-Muhandis reveals results of investigations into bombing of arms storehouses ... and announces 'deterrent' measures", NAS News, 21 August 2019 (Arabic). U.S. officials speaking anonymously have said Israel is responsible for several strikes in Iraq, though other officials have disputed those accounts. Alissa J. Rubin and Ronen Bergman, "Israeli airstrike hits weapons depot in Iraq", *The New York Times*, 22 August 2019. The Pentagon has denied any role in attacks in Iraq in 2019, saying it supports Iraqi sovereignty and "has repeatedly spoken out against any potential actions by external actors inciting violence in Iraq". U.S. Department of Defense, "Statement on recent attacks in Iraq", 26 August 2019.

⁸⁴ Crisis Group phone interview, Iraqi analyst and adviser to the prime minister's office, 10 August 2019. The Iraqi parliament's Hashd-linked Fatah Coalition echoed doubts about the U.S. presence in a 25 August statement condemning airstrikes on Hashd units that day: "We believe that this American presence, which supposedly protects [Iraqi] airspace even as it provides cover for all these Zionist attacks, is not necessary". "Fatah Coalition", Facebook, 11:24pm, 15 August 2019 (Arabic).

⁸⁵ According to a Coalition member country diplomat: "The problem is that if you get rid of the Americans, you don't have the infrastructure to support the rest of the Coalition. So the rest would

Iraq will lose Coalition member contributions of training and materiel that might help Iraq ultimately achieve self-sufficiency, as well as the Coalition's technical capabilities that, in the near term, enable Iraq's counter-ISIS efforts on the battlefield.

If Iraqi forces struggle to patrol the country's mountains and desert, ISIS will have space to coalesce. That refuge, in turn, could allow it to mount more sophisticated attacks. A senior Iraqi military officer put it bluntly: "We cannot defeat ISIS without air support from Coalition forces".⁸⁶ Many Iraqi officials privately recognise the continued necessity of U.S. and Coalition support, and U.S. troops have consciously adopted a less visible role in Iraq so as not to look like an occupying force and thus inflame Iraqi opinion.⁸⁷ Still, if the Hashd comes under attack again from Israel or any other foreign party, or U.S.-Iranian tensions escalate, the U.S. and Coalition role in Iraq could come to an abrupt and unplanned end.⁸⁸

Even with Coalition assistance, Iraq faces the challenge of securing its periphery, including areas like rural Ninewa and Kirkuk's Hawija countryside. That challenge is, in turn, related closely to the continuing displacement of those areas' residents. A reported 1.7 million Iraqis remain internally displaced after the war with ISIS. Many are unwilling to return to destroyed towns, with no jobs and public services.⁸⁹ Some have gone home, only to find living there impossible, and left again.⁹⁰ The threat of night raids by ISIS is another barrier to return. Residents do not trust the security forces to defend them.⁹¹ Yet their reluctance to return also perpetuates the ISIS threat. One Kirkuk security official said:

When displaced people don't return, that leaves their villages empty. That gives terrorists space to enter those villages and use them as bases for operations. And village residents are an important source of information [for the security forces].⁹²

be swept out, even if they're not included in a resolution". Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, February 2019.

⁸⁶ Crisis Group phone interview, senior Iraqi military officer, 5 August 2019. See also Crisis Group Briefing, *Evading the Gathering Storm*, op. cit.

⁸⁷ U.S. forces mainly remain inside Iraqi military bases. Crisis Group interviews, Iraqi and Western officials, Washington and Baghdad, January-February 2019. According to one U.S. official: "We constantly emphasise our respect for Iraqi sovereignty, and that we're there at their request. We say, 'We're here for you,' in public and private. And privately, everyone understands the ISIS threat". Crisis Group interview, Washington, January 2019.

⁸⁸ In a television interview, the commander of one major Iran-linked Hashd faction said: "If a war happens, the Americans [in Iraq] are all hostages of the Resistance's factions". "Perspective – exclusive audience with the Secretary-General of Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada, Abu Alaa al-Walai" (Arabic), video, YouTube, 28 August 2019.

⁸⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Iraqi officials, Iraqi and international humanitarian workers, Baghdad, Baquba and by phone, February, June-July 2019. See also REACH, "National level movement intentions of IDPs in camps – Feb 2019", 22 April 2019.

⁹⁰ According to a local *mukhtar* responsible for a displacement camp: "I've had people leave for home for five or six months, then return here. They were just sitting around, with no work". Crisis Group interview, June 2019.

⁹¹ Crisis Group interviews, Iraqi humanitarian workers and Kirkuk residents, Baquba and Kirkuk, February, March and June 2019.

⁹² Crisis Group interview, Kirkuk, March 2019.

Protracted internal displacement has other risks for the estimated 450,000 Iraqis living in camps.⁹³ Iraqis and humanitarian workers describe harsh conditions in these camps, as residents suffer violations including sexual abuse and exploitation.⁹⁴ Some report lasting psychological effects on camp residents and those who have returned from the camps to their home areas.⁹⁵ Iraqis fear that the camps, if they persist, could become hothouses of anger and militancy.⁹⁶ Iraqi security forces also worry that camp residents will provide aid to local militants.⁹⁷ Still, humanitarian agencies have resisted government efforts to evict families from camps, pushing instead for residents' voluntary return to their homes.⁹⁸

"ISIS families", as they are popularly known in Iraq, present an additional dilemma. These civilians, including women and children, have been expelled by their home areas because of their alleged family ties to ISIS militants.⁹⁹ Many are marooned in displacement camps. In some cases, they are prevented from returning by unresolved investigations into their relatives' activities or their own lack of documentation, which also precludes them from gaining access to services and enrolling their children in school.¹⁰⁰ Many also face the threat of violence from their own communities.¹⁰¹ Collective punishment of "ISIS families" represents the dark side of Iraq's tightly knit communities and their willingness to police themselves.¹⁰² As time pass-

⁹³ REACH, "IDP camp directory: comparative dashboard & camp profiles: round XI", April 2019.

⁹⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Iraqi and foreign humanitarian workers, Baghdad, Baquba, Ramadi, February, March and June 2019. For more on the hardships of displacement in Iraq, see Belkis Wille, "Iraq: Not a Homecoming", Human Rights Watch, 14 June 2019.

⁹⁵ An Iraqi humanitarian worker said camp residents seem "brutalised", particularly children. "With families who've come back from the camps, when we come to distribute food or non-food items, it's impossible to organise them or to order them by name. They just pounce". Crisis Group interview, Ramadi, June 2019.

⁹⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Iraqi civilian and security officials, Baghdad, Mosul and by phone, February, April and June 2019.

⁹⁷ Crisis Group interviews, senior Coalition officer and humanitarians, Ramadi and by phone, June and July 2019.

⁹⁸ Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian workers, Ramadi and by phone, June and July 2019. According to one: "You don't want a child to grow up in a camp. It's in everybody's best interest for the camps to close. But we also don't want them to suffer a new trauma". Crisis Group interview, Ramadi, June 2019. The return of displaced people is also complicated by local politics. Some Iraqis allege that officials and others use camps to carry out corrupt schemes and to muster votes for electoral advantage. Crisis Group interviews, residents, Kirkuk, Baquba and Mosul, February, March and June 2019.

⁹⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Iraqis, Baghdad, Baquba, Mosul, Ramadi, Falluja, February and June 2019. For more, see Elizabeth Tsurkov and Basma Alloush, "Among displaced Iraqis, one group is worse off than the rest", *Foreign Policy*, 29 April 2019.

¹⁰⁰ "Iraq: School Doors Barred to Many Children", Human Rights Watch, 28 August 2019.

¹⁰¹ According to an Iraqi humanitarian worker who works with the displaced: "Some people have gone back home for less than a week before returning [to the camp], because of threats and violations. Some have had husbands kidnapped or killed, one or two days after getting back. ... Some people say they're ISIS, then people come and kill them". Crisis Group interview, June 2019.

