

# POLICY BRIEF

## Coming Up Through the Cracks: The Islamic State's Resurgence in Syria and Iraq

### Abstract

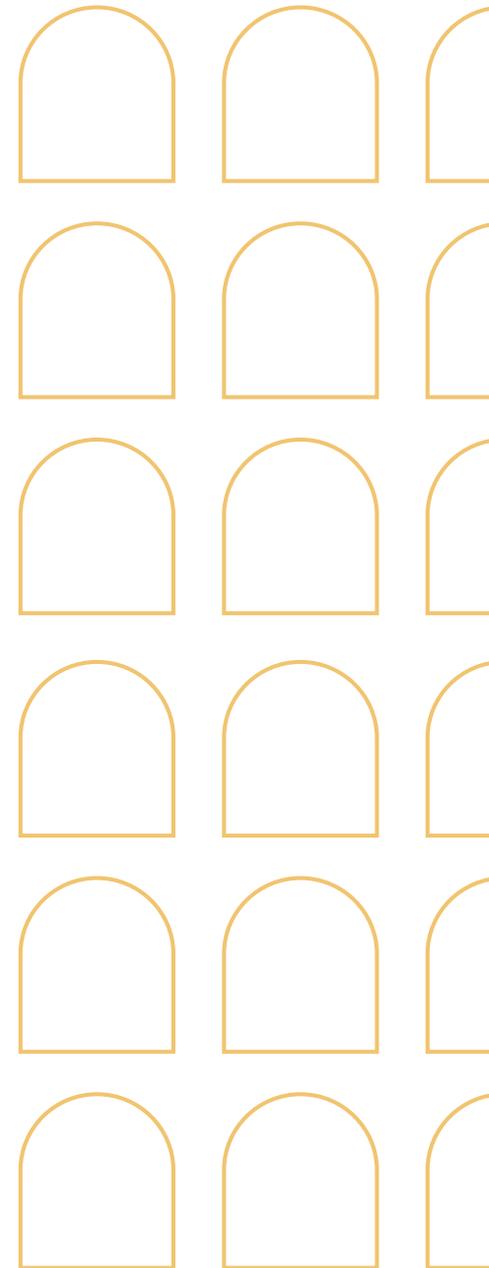
The Islamic State's attack, 20 January 2022, on al-Sina'a prison (al-Hasaka city) took both the international Coalition and the Syrian Democratic Forces by surprise. The Islamic State remains, on the evidence of this raid, a centralised organisation, coordinating efficiently at the regional level. The Islamic State is seizing the opportunities for action left to it by various local military forces. It is still taking advantage of the tensions from counterinsurgency strategies led by Western countries. The success of the war on terror will depend on the capacity of the Coalition to manage the new political landscape that this war helped create in Syria and Iraq.

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## Introduction

On 20 January 2022, the Islamic State (IS) launched its largest military operation in Syria since the fall of Baghouz in March 2019. Its attack on al-Sina'a prison in the city of al-Hasaka in North-Eastern Syria (NES), which is controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the US-led Coalition, offers many points for reflection. The raid points to IS's resurgence and to the shortcomings of the Coalition's counterterrorism policies.

The operation demonstrated that, despite continuous warring with all military forces in the region, IS is still capable of mobilising its forces in the wastelands between Syria and Iraq. From its new hub in the Syrian desert south of the Euphrates (or al-Badia), IS is rebuilding its operational capabilities. The attack also gives the lie to the idea that IS has been condemned to operate in a decentralised fashion since the end of its caliphate. Indeed, the operation revealed the outlines of a still highly-centralised IS structure across Syria and Iraq.

The attack also showed how dependent the SDF are on Coalition military support. This dependency sets up a vicious circle: the internal weakness of the SDF triggers more international support to its security sector, which increases Turkish concerns and that might exacerbate the war between the SDF – and more broadly the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) – and Ankara. This war has the potential, over the medium term, to cancel out the achievements of the anti-IS campaign. Across the region, all local military forces are now trying to convert the gains achieved through their military fight against IS into legitimacy: this is true for Ha'yat Tahrir al-Sham in north-western Syria, for the SDF in NES and for the Iranian-backed Popular Mobilisation Forces in Iraq. The apolitical stance

of the U.S. government and its European allies – claiming to be in the region only to fight IS – is increasingly counter-productive. Stabilisation efforts cannot be sustained if they do not actively deconflict the political landscape created by the political ambitions of local military forces.

