

Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

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Al-Qaeda's Malian Affiliate Celebrates French Withdrawal

Jacob Zenn

On February 17, France announced its withdrawal of troops from Mali ([France24.com](https://www.france24.com/en/france/20220217/france-withdraws-troops-from-mali), February 17). President Emmanuel Macron noted that victory was "impossible" if the Malian junta, which came to power through a coup in 2021, continued to obstruct counter-terrorism operations. Although threats from the al-Qaeda affiliate Group for Muslims and Islam (JNIM) or Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS) were not cited as the reason for the French withdrawal, JNIM itself perceives its expanding insurgency as the reason why France lost its will to remain in Mali ([Twitter.com/@abdalatargui](https://twitter.com/abdalatargui), February 23).

According to a JNIM internal statement delivered to fighters in Mali, the "defeated French President [Macron] announced the withdrawal from Mali after attacks killed them [French soldiers] from the den of the Mujahideen in Kidal to Timbuktu, Gao, Macina, and Arbinda, thus congratulations to you for this victory ([imangahdien.com](https://www.imangahdien.com), February 23)." In the statement, JNIM notably referenced the Malian towns of Kidal and Timbuktu, but also Arbinda in Burkina Faso, and Macina, which generally refers to the pre-colonial Sahel region. This reflected JNIM's expanding operations beyond Mali.

The French withdrawal has also had a ripple effect on other European troop deployments in Mali. Macron's announcement, for example, coincided with Estonia's withdrawal announcement from Mali on grounds that the ruling junta had no plans to hold democratic elections,

which was one of the conditions for Estonia's continued deployment in the country (Leht.postimees.ee, February 14). The Scandinavian countries of Sweden, Denmark, and Norway, like France and Estonia, also attributed their withdrawals to the ruling junta's indifference towards holding democratic elections (err.ee, February 14).

In the backdrop of the European withdrawals from Mali, Russia is boosting its troop presence in the country through providing military instructors as well as the unofficial deployment of approximately 200 Wagner Group mercenaries (france24.com, November 1, 2021). Russia, in contrast to the European countries, does not show concern for Mali's democratic backsliding and, therefore, is a more viable counter-terrorism ally for Mali at present. At the same time, the limited Russian presence in Mali is unlikely to influence in any significant way the counter-terrorism effort against JNIM and ISGS, given the larger 5,000 French troop deployment had not effectively thwarted their expansion in recent years.

Although JNIM's statement did not mention Niger, the country is set to become a key battleground between JNIM and international forces. France is attempting to concentrate its forces in Niger instead of Mali, although France still faces some hostility from Niger's citizens about its exploitation of resources in the country and colonial history. Moreover, there are risks of potential political turmoil in Niger. The African state has a history of military coups (france24.com, February 18). Nevertheless, with the U.S. also fielding a significant troop presence in Niger, the country is now arguably the counter-terrorism lynchpin of West Africa. A lynchpin not only for dealing with JNIM and ISGS to the north, but also Boko Haram factions in northeastern Nigeria, and bandits in northwestern Nigeria, both of which traverse the borders between Nigeria and Niger (militarytimes.com, February 22).

Whatever the ultimate arrangement of counter-terrorism forces in West Africa will be, for the time being the momentum is with JNIM and, to a lesser extent, its own rival, ISGS. JNIM has likewise received a morale boost from the Taliban success in Afghanistan. The lack of political stability in the region will only further enable JNIM's advances.

Jacob Zenn is the Editor of Terrorism Monitor.

Norwegian's Arrest Highlights Decreasing Terrorism Threat in Yemen

Jacob Zenn

Ten years ago, in 2012, the Norwegian citizen Anders Cameroon Østensvig Dale joined al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen (nrk.no, March 7). At that time, AQAP was among the most significant threats to the West of all al-Qaeda affiliates. In 2009, for example, Carlos Bledsoe, who converted to Islam and changed his name to Abdulhakim Mujahid Muhammad, trained with AQAP. He then returned to the U.S. and shot and killed a U.S. soldier at a military recruitment center in Arkansas (abcnews.com, June 2, 2009).