¹⁰² A Ramadi *mukhtar* said local residents knew who the "ISIS families" were and refused to let them return. "People who lived here under ISIS know them; they know who ate and drank with ISIS". Crisis Group interview, Ramadi, June 2019. A Sunni politician said: "[These people are] being punished for something we [in Iraq's government and society] did: the government abandoned them when ISIS took over, and they were left there for four years. Now they're in these open-air

es and those still in camps are increasingly assumed to be “ISIS families”, that perception may translate into harsher treatment for all the displaced.¹⁰³

Many Iraqis recognise that “ISIS families” need to be reintegrated into society, not permanently ostracised. Some militants’ relatives have managed to facilitate their own return by formally renouncing their family members in court.¹⁰⁴ The Iraqi government has helped mediate individual settlements, but it has been unable to devise a comprehensive solution.¹⁰⁵ Without action, these people could become a permanent underclass. Even “ISIS families” able to live in their home areas face discrimination.¹⁰⁶ If they cannot reintegrate, some Iraqis fear, their children will themselves subsequently turn to militancy or seek revenge.¹⁰⁷ Yet this very stigma – the notion that these children could be “radicalised” – also risks pushing them into dangerous behaviour. (Iraqis additionally worry about the effects of ISIS’s occupation, whether the group’s ideological influence or the trauma of the war, on all children who lived through its control.¹⁰⁸)

Some also fear that efforts to bring ISIS members to justice will deepen the country’s divisions. Iraqis describe episodes of spontaneous revenge by security forces and local residents as they retook areas from ISIS.¹⁰⁹ Since then, Iraq’s legal system has reasserted itself. Yet Iraq’s post-ISIS justice seems primarily retributive. Prosecutions rely largely on Iraq’s sweeping counter-terrorism law, which criminalises ISIS membership or aid to the group and carries punishments of life imprisonment

prisons. It’s against international law, Iraqi law, the Sharia”. Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, 21 June 2019.

¹⁰³ Several Iraqi officials told Crisis Group that a majority of camp residents are “ISIS families”. Crisis Group interviews, Mosul, Ramadi and by phone, March, June and July 2019.

¹⁰⁴ An Anbar tribal sheikh acknowledged that it was difficult for some to renounce their family members. But he also said: “There are people who’ve refused to renounce [their family members who joined ISIS]. But those people have no place here. ... When [someone] doesn’t renounce [his son who fought with ISIS], he becomes loyal to ISIS, loyal to those murderers”. Crisis Group phone interview, 7 July 2019.

¹⁰⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Iraqi officials, Baghdad, Ramadi and by phone, February and July 2019. For one discarded draft plan, see “Iraq: Confining Families With Alleged ISIS Ties Unlawful”, Human Rights Watch, 7 May 2019. Crisis Group interviews, Iraqi officials, June 2019. There seems to be little discussion of third-area resettlement of these families.

¹⁰⁶ An international humanitarian worker described one community meeting: “They clearly told me, ‘We have a situation’, where the children of ISIS family members are not even accepted by schools. Some families have indicated that if you see the kids of so-and-so, they were the ones who killed your father, or your brother”. Crisis Group phone interview, 9 July 2019.

¹⁰⁷ An Iraqi journalist said: “Even if a mother doesn’t raise her child on jihadist thought, if a son sees his mother in a camp, if his mother is raped, what will the result be? He’ll ask, ‘Why am I in a camp, just because my father was in ISIS?’” Crisis Group phone interview, 1 April 2019. A Sunni politician said: “Imagine the generation that will emerge from this. A child who hates his father, and hates his community, who has no TV or school. He can’t understand why. He’s a child, and he doesn’t know what happened”. Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, 21 June 2019.

¹⁰⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Kirkuk and Mosul, February–March 2019. Many children missed years of school during ISIS’s reign, though some have returned with the help of “catch-up” classes. Crisis Group interviews, Ramadi residents, Ramadi, June 2019.

¹⁰⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Mosul, Baquba, Ramadi, March and June 2019. See also “Ruinous Aftermath”, Human Rights Watch, 20 September 2015; “Iraq: Execution Site Near Mosul’s Old City”, Human Rights Watch, 19 July 2017.

and death.¹¹⁰ The UN has said Iraq's legal system is "marred by very serious structural problems".¹¹¹ Thousands accused of ISIS membership or related offences have been convicted and sentenced to death.¹¹² Iraqi courts have also been vulnerable to error and abuse, as confusion between names on lists of fugitives and false, malicious charges of ISIS involvement have landed innocents in extended detention before Iraq's slow-moving judicial bureaucracy can clear them.¹¹³ Investigatory and judicial processes have improved in some courts, but not necessarily system-wide.¹¹⁴ Authorities hold ISIS and non-ISIS prisoners in the same detention facilities, raising concerns that ISIS members might recruit or organise other inmates, as happened before in Iraqi prisons mismanaged by the U.S.¹¹⁵

Some Iraqis question the fairness of post-ISIS justice, or ask about the fate of those who disappeared during and after the military campaign against the group.¹¹⁶ But most Iraqis who spoke to Crisis Group seemed unconcerned about the consequences of harsh, punitive measures, for which there is a large popular constituency. Many Iraqis who lived through ISIS's relentless violence – not only from 2014, but from its predecessors in previous years – seem comfortable with an unforgiving approach.

Some residents of areas retaken from ISIS now feel that Iraqis elsewhere in the country regard them as complicit in the group's actions.¹¹⁷ According to one Diyala sheikh:

¹¹⁰ The counter-terrorism law entails less demanding evidentiary standards and can deliver indiscriminate sentences irrespective of an ISIS member's individual crimes. Judges can also issue reduced sentences at their discretion. "Flawed Justice", op. cit. For the law's text, see Supreme Judicial Council, "Counterterrorism Law no. 13/2005" (Arabic).

¹¹¹ UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, "UN Expert Urges Efforts from France for the Return of 7 Nationals Awaiting Execution in Iraq", 12 August 2019.

¹¹² Qassim Abdul-Zahra and Susannah George, "Iraq holding more than 19,000 because of IS, militant ties", Associated Press, 22 March 2018.

¹¹³ Crisis Group interviews, residents and officials, Mosul, March 2019. In a report leaked in March 2019, an Iraqi parliamentary fact-finding commission reported malicious filing of false accusations of ISIS involvement in Iraqi courts. "Al-Sumaria News publishes Ninewa fact-finding commission report", *Al-Sumaria News*, 14 March 2019 (Arabic). On harsh prison conditions, see, for example, "Iraq: Thousands Detained, Including Children, in Degrading Conditions", Human Rights Watch, 4 July 2019.

¹¹⁴ "Iraq: Key Courts Improve ISIS Trial Procedures", Human Rights Watch, 13 March 2019. Security officials say they are aware of these problems and are working to address them. Crisis Group interviews, Iraqi security officials, Mosul and Ramadi, March and June 2019.

¹¹⁵ "Fears of new jihadist 'academies' as Iraqi jails fill up", *France 24*, 9 May 2019. One security official said he was unconcerned about this mixing. He said his staff monitor the inmates and recruit prison informants to disrupt any plotting. Crisis Group interview, Ramadi, June 2019. An interior ministry official told the Associated Press that Iraq would never allow a repeat of what happened in U.S.-run prisons: "The Americans freed their captives; under Iraq, they will all receive the death penalty". "Iraq holding more than 19,000 because of IS, militant ties", op. cit.

¹¹⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Baquba, Kirkuk and Mosul, February, March and June 2019. One Kirkuk resident said some of those convicted for ISIS membership might not deserve the death penalty. He added: "One of the problems that created ISIS was that there was no justice". Crisis Group interview, Kirkuk, February 2019.

¹¹⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Kirkuk, Mosul, Baquba, February, March and June 2019.

