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**Opinion**

### **What the escape of at least 15,000 detainees means for ISIS**

The escapees fleeing al-Hol could create the next generation of Islamic State fighters.

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The al-Hol camp in northeastern Syria on Feb. 4. (Ghaith Alsayed/AP)

By Colin P. Clarke

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For years, counterterrorism analysts have warned about the dangers of the al-Hol camp in northeast Syria. Al-Hol, along with other detention centers throughout the country, housed Islamic State fighters and their families. After the United States and its allies [destroyed the remnants](#) of the Islamic State's proto-state in March 2019, al-Hol held approximately 70,000 detainees. In recent years, that number hovered around 23,000.

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And now, according to the U.S. intelligence community, between 15,000 and 20,000 people, mostly the families of Islamic State militants, are at large after [escaping this month](#). Some were smuggled out, others escaped through large holes cut into the fences being used to secure the camp. The prison break presents a difficult challenge for a new Syrian regime still fighting to assert control over the country and risks rejuvenating the Islamic State.

The [conditions in the camp](#) were deplorable — a lack of basic sanitation, limited medical supplies and few educational services for children — and served as a petri dish for further radicalization. Moreover, many detainees, especially the wives of Islamic State fighters, are hardcore extremists who saw their job as [raising the next generation](#) of jihadists, or what [they call](#) “the cubs of the caliphate.” Women have long played an important role in militant groups: serving on the front lines, launching suicide attacks and performing crucial intelligence functions.



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The children present a more complicated problem. Through no fault of their own, they were either born in al-Hol or ended up there after their families became involved with the Islamic State. These kids were raised in dire conditions, and many were indoctrinated from an early age in the Islamic State’s apocalyptic ideology.

Concerns about al-Hol usually centered on the Islamic State freeing those within the camp. The group staged many attempts over the years, including a [successful prison break](#) in Hasakah, Syria, in January 2022 that resulted in hundreds of militants freed and as many as 500 people killed. Busting its fighters out of prison had long been a key component of the Islamic State’s strategy, dating back to its predecessor, the Islamic State of Iraq. Its [“Breaking the Walls” campaign](#), which consisted of offensives to liberate its members from prisons across Iraq in 2012 and 2013, freed fighters who went on to form the core of the force that took the world by storm just a few years later. This month’s mass escape occurred not as a result of an Islamic State-engineered prison break but due to “mismanagement by Syria’s government and a lack of assiduous custody of the camp’s large security perimeter,” [according to](#) a U.S. intelligence assessment.

At its peak, the Islamic State attracted tens of thousands of fighters from [more than 100 countries](#) around the world. When the group was militarily defeated in Syria, those who survived languished in these camps. Governments [refused to repatriate](#) them, citing security concerns and fears that the evidence available to prosecute those who had committed crimes would not be enough to gain convictions, especially in Western judicial systems. Former fighters and their families were left with one choice: the Islamic State.

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Escapees fled al-Hol during a transfer of control over the camp from the Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to Syrian state forces commanded by the country's leader, Ahmed al-Sharaa, himself a former jihadist and commander of al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra. The SDF had provided security at the camp since its inception, but a [Syrian government offensive](#) against the Kurdish group in early January led to chaos and rioting that produced the prison break. Luckily, those considered the most dangerous — military-age males known to be Islamic State members — were [transferred last month](#) by the U.S. military to a series of prisons in Iraq. But the women and children who escaped al-Hol this month could become the next generation of fighters for the Islamic State.

Now, the same Syrian government unable to secure the camps must deal with the fallout from the prison break. Fourteen months after taking power in a rebel offensive that toppled longtime Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad, the government in Damascus still lacks a monopoly on the use of force throughout the country. Pockets of territory are dominated by violent armed groups, including the Islamic State. Another challenge is that the U.S. military is set to [withdraw entirely](#) from Syria, pulling its remaining 1,000 troops over the next two months.

The dissolution of al-Hol could prove to be a boon for the Islamic State in terms of personnel, morale and propaganda. The Islamic State has been [on the ascent](#) in Syria over the past several years, demonstrating a knack for resilience and regenerating the capabilities to conduct large-scale terrorist attacks. The group's long-standing motto is *baqiya wa tatamadad*, or "remaining and expanding." The jihadists have remained, maintaining a fighting force of several thousand militants. It will now have the opportunity to expand, with a potential infusion of members from the next

generation of fighters and a boost to morale for the group at a pivotal time in Syria's precarious transition.

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