One year later, in 2010, AQAP claimed responsibility for the crash of a cargo plane in the United Arab Emirates, reportedly due to a parcel bomb left onboard (aljazeera.com, November 6, 2010). After several domestic attacks, in 2015, AQAP-trained brothers carried out the infamous Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris (aljazeera.com, January 14, 2015). Notwithstanding AQAP's territorial acquisitions in Yemen, the group has struggled to launch any attacks or plots abroad and lost key leaders to targeted killings, such as Qassim al-Raymi in February 2020 (aljazeera.com, February 6, 2020).

With the arrest of Dale in early March, the group's ability to threaten foreign countries or recruit foreigners who could return to their countries to conduct attacks is further diminished. Dale himself converted to Islam in 2008 in Norway, traveled to Yemen several times over the next three years, and joined AQAP in 2011. Although the Norwegian authorities sought to arrest him as early as 2014, it was not until he was recently captured by Houthi forces in the capital, Sanaa, that they became aware of where he was. However, it will be difficult to have him extradited to Norway, given the lack of diplomatic relations between the Norwegian government and the Houthi rebels (nrk.no, March 7)

The main threat from AQAP in the foreseeable future is to foreign nationals operating within AQAP territory in Yemen itself. For example, in February, five UN staff workers traveling through Abyan province were captured by AQAP and remain in an unknown location. Likewise, any AQAP demands for releasing these captives still remain undisclosed for security reasons (aljazeera.com, February 13).

Although AQAP has not claimed responsibility, two Doctors Without Borders (MSF) workers from Mexico and Germany were also reportedly kidnapped on March 6 in Hadramawt, Yemen (france24.com, March 6). This area is controlled by the internationally recognized government, but is a historic hub for AQAP leaders to hideout. Saeed al-Shihri and Nasser al-Wuhayshi, for example, were killed there in 2012 and 2015, respectively (aljazeera.com, September 11, 2012; [BBC](http://bbc.com), June 16, 2015). While AQAP's global influence and prestige in the al-Qaeda affiliate network may be waning, it must not be discounted as a factor in Yemen's domestic security struggles and as a threat to foreigners in the country.

Jacob Zenn is the Editor of Terrorism Monitor.

Islamic State in West Africa Province Video Signals the Group's Grand Strategy for the Future

Rueben Dass and Jasminder Singh

On January 18, 2022, Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), which is the Islamic State (IS)'s affiliate in Nigeria and the Lake Chad basin, released a 27-minute propaganda video titled "The Empowerment Generation" on its official media platform (Ujasusi, January 23). The video provides exclusive access into what ISWAP refers to as its "Khilafah [Caliphate] Cadet School." It features young children between 8-16 years old undergoing religious indoctrination and physical training involving martial arts and arms. It even shows the trainees executing three members of the Nigerian Special Forces. This video suggests that IS has a well-developed, long-term strategy to provide a continuous supply of youth fighters to replenish and rejuvenate its ranks.

IS and the "Cubs of the Caliphate" in Nigeria

The "Cubs of the Caliphate" was a term coined by IS to refer to its child recruits. The use of children in IS propaganda videos is not a new phenomenon and IS has produced numerous videos showcasing children of various nationalities, including Southeast Asians, Central Asians and Middle Easterners, between 2014-2017 (icsr.info, July 2018).

After a multi-year hiatus, one possibly due to restructuring within the group after the fall of the "territorial caliphate" in 2019, "The Empowerment Generation" from ISWAP highlights that IS is still interested in investing resources into grooming youngsters for its next generation of fighters. The video features similar themes as previous IS videos, including an emphasis on religious education and classroom studies; military-style physical and arms training; and the execution of

hostages. In essence, this exemplifies the three key aspects of an IS fighter, which are ideological indoctrination, the need to fight, and the ability to execute enemies.

A key highlight of the ISWAP video, however, is the level of inside information revealed regarding the training program. In an extended interview, one of the trainers states that the *Khilafah* Cadet School is comprised of a Sharia Law Institute, a Quran *halaqah* (discussion group), and a physical training camp. The students in the film were the first batch at the school.

The trainer further disclosed that the recruits in the school undergo a strict selection process. After several years of *Quranic* training, prospective recruits must sit for an entry examination conducted by an Education Department. Only those who fulfill the entry qualifications are selected. The four main themes emphasized throughout the training program are loyalty; jihad; *hijrah* (migration) and *jemaah* (congregation).