One of a thousand people was ISIS. But because of that one person, that's held against five hundred households. There were ISIS members in those areas, but you could count them on your fingers.¹¹⁸

Some Hashd factions' behaviour in post-ISIS areas also upsets residents. The Hashd still plays an important part in providing security nationwide, and critically discussing the Hashd's role can be sensitive; many Iraqis are fiercely defensive of the paramilitary groups and their fighters' sacrifices in the fight against ISIS.¹¹⁹ Still, residents of some Sunni-majority areas resent non-local Hashd factions that have remained after the battle and intervened unaccountably in local politics and business.¹²⁰

Iraq also faces numerous non-ISIS threats to its stability, including state weakness, a lethargic economy, under-investment in public services and infrastructure, and a mental health crisis compounded by decades of war.¹²¹ These are national problems, felt in Iraq's southern Basra province as much as in Diyala, and have helped drive the country's latest wave of unrest.¹²² Still, these Iraq issues manifest particularly acutely in some of Iraq's post-ISIS areas, even as their traumatised residents have not joined in the protests that have taken place nationwide.

In the two years since defeating ISIS, the Iraqi government has made only minimal progress rebuilding post-ISIS areas and reviving their local economies. Residents report that reconstruction has been halting or non-existent; wreckage is hard for a visitor to miss. These locals blame the government for its failure to rebuild their areas or pay out compensation for war damage, and additionally complain that international donors have failed to deliver.¹²³ There is no reason to assume local resentment will lead residents directly back to ISIS, particularly given their bitter recent experi-

¹¹⁸ Crisis Group interview, Baquba, June 2019.

¹¹⁹ The U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency has said the Hashd's effect on countering ISIS is still a "net positive". "Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress", op. cit., p. 53. Crisis Group Middle East Report N°188, *Iraq's Paramilitary Groups: The Challenge of Rebuilding a Functioning State*, 30 July 2018.

¹²⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Western diplomats and Iraqi civilians, Baghdad, Kirkuk, Mosul and by phone, February-July 2019. In a 1 July edict, Prime Minister Adel Abdel-Mahdi directed the Hashd's factions to cease political activities and close "economic offices", among other steps. Office of the Prime Minister, "Cabinet Head and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces Mr. Adel Abdel-Mahdi issues administrative order no. 237 on the mobilisation, out of belief in its fighters and in order to guarantee and safeguard its forces and provide for the continuity of their work", 1 July 2019 (Arabic). See also Isadora Gotts, "PMU economic offices undermine fragile stability in Mosul", *Al-Monitor*, 27 May 2019.

¹²¹ Crisis Group interviews, Iraq, February and June 2019. See also Annie Slemrod, "Iraq's growing mental health problem", *The New Humanitarian*, 16 January 2017.

¹²² Ahmed Aboulenein and Ahmed Rasheed, "Stagnant politics, graft and slow recovery fuel new Iraqi unrest", Reuters, 2 October 2019.

¹²³ Crisis Group interviews and observations, February, March and June 2019. One Kirkuk resident said: "The community feels despair". Crisis Group interview, Kirkuk, February 2019. Baghdad's international partners have also been alarmed by what they consider the Iraqi government's failure to take post-ISIS stabilisation and reconstruction seriously. Crisis Group interviews, Western officials, Baghdad and Beirut, February, May and June 2019. One said: "I don't want to be so pessimistic. What would make me more relaxed would be if I got the sense the [Iraqi] government itself sensed the urgency – that it sees the problem and gets the needs. I don't get that sense". Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, February 2019.

ence with the group's rule. Still, both Iraqis and Iraq's foreign partners worry about what might happen if these areas remain ruined and economically depressed.¹²⁴

Mosul, ISIS's former de facto capital, is an extreme example of post-war dysfunction.¹²⁵ Two years after the jihadists' defeat, security in the city is the best it has been in years.¹²⁶ Yet key infrastructure is demolished, and large swathes of the city's Right Side – the western bank of the Tigris River, including the Old City, which suffered the city's most destructive fighting in 2017 – are in ruins.¹²⁷ Only one of the five bridges across the Tigris is intact, preventing Right Side residents from participating in an economy now centred in the Left Side.¹²⁸ One resident said: "If I had money, I'd leave. ... We'd all be on the Left Side, if we could".¹²⁹ What smaller-scale rebuilding has taken place has mostly been the work of individual residents with some assistance from international non-governmental organisations.¹³⁰ Yet major public works like repairs to the bridges require large-scale investment by the federal government.¹³¹

On the Right Side, residents living in ruins say they do not want ISIS back.¹³² But unless something changes, what sort of future awaits them? A Ninewa military official said:

Three months ago, we captured a group of youth who had rejoined ISIS. We asked them, 'Why?' They said, 'We don't have any resources to live'. ISIS had started giving them 60,000 Iraqi dinars [\$30] a month.¹³³

Many Iraqis who spoke to Crisis Group expressed concern about a new iteration of militancy – not ISIS, necessarily – that could tap this popular discontent.¹³⁴ Iraqis

¹²⁴ According to a Ramadi imam: "The best way to make Iraqis love their country is to satisfy them materially. Everyone who turned to ISIS did it because they thought it might improve their lives. Part of combating terrorism is combating poverty". Crisis Group interview, Ramadi, June 2019. A U.S. official noted that ISIS may now be hiding out in rural Anbar, but asked: "What is its ability to operate in Ramadi, if, in eighteen months, unemployment is 60 per cent?" Crisis Group interview, Washington, April 2019.

¹²⁵ Roughly one fifth of all Iraq's internally displaced persons are from Mosul. "Mosul: Over 300,000 Still Unable to Go Back Home Two Years since End of War", Norwegian Refugee Council, 4 July 2019.

¹²⁶ Local officials described how militants would terrorise the city in the years before 2014, targeting minorities and state representatives. One said: "Before 2014, it was impossible to walk in the street in Mosul. No one in the local government would walk in the street or go to [visit] neighbours". Crisis Group interviews, Mosul, March 2019.

¹²⁷ The city still has no fully functioning hospital, though it does have working health centres. Right Side residents live amid destroyed buildings marked with spray paint to indicate the unexploded ordnance and dead bodies within. Crisis Group observations and interviews, residents, Mosul, March 2019.

¹²⁸ Municipal authorities have "patched" two other bridges with connectors, allowing a limited number of vehicles to cross. Crisis Group interview, city official, Mosul, March 2019.

¹²⁹ Crisis Group interview, Mosul, March 2019.

¹³⁰ Crisis Group interviews, city and Ninewa provincial officials and residents, Mosul, March 2019.

¹³¹ Crisis Group interviews, local officials, Mosul, March 2019. According to one: "The local government can keep providing services and removing rubble, but it doesn't have the means to rebuild a city. Restoring the Right Side is beyond its means". Crisis Group interview, Ninewa official, March 2019.

¹³² One Old City resident told Crisis Group: "If the organisation tries to return, we'll be lying in wait for it. No more ISIS. No more". Crisis Group interview, Mosul, March 2019.

¹³³ Crisis Group interview, Mosul, March 2019.

speculate that a new militant Sunni Islamist group could appear, or that ISIS could somehow rebrand.

ISIS's leadership seems intent on exploiting Iraqi Sunnis' litany of complaints to its own ends. Its spokesman touched on the notion of Sunni suffering in a March 2019 audio address, referring to "Safavid rejectionist militias" running rampant and Sunni women and children languishing in camps because of alleged ISIS ties.¹³⁵ "Sunnis in Iraq", he intoned. "What is the Islamic State but your lifeboat and your impregnable fortress in the face of this Safavid Iranian tide?"¹³⁶

ISIS may also benefit from Iraq's changing regional context. Recently, it has been less able to avail itself of chaos and civil conflict in neighbouring Syria. In the early years of Syria's war, a sluice of fighters, weapons and money had run into Syria via Turkey, then spilled into Iraq. That flow has now gone mostly dry. Syria's war does not electrify Iraqi domestic politics as it did between 2012 and 2014, when Iraqi Sunni opinion was charged by Baghdad's perceived alignment with the Syrian regime and its key backer Iran.¹³⁷ Other neighbours, such as Saudi Arabia, are now interested in normal relations with Iraq, after years of estrangement.¹³⁸ Gulf-based satellite channels no longer fan sectarian resentment, nor promote opposition to Baghdad, as they did in 2014.