This policy brief relies mainly on interviews with security officials, Autonomous Administration of North-Eastern Syria (AANES) officials, local activists and residents. These interviews were conducted in Syria and Iraq between January and April 2022. The paper is also based on research from trips to the two countries over the past five years.

## 1. A Regionally Centralised Military Operation

With the attack on the al-Sina'a detention centre, right in the heart of SDF-controlled territory, IS proved that it is still able to act in a centralised way and at the regional level. No other IS's operation had been carried out on this scale since the end of its territorial project in 2019.

The raid on al-Hasaka, one of the main cities in NES, was facilitated by the run-down state of the prison facilities there. Not enough resources had been invested in strengthening the prison system. Like many other detention centres for IS detainees,<sup>1</sup> al-Sina'a prison is located in inadequate buildings.<sup>2</sup> Unsurprisingly, detention centres have seen several internal mutinies or external attacks in the recent years.<sup>3</sup> For key SDF security and military commanders, mutinies *per se* came to be seen as a manageable reality as long as they stayed within the walls.<sup>4</sup> In al-Sina'a, the SDF had already twice lost control of the prison for a few days. These two mutinies were locally organised, one from Deir al-Zor and one from Ras al-Ayn. The January attack was,

1 Twenty-seven detention centers are hosting IS detainees in the NES alone. Interview with military commanders and officials, al-Hasaka, March 2022.

2 Al-Sina'a prison is located in a former technical school. It was defended by young and poorly trained men from the Self-Defence forces, with little combat experience. Numerous testimonies confirm that there are problems with the prison system. The buildings are not well suited to incarceration. Inmates can open passages through walls to communicate between cells at will, dig tunnels to hide knives and pistols, and they communicate easily with the outside. Interviews with security officers, al-Hasaka, March 2022.

3 As a result, the practice of amnesties for IS prisoners was almost abandoned a couple of years after several amnestied prisoners joined the organisation again. In 2021, only two prisoners received a remission of sentence. Interviews with anti-terror judges, Qamichli, March 2022.

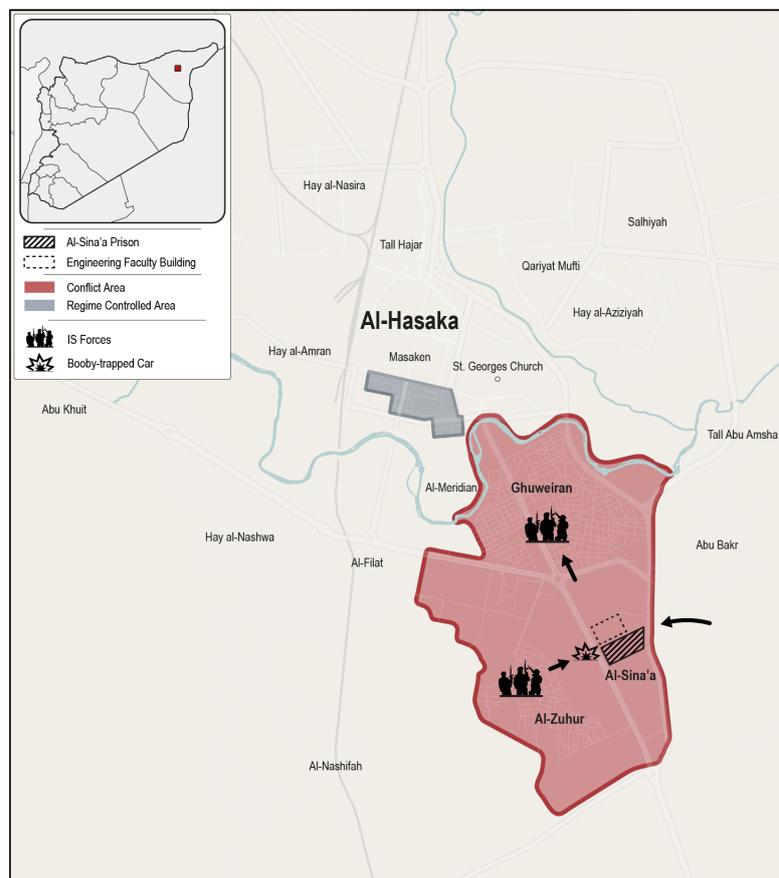
4 Interviews with senior military officials, al-Hasaka and Qamichli, March 2022.