The Strategic Importance of Africa and Youth to IS through the Video Lens

This video is the most detailed IS video involving children to be released. It is meant to showcase a day in the life of a trainee at the school. Their daily schedule appears to be highly regimented and includes *Quran* recital sessions, multiple prayer sessions, a classroom study session where they learn *aqidah* (Islamic creed), *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), *hadith* (sayings of the Prophet), and Arabic language. There is also a session where they watch IS propaganda videos and another that involves two physical training sessions that include self-defense and arms training. The group of trainees are also shown making the *bayah* (oath of allegiance) to Abu Ibrahim al-Quraishi, the former IS leader who was reportedly killed on February 3 (theArabweekly.com, February 8). Towards the end of the video, the children are finally seen engaging in urban warfare exercises where they move

into an abandoned building in a highly coordinated manner. They capture several hostages, who are actually Nigerian soldiers caught by ISWAP in previous battles, and then proceed to execute them.

The release of this video highlights the emphasis IS has placed on its African presence. The region is one of the new epicenters of jihad after Iraq and Syria. Based on previous trends, IS usually releases training videos of children only from areas that are its strongholds. At the peak of IS activity in the mid-2010s, most of the videos featuring “cubs” came from Iraq and Syria where IS controlled territory. This video coming out of Nigeria signals that the northeastern region of the country appears to be a new stronghold. Indeed, Nigeria saw the second highest number of claimed attacks by IS in 2021, only after Iraq ([Jihad Analytics](#), January 24).

In addition, the video highlights a level of structure and organization for the children’s training curriculum that has never been seen before in IS videos. This suggests that IS has a long-term strategy of cultivating the younger generation as fighters for the group. This is reflected in a quote by one of the trainers in the video. He states, “To fulfill our long-term ambitions, we have devised a long-term plan to prepare the boys who will defeat *kufur* (disbelief) with Islamic *millah* (foundational principles) and *aqidah* (creed). Although the Islamic State has been going through a tough battle for the last few years, we have created an integrated program in educating and guiding these youth.”

Conclusion

The threat posed by IS as evidenced in the video is not localized to Africa or the Middle East. After the release of the video, an Indonesian IS-affiliated media channel, an-Najiyah, released both a 21-page document titled “*Generasi Tamkin*,” which means “The Empowerment Generation” in the Indonesian-language, and the same

ISWAP video with Indonesian-language subtitles. Thus, the idea of training and preparing the youth as the next generation of fighters may resonate with IS's affiliates in Southeast Asia.

IS's strategy to recruit and cultivate youths is focused on preparing the next generation to be fighters undertaking the group's mission internationally. A recent United Nations Security Council report noted that IS had "recently reinstated their Cubs of the Caliphate program" to form the next generation of IS ([United Nations Security Council](#), January 28). Thus, authorities throughout the world will need to monitor IS attempts to raise more "cubs" as part of its long-term grand strategy.

Jasminder Singh is a Senior Analyst with the International Center for Political Violence and Terrorism Research, a constituent unit of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. His research interests include religious extremism, counter-terrorism and political violence in Southeast Asia and South Asia.

Rueben Dass is a Research Analyst with the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

Islamic State's Voice of Hind Magazine: Globalizing the Regional Anti-Taliban Narrative

Lucas Webber

In July 2020, a media network aligned with Islamic State in Hind Province (ISHP) published the premier issue of the English-language Voice of Hind (VoH) magazine. This print series serves a unique function in the South Asian Islamic State (IS) media ecosystem and communications network.

Specifically, VoH supports IS's media warfare campaign against the Taliban in Afghanistan.

VoH aggregates and organizes scattered anti-Taliban narratives purveyed through various outlets by IS's branches in Iraq/Syria, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, as well as in Kashmir. It also incorporates discourses and sentiments from grassroots IS supporter networks on social media and messaging applications, expounds upon them, and publishes them in the world's most-spoken language, English. It does so in a visually aesthetic magazine that is disseminated across the IS media ecosystem.

VoH is also connective in the sense that it includes clickable links to pro-ISHP Telegram channels. The magazine's operational longevity and the consistency of its publications are notable aspects of VoH, indicating that there is a devoted media team producing the series. This network is reportedly transnational, with propagandists operating throughout South Asia ([SunOnline International](#), September 6, 2021).

Islamic State's Conception of "Taliban 2.0"

IS has been conducting an intense media warfare campaign against the Taliban to delegitimize it as a governing body and discredit them as a religious authority ([Terrorism Monitor](#), December 16, 2021). The focus of this effort is the telling of a new history of the Taliban. According to this narrative, a once pious and honourable movement has deviated from Islam, become morally corrupted, and ultimately betrayed its founding principles.