Yet Turkish intervention in north-eastern Syria, and the chaos that could ensue, may endanger Iraq's stability all over again. ISIS is already most active in eastern expanses of Syria that are tightly linked, geographically and historically, to the organisation's areas of operation across the frontier. ISIS's enemies have worked to reimpose the formal international border separating the two countries, but ISIS elements continue to move back and forth.¹³⁹ If Syria's north east erupts into open conflict, Iraq will be at risk.

¹³⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Baghdad, Kirkuk, Falluja, February and June 2019. Iraq's post-ISIS areas have witnessed some stirrings of protest, but unrest since 2017 has mostly been concentrated in the country's centre and south. The clearest example of protest in the country's ISIS-affected areas was Mosul's angry demonstrations against then-Ninewa Governor Nawfal al-Agoub after a ferry capsized and drowned nearly 100 people in March 2019. Alissa Rubin and Falih Hassan, "Iraq ferry accident sets off political upheaval in Mosul", *The New York Times*, 24 March 2019. On Iraq's summer 2018 protest wave, see Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°61, *How to Cope with Iraq's Summer Brush-fire*, 31 July 2018.

¹³⁵ "Safavid" (*safawi*) refers to the Islamic Safavid Empire, which ruled from what is now Iran between the 16th and 18th centuries. Saddam Hussein's regime employed the term to stoke hostility to Iran (and decry alleged Persian influence in Iraq) during the two countries' eight-year war. The word is not sectarian, per se, but it can easily blur into anti-Shiism. "Rejectionist" (*rafidhi*) is a nakedly sectarian epithet referring to Shiites' "rejection" of the legitimacy of the Prophet Muhammad's elected successors Abu Bakr, Omar and Othman. Shiites believe that leadership of Muslims should have passed immediately to Ali, the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law. Sunni Muslims, by contrast, regard Abu Bakr, Omar and Othman as the first three "rightly guided caliphs" and Ali as the fourth.

¹³⁶ Abu al-Hassan al-Muhajir, "He was true to God, so [God] was true to him", op. cit.

¹³⁷ See Crisis Group Report, *Falluja's Faustian Bargain*, op. cit.

¹³⁸ Crisis Group Middle East Report N°186, *Saudi Arabia: Back to Baghdad*, 22 May 2018.

¹³⁹ See footnote 35.

IV. ISIS in Syria: Nearly Defeated – But for How Long?

Turkey's intervention in north-eastern Syria, following President Trump's 6 October decision, has put ISIS's near defeat in Syria in question. After a phone call with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Trump announced that Turkey would launch a military operation in northern Syria and that U.S. forces "will no longer be in the immediate area". He also said that Turkey would be responsible for captured ISIS fighters held there.¹⁴⁰ Trump's statement seemingly gave a green light to the unilateral Turkish military intervention in Syria's north east of which Turkish officials had repeatedly warned in the preceding days.¹⁴¹

Not surprisingly, Trump proceeded to amplify and, in the process, muddy his message. He threatened to "destroy and obliterate" Turkey's economy if Turkey "does anything [Trump considers] to be off limits".¹⁴² He later tweeted:

We may be in the process of leaving Syria, but in no way have we [abandoned] the Kurds. ... Turkey ... understands that while we only had 50 soldiers remaining in that section of Syria, and they have been removed, any unforced or unnecessary fighting by Turkey will be devastating to their economy and to their very fragile currency. We are helping the Kurds financially [and with] weapons!¹⁴³

Trump's erratic messaging seems not to have dissuaded Turkey. On 9 October, President Erdoğan announced the launch of Operation Peace Spring to "prevent the creation of a terror corridor across [Turkey's] southern border and to bring peace to the area".¹⁴⁴ Simultaneously, Turkey began bombarding positions inside Syria along the border with artillery and from the air.¹⁴⁵ The Turkish military has since announced that its ground incursion into north-eastern Syria has begun.¹⁴⁶

Ankara is resolved to clear the strip of north-eastern Syria along the Turkish border of "terrorists", whom it argues have been empowered by the U.S.-led campaign against ISIS. The Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS's primary Syrian partner has been the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a multi-ethnic force led by the mainly Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG). The YPG in turn is organically linked to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), with which Turkey has fought a decades-long war, and which Turkey, the U.S. and the EU have designated a terrorist organisation. With Coalition backing, the SDF drove ISIS out of most of north-eastern Syria, in the process capturing nearly one third of the country and much of its resource wealth. Turkey considers a large, internationally sponsored zone of YPG control on its southern

¹⁴⁰ White House, "Statement from the Press Secretary", 6 October 2019.

¹⁴¹ For example, see Faruk Zorlu, "Turkey ready for operation east of Euphrates in Syria", Anadolu Agency, 5 October 2019.

¹⁴² Tweet by Donald J. Trump, @realDonaldTrump, U.S. president, 6:38pm, 7 October 2019. Trump's decision has attracted broad criticism from U.S. politicians, including from his own Republican party. See the statement by Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, "McConnell Statement on Turkey and U.S. Partners in Syria", 7 October 2019.

¹⁴³ Tweets by Donald J. Trump, @realDonaldTrump, U.S. president, 3:55pm, 8 October 2019.

¹⁴⁴ Tweet by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, @RTErdogan, president of Turkey, 4:20pm, 9 October 2019.

¹⁴⁵ Crisis Group phone interview, resident, Qamishli, 9 October 2019.

¹⁴⁶ Tweet by T.C. Millî Savunma Bakanlığı, @tcsavunma, Turkish Ministry of National Defence, 10:37pm, 9 October 2019.

border a grave threat to its national security. In his announcement of Turkey's intervention, President Erdoğan said it would target "PKK/YPG and [ISIS] terrorists".¹⁴⁷

Ankara has repeatedly threatened to intervene militarily against the YPG in north-eastern Syria, as it did in the north-western enclave of Afrin in early 2018. When Turkey previously warned of unilateral military action in December 2018, it prompted Trump to order a surprise withdrawal of U.S. forces from Syria.¹⁴⁸ Trump subsequently modified this decision, allowing for a numerically reduced but open-ended U.S. presence on the ground.¹⁴⁹

After Turkey again threatened to intervene in the north east, Washington agreed with Ankara on 7 August 2019 to jointly establish a "safe zone" in Syria's north east that would address Turkey's security concerns.¹⁵⁰ The two took gradual steps toward the agreement's implementation, including joint patrols and overflights of the border zone, as the SDF has destroyed some defensive fortifications on the border.¹⁵¹ Only days prior to Trump's tweet, a senior U.S. official, while not ruling out a Turkish incursion, said that the U.S. and Turkey were working remarkably well together on the ground, including through the joint patrols.¹⁵² Still, President Erdoğan repeatedly said the end of September was the deadline for establishing the safe zone.¹⁵³ As that deadline passed, Turkish officials said implementation had fallen short and again signalled they would take unilateral action.¹⁵⁴ That led to Trump and Erdoğan's 6 October phone call.

The full scope of Turkish intervention in the north east remains unclear, as does the extent of U.S. withdrawal, but Turkish officials have told Western counterparts that they intend to secure the full "safe zone" they have mooted publicly – 32km wide and 480km long.¹⁵⁵ The few (roughly 50) U.S. military personnel present on the border have left their positions (but not Syria).¹⁵⁶ Trump and Erdoğan seem likely to discuss Syria during the Turkish leader's announced trip to Washington on 13 November.¹⁵⁷

¹⁴⁷ Tweet by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, @RTErdogan, president of Turkey, 4:20pm, 9 October 2019, op. cit.

¹⁴⁸ Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°66, *Avoiding a Free-for-all in Syria's North East*, 21 December 2018.

¹⁴⁹ For more, see Crisis Group Report, *Squaring the Circles in Syria's North East*, op. cit.