instead, the first centralised operation according to a high-ranking military official in NES.<sup>5</sup> IS was well aware of the fragility of existing security arrangements and also knew that the construction of a more secure building was almost complete. Indeed, the attack on al-Sina'a prison had been hurried along by fears that the opening of the new centre would make it more difficult for IS to free its members.<sup>6</sup>

For months, IS's central command mobilised few dozen fighters of different nationalities: in addition to Syrians there were Iraqis, Egyptians, Saudis, Tunisians.<sup>7</sup> These fighters stormed the western gate of the building after a car bombing on the main entrance and a motor bombing at

an adjacent door. The defending forces were taken by surprise.<sup>8</sup> Faced with determined and experienced fighters and a mutiny inside the prison, the 90 prison guards lost control of the buildings and most were killed in combat. A small group of high-level prisoners had been quickly exfiltrated by IS,<sup>9</sup> and the rest of the fugitives managed to take control of a weapons depot adjacent to the jail as well as the prison guards' weapons. IS militants then spread out and took up positions in Ghuweiran and al-Zuhur, two poor neighbourhoods surrounding the detention centre (Map 1). Groups of four to five escapees stormed houses, where informants had notified them that weapons might be present. The two neighbourhoods fell quickly under their control.

**Map 1: IS Attack on al-Sina'a Prison in al-Hasaka**



Source: The authors

5 Interview with a senior military official, al-Hasaka, March 2022.

6 Interviews with SDF military commanders, March 2022.

7 Interviews with SDF military commanders, January-February 2022. IS claims that the prison break was made with 12 people. Al-Naba, "Issue n. 323," 27 January 2022.

8 The arrest of several IS cells over the last six months, including a cell specifically responsible for an attack on al-Sina'a prison in November 2021, falsely led the Coalition and the SDF to believe that IS's plot to attack the prison had been aborted. General Command of the Internal Security Forces NES, "Statement Issued by the General Command of the Internal Security Forces in North-Eastern Syria to Our People and Public Opinion" (in Arabic), *Asayish*, 8 November 2021, <https://bit.ly/3sL4RK8>. A key military commander recognised that this excess of trust has been their main mistake, interview, al-Hasaka, March 2022.

9 Interviews with SDF officials, al-Hasaka, March 2022.

The sustained fire of several Apache helicopters prevented a mass escape of detainees.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, the SDF reacted by mobilising 7,000 men in two security cordons, one around the two occupied neighbourhoods and one around the city of al-Hasaka as a whole.<sup>11</sup> The two neighbourhoods were controlled by IS militants for at least five days, while negotiations were taking place.<sup>12</sup> The SDF were forced to fight house-to-house against small, mobile and highly-motivated IS groups with limited resources (rifles, light machine guns). Several dozen U.S and British troops proved decisive in regaining control.<sup>13</sup>

The human toll was high. Heavy fighting in the two neighbourhoods destroyed more than 50 buildings and displaced more than 6,000 civilians.<sup>14</sup> According to the SDF, 374 IS members (attackers and prisoners), 117 SDF members and prison guards (40 SDF and 77 guards), and more than 30 civilians were killed. SDF leaders claim that no more than a few dozen prisoners absconded, but the number might be higher according to Coalition sources.<sup>15</sup>

The prison attack proved, first, that IS is now capable of going beyond the low-intensity, clandestine operations the organisation carried out during the last three years in its former strongholds. The *modus operandi* amounts to a full military strategy: reliance on suicide commandos; advance weapons caches; and urban guerrilla tactics carried

out by pre-positioned forces to slow down any counterattack.<sup>16</sup> The attack's financial costs approached, it is alleged, half a million dollars.<sup>17</sup>