IS's "guerrilla historiography" is employed in the second issue of VoH, which features an article titled "Taliban: From Jihad to Apostacy" that traces the movement's spiritual decline ([Jihadology](#), March 25, 2020). The piece places an intense focus on the conceptual binary between the original Taliban and what it calls "Taliban 2.0". The

"Taliban of today", it asserts, "has nothing in common, except for their name, with the Taliban under the leadership of sheikh and Mujahid Mullah Omar ... who clearly refused to hand over Sheikh Usama bin Laden". The contemporary Taliban, in contrast, is accused of being composed of deceitful "hypocrites" who covered up the death of Mullah Omar and are "headed by the nationalists, seculars, democrats and apostates." IS also explains how the new Taliban "began to implement tribal laws in order to please the local communities and abandoned sharia." The piece further scorns the "second generation" of the Taliban for planting "cannabis and opium all over the country" ([Jihadology](#), January 18, 2021).

In the May 2020 issue, VoH noted that the "Taliban in the time of Mullah Omar had attacked the places of shirk (polytheism) like statues of Buddha and the temples of Rafidah in Afghanistan" ([Jihadology](#), May 23, 2020). In contrast, the new generation "began to develop the soft corner for the apostate regime of Iran and their Shia brethren by protecting the places of shirk and kufr for their nationalist interest." On multiple occasions, VoH writers have further criticized the Taliban for killing Uzbek (and Tajik) Muslims — a reference to the Taliban hunting down Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) members in Zabul after the IMU's pledge of allegiance to IS ([Jihadology](#), June 22, 2020; ferl.org, November 28, 2015).

Critique of Taliban Foreign Relations

VoH portrays IS as waging a righteous jihad based on the Quran and Sunnah, while the Taliban promotes "nationalistic, linguistic, patriotic and racial doctrines" ([Jihadology](#), May 23, 2020). The magazine also contrasts IS being independent and uncompromising, whereas the Taliban pursues friendly relations with the enemies of Islam and is beholden to malign foreign powers. IS has described the Taliban as "puppets", "contractors", "mercenaries", a "militia", and a "proxy" force for external actors ([Jihadology](#), January 18).

VoH denigrates the Taliban using visual methods as well, and argues the group is a mere chess piece in the grand strategy of foreign powers. On the cover of issue 5, IS accordingly depicts Taliban Emir Haibatullah Akhundzada dressed in military fatigues adorned with a Pakistani flag patch. He is also hoisted on strings controlled by a ventriloquist's hand that is colored like the American flag ([Jihadology](#), June 22, 2020).

The Taliban's foreign relations with the "enemies of Islam" are heavily scrutinized throughout the VoH series, which focuses on regional powers like Pakistan and Iran as well as great powers such as the United States, China, and Russia. IS also chides the Taliban for abandoning the Kashmir issue and for its friendly ties to the "tawaghit [tyrants] of Qatar" and the rest of the group's "brethren at the helm in the Arab world" ([Jihadology](#), October 20, 2020). VoH further ties the Taliban to Pakistani intelligence, arguing the Taliban are "dancing to the tune of Pakistani agencies" and taking orders from Islamabad ([Jihadology](#), November 13, 2021). IS views Pakistan as instrumental in the formation of the new, deviant Taliban, stating that "the Taliban pre-2001 was broken up for some time, with the pieces later put back together by Pakistani intelligence services only" ([Jihadology](#), October 20, 2020).

IS hones in on the Taliban's relations with Iran and Afghanistan's Shiite communities, particularly the Hazara, denouncing the Taliban as allies of Iran for protecting Afghan Shiites — apparently to please Tehran. VoH's 12th issue, for example, includes an article titled "Black Water with White Flags" in which it claims the Taliban "joined the ranks of the Americans and became blackwater mercenaries" and are "used by the [intelligence] agencies as a proxy against the Islamic State" ([Jihadology](#), January 18, 2021). Likewise, IS criticizes the Taliban for promising the Americans that Afghan territory will not be used to launch attacks against the US.