¹⁵⁰ U.S. State Department, "Statement on joint military talks regarding Syria", 7 August 2019. The U.S. has since preferred to refer to the area as a "security mechanism" rather than a "safe zone".

¹⁵¹ For example, see U.S. European Command, "U.S. and Turkey Begin Joint Ground Patrols", 9 September 2019; U.S. Central Command, "U.S. and partner forces implement security mechanism in northeast Syria", 28 August 2019.

¹⁵² Crisis Group interview, New York, September 2019.

¹⁵³ For example, see Enes Kaplan, "N. Syria safe zone should be formed till end of Sept.", Anadolu Agency, 8 September 2019.

¹⁵⁴ Sarp Ozer, "Turkey, US defense chiefs to discuss safe zone plans", Anadolu Agency, 3 October 2019.

¹⁵⁵ Crisis Group interview, senior Western diplomats, Brussels, 9 October 2019.

¹⁵⁶ "Coalition forces withdraw from border areas with Turkey", Hawar News Agency, 7 October 2019. Trump has sought to minimise the number of troops withdrawn from the border, saying it was "only ... 50 soldiers". Tweet by Donald J. Trump, @realDonaldTrump, U.S. president, 8 October 2019, op. cit.

¹⁵⁷ Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, "Phone call with U.S. President Donald Trump", 6 October 2019.

Conflict between Turkey and the SDF along the Syrian-Turkish border will likely relieve at least some pressure on ISIS, which lost its last territorial foothold in eastern Syria in May 2019 but persists as a deadly insurgency. Since May, the SDF has continued to pursue ISIS remnants across the north east, and to hold thousands of ISIS detainees. The SDF has warned that it would be forced to redirect its forces toward Syria's northern border should Turkey attack, with potentially disastrous consequences for counter-ISIS efforts.¹⁵⁸ The SDF believes it needs to mount strong resistance to a Turkish incursion to blunt any advance.¹⁵⁹

A. A New ISIS Insurgency

The presence of ISIS across Syria reflects the fact that the country is a patchwork of territorial control. In Syria, ISIS was ultimately defeated by several enemies, including the SDF with U.S. and Coalition support; the Syrian regime, with assistance from Iran and Russia; and opposition rebels backed by Turkey. These forces divided the swathe of territory ISIS once held among themselves, and each force continues to pursue ISIS remnants in its respective zone. Each zone has its own particularities, and its own security regime; accordingly, ISIS has adopted a different operational mode in each area. The group has vowed to teach "lessons" to all sides in Syria's war.¹⁶⁰

In Syria's north west, including rebel-held Idlib province, ISIS's underground cells have targeted rebels with bombings and assassinations.¹⁶¹ ISIS has likewise claimed attacks elsewhere in Syria, including in regime-held Daraa in Syria's south west.¹⁶² By contrast, in the open expanse of Syria's central Badiya desert ISIS is able to mount larger attacks on regime forces. The group has set up camp in the Badiya's rocky outcroppings and caves, from which it launches periodic raids on exposed Syrian military and auxiliary positions outside the crossroads city of Palmyra.¹⁶³ ISIS's Badiya units can seemingly traverse the desert and attack in numbers that it cannot muster in Syria's SDF-controlled north east, with U.S.-led Coalition aircraft overhead.¹⁶⁴

The SDF-held north east comprises much of what had been ISIS's Syrian territory, and it is now the main theatre for ISIS's insurgency. Still, even within this SDF

¹⁵⁸ For example, see Sirwan Kajjo, "Kurdish leader: Turkish offensive will help re-emergence of IS in Syria", *Voice of America*, 5 August 2019.

¹⁵⁹ Crisis Group phone interview, senior SDF political representative, 9 October 2019.

¹⁶⁰ ISIS, "The reward belongs to the righteous", Syria Province media office, 20 August 2019 (Arabic).

¹⁶¹ ISIS has apparently attempted to direct international attacks from this area. Sam Heller, "A Glimpse into the Islamic State's External Operations, Post-Caliphate", *War on the Rocks*, 29 May 2019. In Idlib, Hei'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) has made apparently credible efforts to break up ISIS networks in the area. HTS detailed the makeup and function of one ISIS cell it dismantled in "Kharrijite cell in 'Aleppo Province'", 16 April 2019 (Arabic). HTS is the latest iteration of Jabhat al-Nusra, the group founded by the mostly Syrian expeditionary force that ISIS (then ISI) sent from Iraq to Syria in 2011, as unrest was spreading across the country. The group rebuffed ISIS's attempt to re-absorb it in 2013 and instead pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda before later splitting with that organisation as well. For more, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°197, *The Best of Bad Options for Syria's Idlib*, 14 March 2019.

¹⁶² For example, see *Al-Naba*, 6 June 2019.

¹⁶³ Crisis Group phone interviews, Badiya residents and humanitarian workers, April-June 2019.

¹⁶⁴ ISIS reports substantial casualty tolls among the regime forces it attacks. For example, see *Al-Naba*, 2 May 2019.

zone, ISIS has varied its tactics by area. The group is thought to have more sophisticated clandestine networks in al-Raqqa and al-Hasaka provinces, where it perpetrates relatively complex and ambitious attacks.¹⁶⁵ Residents consider these areas relatively safe, with occasional jarring interruptions.¹⁶⁶ A reported 9 October attack by ISIS in al-Raqqa city could indicate that the security situation is deteriorating, however, and that could worsen further as a Turkish intervention draws closer.¹⁶⁷

In the eastern countryside of Deir al-Zour province, by contrast, the group has kept up a steady drumbeat of low-level violence throughout. Even as ISIS was fighting a losing battle for the Deir al-Zour town of Baghouz in early 2019, the group was already ramping up an insurgency behind SDF lines.¹⁶⁸ With the conventional fight over, ISIS has loosed a wave of attacks, including roadside bombings, drive-by shootings and assassinations of local SDF collaborators. As in Iraq, ISIS may not be behind all these incidents; some violence may be local score settling. Nonetheless, ISIS has claimed many of them and locals believe the group is responsible. ISIS's attacks have been technically simple but competently executed and frequent.¹⁶⁹ It has also carried out one suicide car bombing against an SDF base, in the Deir al-Zour town of al-Tayyana in July 2019, which may signal that the group is reconstituting a capacity for complex, collective action.¹⁷⁰ The group's attacks have been concentrated in a strip along the Euphrates River between the towns of al-Buseira and al-Tayyana.¹⁷¹

ISIS has targeted the SDF's local Arab element in particular. With U.S. and Coalition support, the YPG has mobilised a large, ethnically mixed force in the SDF, including many local Arabs. In this context, ISIS attacks have been an apparent attempt to terrorise the local Arab population into non-cooperation with the YPG, collapsing local governance bodies and depriving the YPG of the local knowledge necessary for effective

¹⁶⁵ Crisis Group phone interview, U.S. official, 18 May 2019. Among the more prominent examples is ISIS's 16 January 2019 suicide attack on a U.S. military convoy in Manbij, a city in Aleppo province, which killed nineteen, including four Americans. Ben Hubbard and Eric Schmitt, "A favorite restaurant in Syria led ISIS to Americans", *The New York Times*, 17 January 2019. In a more recent example, ISIS carried out three near-simultaneous bombings in Hasaka in July. *Al-Naba*, 18 July 2019; "Three bombings in al-Hasaka within two hours", ANF News, 11 July 2019 (Arabic).

¹⁶⁶ Crisis Group observations, north-eastern Syria, March 2019.

¹⁶⁷ "ISIS attack in al-Raqqa simultaneously with expected Turkish attack", Hawar News Agency, 9 October 2019 (Arabic).

¹⁶⁸ Walid Al Nofal and Justin Clark, "Suspected IS sleeper cells step up assassinations, attacks in eastern Syria after SDF 'victory' in Baghouz", *Syria Direct*, 27 March 2019.