This operation also demonstrated a strong level of centralisation and regional coordination. This was reflected in the decision-making process behind the raid. It was ordered and partially supervised by the former IS leader, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi, who was killed on 3 February 2022. It was commanded – it is alleged – by the IS leader in charge of Syria and supported by several senior Iraqi commanders.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, this operation is part of a strategy announced by al-Qurashi's predecessor, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, in an appeal in April 2019. He had demanded there for the group's strategy of territorialisation to be replaced by a "war of attrition".<sup>19</sup> The release of detained members is central to this war of attrition, in order to regain the former technical know-how lost during the battles with the Coalition. The objective of the al-Sina'a prison break was twofold. First, it was to release high calibre detainees, and it is no coincidence that the organisation targeted al-Sina'a which detained foreign fighters and not the central prison of al-Hasaka a few hundred meters to the north where Syrian IS fighters are housed with common criminals.<sup>20</sup> Second, the aim was to enter into al-Hasaka city and to capture hostages who could be exchanged for key members of the organisation.<sup>21</sup>

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10 Interviews with Coalition officers, March 2022.

11 Interview with a military commander, al-Hasaka, March 2022.

12 The mutineers managed to secure the treatment of injured militants but failed to obtain any positive response on their other requests: supply of food and a safe passage to the Syrian desert. Interview with a military commander, al-Hasaka, March 2022.

13 Interviews with AANES security executives, February 2022.

14 Humanitarian Needs Assessment Programme (HNAP).

15 Interview with SDF officials, al-Hasaka, and Coalition sources, March 2022.

16 Interviews with al-Hasaka residents and SDF military commanders, January-February 2022.

17 Interviews with regional and local security officers, February 2022.

18 Ibid.

19 Kyle Orton, "The Reappearance of the Caliph," *Kyle Orton's Blog*, 10 May 2019, <https://bit.ly/3pDSKfZ>

20 The scenario is quite similar to 2011 after the departure of the US army from Iraq: Al-Qaeda in Iraq, the matrix of what would later become IS, quickly rebuilt itself thanks to prison attacks and was able to partially take over the protest movements that had opposed the US occupation. Arthur Quesnay, *La Guerre Civile Irakienne*, (Paris: Karthala, 2021).

21 Regional security sources claim that IS aimed at reaching the Christian neighbourhood of the city. Interview, March 2022. Capturing hostages is a classic in the repertoire of the organisation. For example, in February 2015, IS captured 200 Christians in al-Hasaka governorate and successfully exchanged them for ransoms following negotiations with Assyrian clerical institutions. Interviews with Christian activists and fighters, al-Hasaka, 2016. Hostage taking continues to be a mainstream IS practice in the Syrian desert: Gregory Waters, "Mass Kidnappings in Central Syria Reveals Dynamics of IS Resurgence," *New Lines Institute*, 8 April 2021, <https://bit.ly/3pEFasE>.

The number of mobilised men also attests to IS's centralised structure: the attacking fighters were brought in from different areas in Deir al-Zor and from south of the Euphrates in Syria and Iraq over more than six months.<sup>22</sup> The number of fighters involved, many of them not Syrians, corresponded to nearly 10% of the organisation's operational capacity. Present estimates suggest that IS has around 1,000 active fighters between Syria and Iraq, supported by 5,000 to 10,000 non-combatants.<sup>23</sup>

## 2. IS's New Strongholds and the Limits of a Resurgence

The prison break was coupled with an urban insurgency in two poor, neglected neighbourhoods that are socially connected to Deir al-Zor. This might lead to the conclusion that the raid confirms an ongoing geographic expansion of IS from its original core zone of influence in SDF-controlled territories in eastern Deir al-Zor. The fact that Deir al-Zor has not risen up suggests that this is not the case. To understand this, it is necessary to unpack the concept of IS's post caliphate 'stronghold'.

A stronghold can be defined as a zone of influence which IS no longer dominates territorially, but where it has re-established control over the population through several of the following: recruitment; protection money taken, in the form of *zakat*, from local traders; oaths of allegiance (*bay'a*) and repentance (*tawba*); IS attacks against representatives of the authorities; weak administrative outreach; pressure to Islamise lifestyles; IS dispensing of justice; "flying" nightly IS checkpoints and motor patrols.