China and Russia are also addressed, with IS asserting that the Taliban “lick the boots of the crusaders and now Russia and China as well” ([Jihadology](#), September 18, 2021). Following the October 8, 2021 suicide bombing by a Uyghur ISKP militant, which killed 46 people, a VoH article stated the Taliban had “promised taghut China that it will kill and expel all Uyghur Muhajireen present in Afghanistan” and had “promised to protect and safeguard the Buddhist statues” at Beijing’s behest ([Militant Wire](#), October 8, 2021; [Sino Security](#), October 14, 2021). Similarly, VoH writers take aim at Taliban-Russia relations, calling them allies in the fight against IS in Afghanistan ([Jihadology](#), September 18, 2021). Russian President Vladimir Putin is even featured alongside Taliban fighters on a VoH magazine cover ([Jihadology](#), May 23, 2020).

Conclusion

IS’s strategy to fight the Taliban in Afghanistan includes a significant media warfare component. There is a robust South Asian IS media ecosystem supported by IS’s central propaganda organs and comprised of a constellation of official branch outlets, regional pro-IS groups, and grassroots supporters that actively work to undermine the Taliban’s image and credibility. VoH serves as a key component in this media assault on the Taliban’s legitimacy and will likely continue being a prominent voice aggressively impugning the Taliban’s reputation in the global jihadi community.

Lucas Webber is a researcher focused on geopolitics and violent non-state actors. He is cofounder and editor at [militantwire.com](#).

Iranian Influence in Post-Conflict Syria: Prospects and Rivalries with Arab Gulf States

Jacob Weiss

Iran’s intervention in the Syrian civil war allowed it to strengthen its foothold in the country. Iran sent numerous foreign militants to Syria, recruited Syrians into Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)-aligned militias, and carved out pockets of de facto territorial control for those allied militias. In recent years, however, several Arab countries have increased their efforts to normalize relations with Syria, and it is looking more likely that Syria will eventually return to Arab regional diplomacy. [1] The question then becomes how Iran might seek to preserve the gains it made in Syria, given that some Arab countries could use strengthened ties with Syria to undermine and side-line their own rival--Iran.

The Iranian Intervention

From the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, the IRGC played a vital role in supporting Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime. IRGC Quds Force leader Qassem Soleimani headed an IRGC advisory mission to Syria as early as 2011. [2] By 2012, the IRGC were facilitating the transfer of material support, training and advising Assad's forces, and organizing the recruitment and establishment of pro-regime militias. This support was vital given the large number of defections that Assad's forces faced early in the conflict. Subsequent years saw Iran support the entry of Hezbollah and similarly Iranian-aligned Iraqi militias into the conflict, while Soleimani played a leading role in coordinating the Syrian army, Hezbollah, and the various pro-regime militias. The IRGC even found itself directly involved in fighting Syrian rebels at times. [3]

Iranian support, further bolstered by the Russian military intervention in 2015, shifted the tide of the conflict in Assad's

favour. At present, despite significant portions of north-western and north-eastern Syria remaining out of Assad's control, the more populated western belt of the country -- the part containing the majority of Syria's major urban hubs -- is firmly under Assad's thumb. Iran, for its part, has gained over 300 military stations in Syria and its proxies, including both foreign and domestic, remain concentrated in strategic locations across the country (Jusoor, December 27, 2021).

Deir ez-Zor and Iranian Access to the Mediterranean

Iran's initial intervention had been defensive and aimed at keeping ally Bashar al-Assad in power. The overthrow of Assad would have threatened Iran's key strategic interests, including access through Syria to the Mediterranean, which allows Iran to connect with its proxy Hezbollah in Lebanon. Iranian fears came true in 2013 with the rise of the Islamic State (IS), which took control of large swathes of eastern Syria. IS control included the province of Deir ez-Zor, which directly threatened Iran's land route to Syria due to its position bordering Iraq.

Syrian forces bolstered by IRGC-backed militias took back control of Deir ez-Zor in 2017. The IRGC and its proxies remained in the province following the victory, with the former establishing the Imam Ali military base and the latter imposing de facto control over several small urban hubs along the western bank of the Euphrates, including the border town of al-Bukamal, while also securing roads connecting the province to Homs, Raqqa and beyond. [4] With the al-Qaim Iraq-Syria border crossing reopening in 2019 and Iranian proxies firmly entrenched on both sides of the border, Iran had secured one of its principal interests in Syria (al-Jazeera, September 30, 2019). Specifically, Iran achieved direct influence over one of Syria's three main border crossings from Iraq, thereby strengthening the land bridge from Iran across Iraq and Syria and into Lebanon and allowing Iran to support its

proxies, strengthen its influence, and threaten its rivals.