¹⁶⁹ For one tally of ISIS attacks in Deir al-Zour, see Amaq News Agency's 19 May 2019 infographic on attacks targeting the "PKK" (the group's typical epithet for the SDF), available via tweet by Christopher Anzalone, @IbnSiqilli, researcher, 10:33pm, 19 May 2019. A humanitarian aid agency's security adviser said: "They're not complex attacks. But these are well-drilled people. ... The fact that they're doing it time and again, and they're not caught – it shows their recon is good, and their targeting is good". Crisis Group phone interview, 24 May 2019. According to a U.S. military official: "[ISIS doesn't] need to do something complex now. The organisation can do targeted assassinations, some bombings. The other thing that's really scary is that ISIS is strategic – they plan for the long term. So they wait, and recuperate, and do what they need to get their ducks in a row, until they pull the trigger and then come back". Crisis Group interview, Washington, April 2019.

¹⁷⁰ *Al-Naba*, 18 July 2019; "More than 15 killed and wounded in car bomb explosion at SDF base in Deir al-Zour", STEP Agency, 12 July 2019 (Arabic).

¹⁷¹ Crisis Group interviews, Western officials and Deir al-Zour journalist, Amman and by phone, May-July 2019.

counter-insurgency efforts.¹⁷² The SDF's would-be local partners in these front-line areas have said they feel they have been left vulnerable to assassination by ISIS.¹⁷³ In ISIS's first video from Deir al-Zour (which it calls al-Kheir) since it lost Baghouz, the group said its men, through their "security operations", "had demonstrated the falsity of claims by the imams of infidelity that they have ended the caliphate's presence in Syria".¹⁷⁴

The YPG-led SDF has struggled to forge ties with Deir al-Zour's Arab residents, identify trusted local interlocutors or involve residents in counter-ISIS efforts.¹⁷⁵ Moreover, complaints about insufficient services and the division of the area's oil revenues have fuelled local resentment of the SDF, as has collateral damage from the SDF's night-time counter-ISIS raids.¹⁷⁶ The SDF's international Coalition partners have attempted to help provide basic services and restart the local economy, so as to offer residents an alternative to militancy, but resources have been limited and Deir al-Zour is geographically remote.¹⁷⁷ On the ground, ISIS has worked to further sap confidence in the SDF and its related civilian institutions. In one notorious example, ISIS posted lists of SDF enlistees and civilian employees on mosques in a Deir al-Zour town, with a demand that they "repent".¹⁷⁸

The SDF has also laboured to accommodate large numbers of ISIS detainees, Syrian and foreign. Its capacity to hold ISIS detainees has been stretched to breaking point, and, in an attempt to win over local tribal constituencies, it has released Syrian ISIS detainees ostensibly "without blood on their hands" who have been vouched for by tribal leaders.¹⁷⁹ But the approach has alarmed some residents, as the result has been the release of ISIS-linked men of uncertain character, with no clear program to track and reintegrate them after they return home.¹⁸⁰

More broadly, the SDF has had to deal with thousands of foreign ISIS fighters and ISIS-affiliated civilians – women and minors, some dangerous in their own right – in SDF-secured detention centres and displacement camps.¹⁸¹ U.S. and other Coa-

¹⁷² ISIS spokesman Abu al-Hassan al-Muhajir said as much in his March 2019 address, warning Arabs in eastern Syria to pull their sons out of the ranks of "atheist Kurds" and "repent" before it was too late. Abu al-Hassan al-Muhajir, "He was true to God, so [God] was true to him", op. cit.

¹⁷³ Crisis Group phone interview, Deir al-Zour military commander, September 2019.

¹⁷⁴ ISIS, "The epic battle of attrition", Syria Province al-Kheir media office, 11 August 2019 (Arabic).

¹⁷⁵ Crisis Group Report, *Squaring the Circles in Syria's North East*, op. cit.

¹⁷⁶ Crisis Group interviews, tribal notables, Deir al-Zour, March 2019.

¹⁷⁷ Crisis Group interviews, U.S. officials and humanitarian workers, Washington, Amman and by phone, April, May and July 2019. A U.S. official said: "When people talk about the reintegration or reconciliation process with ISIS guys, they frequently say they need jobs, livelihoods and education. If these people come back and have nothing to do, they'll just get up to mischief again". Crisis Group phone interview, 18 May 2019.

¹⁷⁸ "ISIS in eastern Deir al-Zour: 'We see you, but you don't see us!'", *al-Modon*, 7 September 2019 (Arabic).

¹⁷⁹ Crisis Group interviews, SDF commander and Coalition member country diplomats, Syria, Beirut and by phone, March, May and July 2019.

¹⁸⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Kurdish security official and Deir al-Zour residents, Deir al-Zour and Qamishli, March and May 2019. See also Liz Sly, "Captured ISIS fighters get short sentences and art therapy in Syria", *Washington Post*, 14 August 2019.

¹⁸¹ The SDF now holds approximately 8,000 Iraqi and Syrian ISIS fighters and 2,000 third-country nationals, in addition to non-combatant affiliates including women and children. "Operation Inherent

lition officials believe that ISIS leaders directed remaining fighters and affiliates in Baghouz to surrender to the SDF in order to conserve manpower and recuperate.¹⁸² Guarding these fighters and affiliates has represented a substantial resource drain on the SDF.¹⁸³ Yet the SDF's Western Coalition partners have been legally unable to contribute more than limited funds to reinforce existing detention facilities and turn buildings such as schools into "pop-up prisons".¹⁸⁴ SDF partners have been concerned that ISIS could target these makeshift prisons for jailbreaks or that prisoners could stage riots that turn into mass escapes, a threat that will become all the more serious now that Turkey and its allies are entering north-eastern Syria and the SDF will have to redirect its resources to confronting them.¹⁸⁵

The north east's vulnerabilities seem clear, including an energetic ISIS insurgency and generally precarious situation in Deir al-Zour, and overfull, exposed prisons and camps holding ISIS militants and affiliates. Turkish intervention and a confrontation between Turkey and the SDF on Syria's northern border seem likely to dramatically worsen these problems. The diversion north of SDF units now securing ISIS-affected southern areas and continuing to pursue ISIS cells could allow ISIS elements that are now disparate and covert to regroup and escalate their operations. Order could break down not only in Deir al-Zour but also in other marginal, Arab-majority areas such as al-Raqqa, as ISIS mounts new attacks and some locals – believing the tide to be turning against the SDF – potentially mount their own resistance or throw in their lot with ISIS.¹⁸⁶ Left unguarded, prisons and camps now holding ISIS militants and affiliates could become easy targets for jailbreaks. SDF commander Mazloun Kobani has already said that holding ISIS prisoners has become a "second priority" as the SDF prepares for a defensive battle with Turkey.¹⁸⁷ One U.S. official warned: "If an attack diverts the SDF toward the border, there will be an ISIS resurgence. I will say that as a matter of fact".¹⁸⁸

Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress", op. cit., p. 23. Regarding women and children who left Baghouz and are now housed in a camp in al-Hol, a Coalition officer said: "Now, among those 73,000, there are real victims. There are also real ISIS members, even if they are female". Crisis Group interview, May 2019.

¹⁸² Crisis Group interviews, U.S. officials, Washington, April 2019.

¹⁸³ Crisis Group interviews, Syrian Democratic Council official, U.S. officials, Qamishli and Washington, March and April 2019.

¹⁸⁴ Counter-ISIS Train and Equip Fund support, per its U.S. Congressional mandate, cannot be used to build new structures. The U.S.'s Coalition partners face legal challenges building prisons in support of a non-state actor, the SDF. Crisis Group interviews, Western officials, Washington and remotely by messaging app, April and August 2019.

¹⁸⁵ Crisis Group interviews, U.S. officials and Coalition officers, Washington and Middle East, April, May and July 2019.

¹⁸⁶ Crisis Group phone interview, senior SDF political representative, 9 October 2019.

¹⁸⁷ Courtney Kube and Mosheh Gains, "Top Kurdish general: Watching over ISIS prisoners now a 'second priority'", NBC News, 8 October 2019.

¹⁸⁸ Crisis Group interview, Washington, April 2019.