An IS stronghold can, then, take different forms, depending on how these criteria fit together in concrete local settings. In south-eastern Deir al-Zor, IS demands and gets protection money. Any trader of a certain size living in the districts of al-Buseyrah, Dhiban and Hajin is, in one way or another, obliged to pay his *zakat*, sometimes very large amounts.<sup>24</sup> The triangle of cities of al-Zir, Dhiban, and al-Buseyrah,<sup>25</sup> is at the heart of this protection racket because the economic circuits, smuggling and some of the oil wells are located there. North-eastern Deir al-Zor however, from al-Buseyrah city to al-Suwar, does not face strong *zakat* pressures. This is mainly because it lacks economic resources. But it is of strategic importance: there is the Iraqi border and tribal affiliations stretch across the border. The AANES was never really able to establish local councils there. Its representatives have regularly been targeted or killed, creating an administrative vacuum that stretches from the northern bank to the eastern Khabur line then north into the Margadeh district (Map 2).<sup>26</sup>

Oaths of allegiance and repentance are a common feature of these strongholds. They are used to control the relationship between the population and AANES institutions. Both concepts, though religious, have their political logic, too. Repentance makes it possible to disaffiliate individuals from AANES institutions. Targets are invited to repent individually, either via meetings with IS activists or publicly in local mosques at Friday prayer time. This practice affects only SDF fighters and civil officials, but not ordinary AANES employees: for instance, a teacher is not threatened. These acts effectively prevent recruitment into local councils or into the military and leaves institutional vacuums.<sup>27</sup>

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22 Interviews with regional and local security cadres February 2022.

23 Interviews with Coalition officials and various experts of IS, January-February 2022.

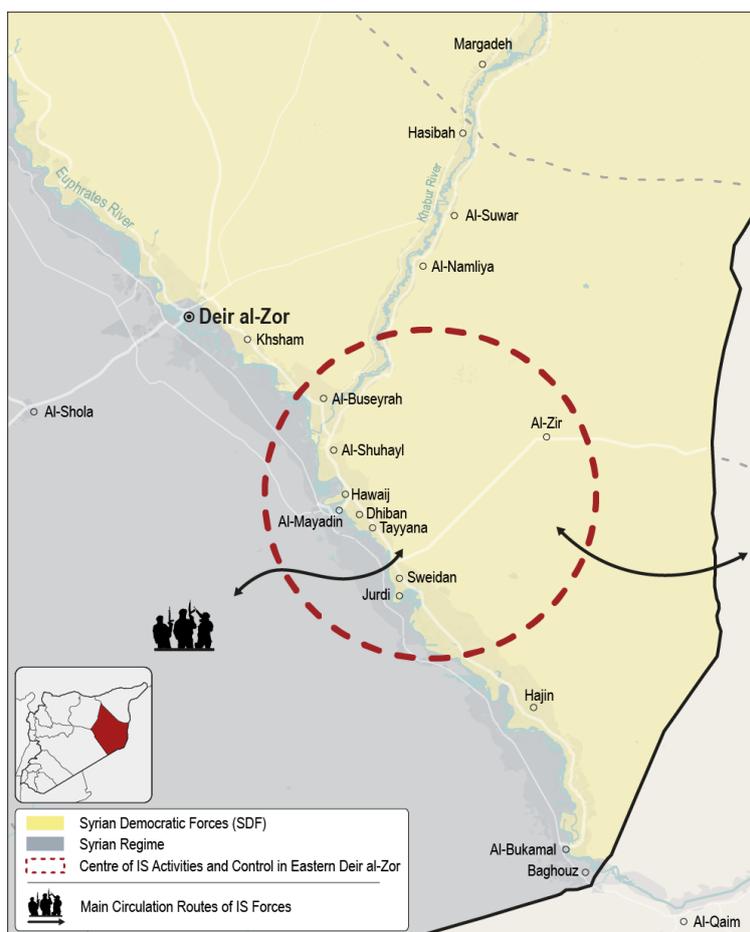
24 Between the districts of Dhiban and Jurdi, the imposition is never less than USD 1,000 and can vary from USD 7,000 to 10,000. Some traders negotiate, sometimes successfully, with the *zakat* Emir. Those who refuse to pay suffer retaliation such as the destruction of their offices or stores. Others prefer to seek exile further north. The *zakat* is imposed through WhatsApp messages, a place of reception is fixed and the merchants, once their due is paid, receive a receipt stamped in the name of IS. Payment is sometimes made via women in the market, the anonymity provided by the niqab conferring additional security. Interviews with activists and local commanders of Deir al-Zor, March 2022.