The Militias of Deir ez-Zor

One of the ways Iran seeks to control areas of Deir ez-Zor and influence Syria is through the network of militias it maintains in the country. The largest militia organization in Syria is the National Defence Forces (NDF). The NDF, created with Soleimani's help in 2012, is an umbrella organization centralizing the multitude of pro-Assad paramilitaries. At its peak, the NDF contained up to 100,000 militants. Not all NDF militias are aligned to Iran, however, as the NDF's demographics reflect the diversity of the Syrian population. Several NDF militias nevertheless received training from Hezbollah and the IRGC, and some militants travelled to Iran for training. [5]

In Deir ez-Zor, the militias on the ground showed their allegiance to Iran most clearly. Iran inundated the province with foreign Iranian-aligned militias while recruiting local Syrians to form newer militias. Notably, Deir ez-Zor hosted a militia presence from pre-existing pro-Iranian Hezbollah and Iraqi militias, such as Kata'ib Hezbollah and the Badr Brigades. [6] Iran also facilitated the creation of new militias, namely Fatemiyoun and Zaynabiyoun, consisting of Shia militants imported from Afghanistan and Pakistan (Salaam Times, January 29, 2019). Locally, aided by its co-opting of several Arab tribes in the province, Iran additionally created militias made up entirely of Syrian recruits from tribes in the province (al-Monitor, October 24, 2021). These militias include Jaysh al-Qura, founded in 2019, and the Hashemiyoun, founded in 2021. Recruitment to these militias has been dependent on conversion and adherence to Iran's Wilayat al-Faqih legal school of Shiism (al-Mashareq, April 1, 2021).

The Shi'ization of Deir ez-Zor

In May 2011, residents of al-Bukamal in Deir ez-Zor, which is majority Sunni,

burned pictures of the leader of Hezbollah Hassan Nasrallah and chanted anti-Iran slogans. [7] Just over a decade since then, Iranian cultural and humanitarian organizations have firmly entrenched their presence in the province, rebuilding damaged infrastructure and setting up schools in which Farsi and Iranian history are taught. Shia proselytizing activities have been facilitated by scholarships for students wishing to pursue religious studies in Iran, while tribal sheikhs are offered financial support to help spread Shia Islam. Iran's proselytizing has multiplied to the point that two Shia shrines have been built in the province, including Ain Ali Spring and the Dome of Ali, enabling Shia pilgrimages and granting the region a new Shia identity. [8] Direct coercion has also been used, with reports of arrests of Sunni imams for refusing to perform the Shia version of the call to prayer. Hospitals in some towns have also refused to admit Syrian locals without prior approval from the IRGC or IRGC affiliated militias.

Alongside proselytizing, Iran also facilitates demographic change. Iranian businessmen and companies have bought housing in al-Bukamal and Mayadin, granting the accommodation to foreign Shia families migrating to the area. Although there are no reliable statistics in Deir ez-Zor, given the influx of foreign Shia militants and their families alongside the hundreds of locals who have joined IRGC affiliated militias, it is likely that Iran has had significant success in changing the demographics of the province. Thus, in one of the area's most vital to Iranian interests in Syria, Iran has laid the groundwork for a local population favorable to long-term Iranian influence.

Syrian Normalization with Arab States

For Assad to push Syria into the post-conflict phase, he requires regional legitimacy of his rule and foreign investment. Normalization of ties with regional powers leading to a return to the Arab League would grant Assad the legitimacy and the investment opportunity

he seeks. Jordan, Egypt, and Algeria have all shown recent signs of deepening diplomatic activity with Syria. [9] However, the biggest prize for Assad remains normalization with the wealthy Gulf States. Assad has already had some success in re-expanding ties with the UAE and Bahrain, attaining limited investment with the the UAE (al-Arabiya, November 11, 2021). Significant Gulf investment in Syria and normalization of ties with regional powerhouse Saudi Arabia are, however, likely conditional on Syria curbing Iran's footprint in the country. Given the security risk that deepening Iranian influence in Iraq and Yemen has posed Gulf countries, the UAE and Saudi Arabia's motivation to counter Iran in Syria has increased (al-Jazeera, February 4).