V. Preventing an ISIS Resurgence

Though it is likely impossible to wholly eliminate ISIS in Iraq and Syria, it has seemed feasible to inhibit its capabilities and reach. As a senior Iraqi security official framed the challenge: “In the current situation, there’s a chance to keep the organisation small, with limited influence and in remote areas. As for ending it totally, that’s very difficult”.¹⁸⁹ Now Turkish intervention and open conflict in Syria’s north east risk giving ISIS new life.

Preventing ISIS’s resurgence requires, first and foremost, either halting or mitigating the impact of a Turkish intervention against the SDF. After the withdrawal of U.S. troops from their positions on the Syrian-Turkish border, there are no longer American lives on the line to discourage a Turkish attack. Still, Trump has threatened to target Turkey’s economy if Ankara engages in “unforced or unnecessary fighting” against the U.S.’s Kurdish allies in Syria, and vowed that a Turkish incursion could do lasting damage to Turkish-U.S. bilateral relations.¹⁹⁰ Washington’s Coalition allies have condemned Turkey’s offensive and called on Turkey to stop.¹⁹¹ The U.S. and its Coalition allies should further urge Turkey to pause its attack, an attack for which Ankara could pay a high price diplomatically and that could even risk new violence inside Turkey, if the PKK resumes its own attacks.

If Turkey can be convinced to reel in its invasion, or at a minimum to stop after establishing a limited beachhead, there may be time for the U.S. to broker some new compromise arrangement. It could also use any such respite to encourage a deal for the north east that could withstand an eventual U.S. exit, namely one between the SDF and the Syrian regime that gradually reintegrates the area into unitary, state-led Syria on the basis of decentralised governance.

If Turkey can be dissuaded from pushing further into the north east, the SDF will still need near-term Coalition assistance to pursue ISIS elements and stabilise areas taken from the group. The U.S.-led Coalition should work with the SDF to devolve governing and security responsibility to local Arab actors in order to consolidate post-ISIS gains. Yet those local Arab partners also need continued assistance from the SDF and its international partners, including materiel and logistical support, if they are to defend themselves against ISIS. Coalition countries should also help reinforce the SDF detention facilities now holding ISIS-linked foreigners, even if they are unable to build new ones.

If it looks as if the U.S. cannot or will not deter Turkey, then the best and only remaining option for the YPG will be to negotiate directly with the Syrian regime for the return of Syrian state sovereignty to Syria’s north east. In this situation, Russia could mediate between the regime and YPG, and also intercede with Turkey, backing the redeployment of regime forces to Syria’s Turkish border even as it assures Turkey that the regime’s return will be substantive, not just symbolic. Russia has previously

¹⁸⁹ Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, 27 February 2019.

¹⁹⁰ U.S. Senator Lindsey Graham, for one, has threatened bipartisan Congressional sanctions on Turkey if it moves forward with its attack. See tweet by Lindsey Graham, Republican senator from South Carolina, @LindseyGrahamSC, 5:47 pm, 7 October 2019.

¹⁹¹ For example, see the tweet by the German Foreign Office, @GermanyDiplo, 5:45pm, 9 October 2019.

argued for reactivating Syria and Turkey's 1998 Adana Agreement, which gives Turkey the right to conduct "hot pursuit" counter-terrorism operations inside Syria even as it entails mutual bilateral recognition.¹⁹²

The YPG's bargaining position would be weak, as Turkey would be bearing down on the north east. Still, for the YPG, even a bad deal with Damascus seems preferable to Turkey reproducing the Afrin experience in an extended border zone that includes nearly every Kurdish population centre in Syria. Damascus, too, has at least some incentive to be flexible, lest Turkey occupy large sections of Syria's east for the long term.¹⁹³ Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on 9 October that Russia is encouraging dialogue between Damascus and "representatives of the Kurds", a statement to which the SDF's civilian governing authority responded positively.¹⁹⁴

As the situation in Syria's north east evolves quickly, countries such as France and Germany whose nationals are now in the north east's camps should repatriate as many as seems feasible. They should prioritise the repatriation of children, whether orphans or minors who are themselves blameless but may be attached to ISIS-affiliated mothers who represent a security concern. Repatriation of ISIS-affiliated civilians is politically controversial and, in some cases, may be risky in security terms. Yet leaving children to be engulfed by oncoming conflict is irresponsible.

If eastern Syria spins into chaos, Iraq will invariably suffer, as fighters and materiel again flow across the border. As a Ninewa security official said: "If Syria gets a cough, Iraq gets the flu".¹⁹⁵

So far, Iraqi security forces have seemed capable of containing ISIS and potentially degrading it further. Maintaining that progress will require concerted efforts by Iraqis and their international partners, particularly if the situation in Syria deteriorates. To that end, Iraq and its international partners should be careful not to allow U.S.-Iranian or Israeli-Iranian tensions to spill into Iraq. Iraqis are keen that their country not become an arena, once more, for outsiders' score settling.¹⁹⁶ If U.S.-Iranian rivalry in the region or continued Israeli airstrikes on Iran's Iraqi allies lead to violence against U.S. and other foreign forces in Iraq, the situation in Iraq inevitably will deteriorate and could even make an international Coalition presence untenable. ISIS would benefit. In this sense, Washington's strategy of "maximum pressure" on Iran

¹⁹² The Adana Agreement is based on Damascus considering the PKK a terrorist organisation and prohibiting its presence, activities and affiliates on Syrian soil. In accordance with the deal, Damascus shut down the PKK's bases in Syria and expelled its leader, Abdullah Öcalan, which paved the way for his eventual capture by Turkey in 1999. See "Proposed Russian control of Syria border unlikely to appeal to Turkey", *The New Arab*, 25 January 2019.

¹⁹³ For more on the multiple negotiations over the north east and the various sides' positions, see Crisis Group Report, *Squaring the Circles in Syria's North East*, op. cit.

¹⁹⁴ "US policy on Kurds may affect entire Middle East region — Russian top diplomat", Tass, 9 October 2019; "Autonomous Administration: We view Lavrov's statements on dialogue with Damascus positively", ANF News, 9 October 2019 (Arabic). Damascus was less enthusiastic, with the state-run news agency saying "some Kurdish organisations" bear responsibility for Turkey's intervention, since they relied on the U.S. for protection. The statement added, however, that Syria remains "prepared to embrace its misguided sons if they return to their senses". "Syria renews its determination to resist Turkish aggression by all legitimate means", SANA, 9 October 2019 (Arabic).

¹⁹⁵ Crisis Group interview, Mosul, March 2019.

¹⁹⁶ Crisis Group Briefing, *Evading the Gathering Storm*, op. cit.

– and especially any attempt to press Iraq into joining its campaign – may come at the cost of allowing ISIS’ revival.¹⁹⁷

But if the U.S. should exercise restraint, so too should Iran and its Iraqi allies. The temptation to target U.S. forces may well exist, but Tehran and its allies should weigh it against the near-term necessity of a U.S. and Coalition role in Iraq to maintain military pressure on ISIS. Coalition members’ training and equipment of Iraqi forces is also key if Iraq is to develop the military capacities it now lacks. That capacity building is meant to eventually make foreign support unnecessary.

With Coalition support, the Iraqi government ought to continue working to secure the peripheral areas in which ISIS still operates. It should use the space provided by a reinforced security presence to rebuild these areas and enable residents to return. Security, renewed economic activity and the return of displaced residents are all mutually reinforcing in these areas, and the government needs to pursue them in parallel. Additionally, clearing the way for returnees will allow many to leave the toxic environment of Iraq’s displacement camps. Stabilising formerly ISIS-held areas will also require working toward a compromise on Iraq’s disputed territories between Baghdad-controlled Iraq and the country’s Kurdish region, without which the two will be unable to coordinate their security efforts, leaving gaps for ISIS to exploit.¹⁹⁸

Too, the Iraqi government will need a solution for “ISIS families”. Its officials say they are working, in consultation with UN agencies, to develop a new plan to facilitate these families’ safe return to their places of origin, likely to include rehabilitation and dialogue with communal representatives of their home neighbourhoods and towns.¹⁹⁹ The plan’s details aside, Iraq ought not allow these civilians to become permanent exiles in their own country.