25 In al-Buseyrah, as in other towns where AANES institutions are present, targeted killings remain frequent. IS has also put direct pressure on lifestyle choices, notably by threatening – unsuccessfully for the time being – shopkeepers who sell tobacco or women who are too conspicuous. IS has also reportedly begun to bring justice through a sharia judge who intervenes in cases of theft or debt.

26 According to a local security operator, many of the attacks taking place in the SDF-controlled areas are coordinated in the Margadeh district. IS is evolving into small groups totally embedded within the shepherd communities, that are therefore extremely difficult to penetrate. Interview, Shedadeh, March 2022.

27 On the growing practice of repentance from the summer of 2019, notably in the town of Abu Hardub, see Arthur Quesnay and Patrick Haenni, "Surviving the Aftermath of Islamic State: The Syrian Kurdish Movement's Resilience Strategy," Research Project Report, (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, 17 February 2020), <https://bit.ly/3mTSZQx>

## Map 2: IS Stronghold in North-Eastern Syria



Source: The authors

In January 2022, in the small town of Dhiban, a group of 40 SDF soldiers received a warning to repent and withdrew from the SDF with the consent of their local commanders who were all aware of the risks involved in not repenting. Many similar cases have taken place in the village of Darnaj – currently without a local council or a municipal chairman; in Sweidan, where a local council has recently been re-established, but where no one will sit as chairman; and in Tayyana. In the last two cases, the SDF are unable to recruit locally and are forced to bring soldiers from other governorates,<sup>28</sup> but at a cost: the military and security apparatus is external to local communities.

While the practice of repentance aims to disaffiliate individuals from the institutional order, oaths of allegiance serve rather as a way to infiltrate that same order. They usually come after threats against AANES officials or against individuals serving in the military or security structures. The aim is to create networks of informants within these institutions and to protect IS from raids and

arrest campaigns. The cessation of attacks in an area is, therefore, not necessarily a sign of IS's organisational weakness. Rather it may simply reflect IS's ability to impose allegiance on local AANES representatives. For instance, IS has recently managed to impose flying checkpoints at night in Sweidan and ceased attacks in Tayyana where all officials are suspected of having pledged allegiance to IS.<sup>29</sup>

In contrast with the eastern part of Deir al-Zor, which appears to be the sole IS stronghold in NES, the neighbourhoods adjacent to the prison in al-Hasaka meet none of the criteria mentioned above. The Ghuweiran and al-Zuhur neighbourhoods are linked to Deir al-Zor through family and tribal ties, but there is no militant continuum between the two areas. These neighbourhoods are neither new IS outposts nor IS strongholds. They are security vacuums and are poorly controlled, not due to local sympathies for IS, but due to long-standing hostility between residents and the

28 Interviews with security officials, military and activists in Deir al-Zor, March 2022.

29 Interviews with local military commanders and civil society activists from Deir al-Zor, March 2022.

Kurdish movement.<sup>30</sup> Disputes have meant that there is little cooperation between the authorities and local communities: the SDF lack security links, and administrative supervision via neighbourhood committees is also weak.<sup>31</sup> As a SDF commander noted, distrust of the Kurds has not produced Islamist sympathies as locals still dislike both the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and IS.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, IS deployment in the area was not a return to an area with sympathisers, but, rather, a violent takeover that led to the death of around 20 civilians, some of them beheaded in their houses or in the street as examples.<sup>33</sup> The few networks IS were able to recreate there are the result of a security vacuum that has historical and social roots. However, there is no evidence for a dynamic of consolidation with the movement becoming locally entrenched.<sup>34</sup>