Toward the end of 2021, Syria showed it would be receptive to reducing Iranian influence in the country, at least on the surface. In November, only days after the visit of the UAE foreign minister to Damascus, Assad ordered the Iranian commander of the Quds Force in Syria to leave the country for breaching Syrian sovereignty (Iran International, November 27, 2021). However, Assad is likely to be cautious about significantly moving against Iran over the coming years. After all Assad, who values staying in power above all other considerations, knows that Iran's intervention kept his regime intact. Since multiple rebel groups remain active, pushing out Iran's military and proxy militias would leave his regime vulnerable.

Iran, Syria, and the Arab World

It could be Iran that is most receptive to Syrian normalization with the Arab world. Iran could benefit politically, economically, and militarily from normalization, including by reducing its direct military presence. If Iran believes the proxy militias it has established and societal changes it has begun are enough to secure its interests in Syria, it may be willing to significantly reduce its military presence. Internationally, a Syrian return to the Arab League would also give Iran influence

within regional Arab diplomacy. Economically, Iran would further benefit from a less-isolated Syria that is better able to pay back the debts it accrued to Iran during the war. Additionally, leaving military activities to militia proxies would free up IRGC resources. Iranian military bases could be handed over to militia proxy control instead of returning to the Syrian army. This could allow a rapid IRGC return to the military positions it built up in Syria if it ever decided to so.

Despite the benefits, any significant IRGC military withdrawal is highly unlikely in the short term. The security environment is still too unstable for Iran, particularly in strategic locations such as Deir ez-Zor, where IS cells still operate and the U.S. maintains a military presence. Iran is likely to seek to undermine both rivals before any real military reduction occurs. Iran has already increased attacks targeting U.S. military bases toward the end of 2021 to achieve this goal, while security operations targeting IS have continued. [10] Iran would also favor a gradual drawdown of IRGC troops since the long-term loyalty of the militias it has built up still remains unproven. This is particularly the case in Deir ez-Zor, where Iran was able to co-opt a local Sunni population due to long-term economic and political marginalization of the region by Assad's regime and the ongoing security vulnerability caused by IS.

Conclusion

While Iran is likely to support Syria's attempts to normalize relations with the Arab world, there remain risks to Iran's influence in Syria even with a long-term and gradual withdrawal of its presence. Increasing Gulf state influence in the country could be aimed at building cultural institutions and community outreach projects of its own. Such projects could seriously undermine Iran's influence, particularly in Sunni majority areas, given that it is unclear how sincere domestic Sunni buy-in has been to Iranian cultural and religious infiltration.

This could set off an intense Iran-Gulf state competition for Syrian loyalty, with each side pouring more and more money into attracting Syrians to their spheres of influence. This, in turn, would contribute to the fragmenting of an already weakened Syrian national identity. The possibility of renewed conflict would also increase, particularly if Gulf state projects in the country are based on supporting a Sunni Islamist identity to counter the Shia Islamist identity built by Iran. IS would also likely ride the wave of increased sectarianism to expand recruitment activities, further undermining Syria's stability.

Jacob Lees Weiss is an analyst specializing in the MENA region at Healix International and HX global. He holds an MA in Contemporary Arabic Studies from the Autonomous University of Barcelona. Prior to working at Healix, he spent time volunteering for NGOs and studying in Algeria and Egypt.

[1] See Danny Makki, "The UAE paves way for Syria's return to the Arab fold, but plenty of hurdles remain" (The Middle East Institute, January 2022).

[2] See Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, pg. 160, (Yale University Press, April 2020).

[3] See Afshon Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, pg. 205-218, (Oxford University Press, April 2016).

[4] See Hamidreza Azizi, "Iran's Multi-Faceted Strategy in Deir ez-Zor" (SWP, March 2020).

[5] See Phillips, pg. 162.

[6] See Navvar Saban, "Factbox: Iranian presence in Syria's Deir ez-Zor province" (Atlantic Council, May 2021).

[7] See Phillips, pg. 158.

[8] See Ziad Awad, "Iran in Deir ez-Zor: Strategy, Expansion, and Opportunities" (European University Institute, February 2020).

[9] See Steven Heydemann, "Assad's normalization and the politics of erasure in Syria", (Brookings, January 2022).

[10] See "Operation Inherent Resolve Quarterly Report October 1-December 31, 2021" (U.S. Department of Defense, February 2022).