More broadly, the Iraqi government should continue to prioritise rebuilding the parts of the country that were under ISIS control – not just front-line areas still suffering ISIS attacks, but also places like Mosul. Given ISIS’s diminished threat and the many other pressing issues facing Baghdad, there is a danger that the government will lose sight of post-ISIS reconstruction. Yet it must not do so if it hopes to break the country’s debilitating cycle of violence and turn to prosaic but important issues such as services and economic development. Reconstruction requires Baghdad’s continued commitment, as well as the additional involvement of local communities and civic organisations.

¹⁹⁷ One U.S. official said that attempting to counter Iranian influence in Iraq, as opposed to supporting the campaign against ISIS, could provoke a hostile reaction from Iraqi factions: “When you’re doing counter-ISIS, it doesn’t generate antibodies in the same way”. Crisis Group interview, Washington, April 2019.

¹⁹⁸ Crisis Group Report, *Reviving UN Mediation on Iraq’s Disputed Internal Boundaries*, op. cit.

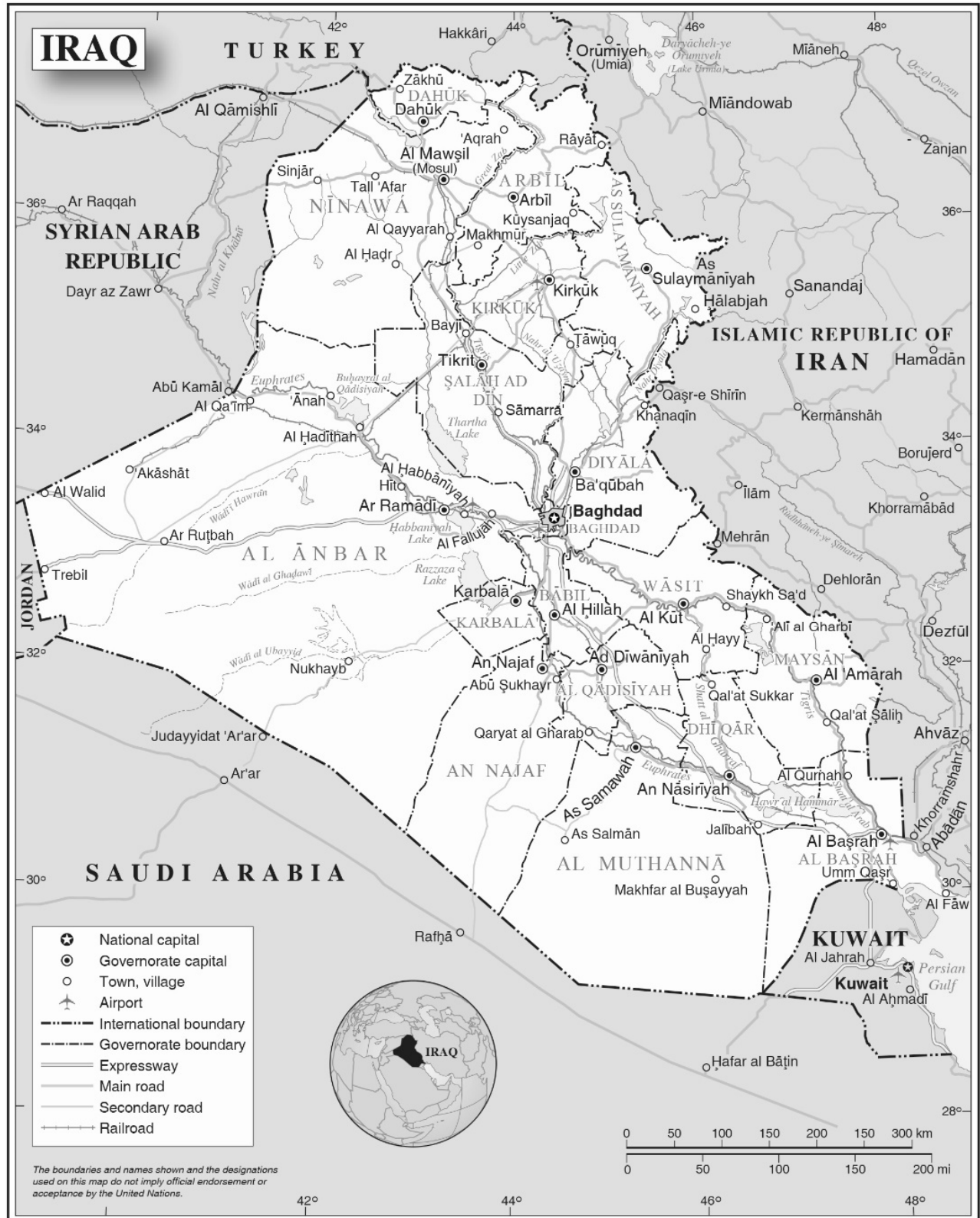
¹⁹⁹ Crisis Group interview, two Iraqi officials, Baghdad, June 2019.

VI. Conclusion

ISIS has been on shaky ground, but it could still regain its footing. The many local and international actors who beat back the organisation in Iraq and Syria can still prevent its resurgence. This task will demand sustained local action in both Iraq and Syria to combat the group and realise post-ISIS stability. It also will require efforts to halt or mitigate new, destructive conflict – whether between Turkey and the SDF in Syria or between Iran and the U.S. – that could reverse hard-fought gains against ISIS and allow the group to return.

Beirut/Istanbul/Baghdad/Deir al-Zour/Brussels, 11 October 2019

Appendix A: Map of Iraq



SYRIAN ARAB REPUBLIC

Legend:

- National capital
- Provincial capital
- Town, village
- Airport
- International boundary
- Provincial boundary
- Expressway
- Main road
- Secondary road
- Railroad
- Oil pipeline

Geographical Features and Labels:

- Countries:** Turkey, Iraq, Jordan, Israel, Cyprus, Lebanon.
- Regions:** AL LADHIQIYA, IDLIB, ALEPPO, HAMAH, HIMS, DIMASHQ, QUNAYTIRAH, DAR'A, SUWAYDA'.
- Cities:** Aleppo, Damascus, Hama, Latakia, Tartus, Idlib, Homs, Qunaytirah, Dar'a, Suwayda', Latakia, Tartus, Idlib, Homs, Qunaytirah, Dar'a, Suwayda'.
- Other Labels:** Mediterranean Sea, Gulf of Iskenderun, Lake Tiberias, Euphrates, Taurus, Anti-Lebanon, Jebel al Nu'ur, Jebel al Druze, Jebel al Zuhayr, Jebel al Qalamun, Jebel al Qalamun, Jebel al Qalamun.

Appendix C: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 70 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is chaired by former UN Deputy Secretary-General and Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Lord (Mark) Malloch-Brown.

Crisis Group's President & CEO, Robert Malley, took up the post on 1 January 2018. Malley was formerly Crisis Group's Middle East and North Africa Program Director and most recently was a Special Assistant to former U.S. President Barack Obama as well as Senior Adviser to the President for the Counter-ISIL Campaign, and White House Coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf region. Previously, he served as President Bill Clinton's Special Assistant for Israeli-Palestinian Affairs.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Algiers, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Hong Kong, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Mexico City, New Delhi, Rabat, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

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Alain Destexhe
Mou-Shih Ding
Uffe Ellemann-Jensen
Stanley Fischer
Carla Hills
Swanee Hunt
Wolfgang Ischinger

Aleksander Kwasniewski
Ricardo Lagos
Joanne Leedom-Ackerman
Todung Mulya Lubis
Graça Machel
Jessica T. Mathews
Miklós Németh
Christine Ockrent
Timothy Ong
Roza Otunbayeva
Olara Otunnu
Lord (Christopher) Patten
Surin Pitsuwan
Fidel V. Ramos
Olympia Snowe
Javier Solana