Finally, the al-Sina'a attack did not trigger any domino effect elsewhere. The fear that fighting would spread to other detention centres or camps where IS relatives are held did not materialise. In eastern Deir al-Zor, IS launched several attacks, but these seemed more like spontaneous reactions, with little cooperation and almost no real impact.<sup>35</sup> The shock wave of the al-Sina'a attack also had little effect in

the villages south of al-Hasaka, where IS had a territorial foothold. Regime forces' withdrawal along the frontline with the SDF in the Resafa and Mansoura areas during the attack could have led to an IS surge. But the SDF managed to secure this outpost.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, IS's attempts to re-activate networks in its former strongholds have been unsuccessful. In the most important, the al-Karama district in eastern Raqqqa, semi-inclusive political engagement based on robust elite bargaining<sup>37</sup> enabled local elites to use AANES institutions to ensure domination in Raqqqa.<sup>38</sup> In return, security institutions put down roots in local communities. Former IS militants are there, but they are contained and demobilised and the area remained calm during the al-Hasaka attack.

The attack on al-Hasaka did not, therefore, change a central fact: IS's influence is based around a strip of some 100 km in the far east of Deir al-Zor along the Euphrates and the Khabur lines, near the border with Iraq. The institutional order in NES has proved relatively resilient. This is despite the additional pressure on the AANES caused by the escalating conflict with Turkey,<sup>39</sup> as well as the destabilisation efforts of Russia and the Assad regime.

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30 Tensions between residents of the two neighbourhoods and Kurds appeared publicly for the first time in 2004, when young people from Ghuweiran and al-Zuhur participated in clashes between Kurds and Arabs over brawls during a soccer match between teams from Qamichli and Deir al-Zor.

31 Interviews with security officials, al-Hasaka and Qamichli, March 2022.

32 Interview with a local SDF commander, al-Hasaka, March 2022.

33 Observations and discussions in Ghuweiran and al-Zuhur, interviews with local commanders, March 2022.

34 In 2021, the increase in the number of arrests of IS fighters in al-Hasaka (including the discovery of a car bomb in September 2021) and in NES reflected IS's exploitation of security vacuums rather than the establishment of an Islamist stronghold based on sympathies between local populations and the militant organisation. Rojava Information Center's Sleeper, "Insurgency and SDF/Coalition raids in the AANES", <https://bit.ly/36T4XXW>

35 In the last days of January 2022, IS used rocket launchers and automatic weapons against military positions in the towns of Jedid Egeidat, al-Buseyrah, al-Shuhayl, Dhiban and Darnaj. IS militants planted their flags and lined the walls of villages with posters, threatening the population with their imminent return. IS supporters called on Telegram for attacks against SDF military facilities in NES. Interviews with SDF military leaders, civil society activists and researchers, Deir al-Zor and al-Hasaka, March 2022.

36 Following the attack, the SDF's security forces made around 30 arrests in Raqqqa city, fewer than 10 in Manbij, and around 50 in eastern Deir al-Zor. Out of the 50 arrests in Deir al-Zor, 40 were released while 10 stayed under custody on charges of being involved in the al-Hasaka attack. Interviews with local activists, residents and security personnel, Deir al-Zor, Raqqqa, Manbij, February 2022 and with SDF commanders and local activists from Deir al-Zor, al-Hasaka, March 2022.

37 Al-Karama was the first battle in the war to recapture Raqqqa in 2017. During the battle, more than 20,000 people were displaced in a camp without any form of vetting. SDF commanders began negotiations with the heads of the major families in the camp and sought to identify weapons caches and IS militants in the camp. But their efforts were neutralised by the influence of IS militants. The SDF then gave up on raiding the camp and struck a deal with the local elites: a collective return of the people of al-Karama to their villages without security consequences in exchange for their commitment to support the AANES and the fight against IS. More than 1,500 young people joined the SDF and local leaders took over all the newly-established civil institutions in Raqqqa. Field observations, al-Karama, August 2021.

38 The key positions in the Raqqqa local council, its court system, security bodies are now held by the Bariaj clan from al-Karama. This gives them the upper hand on disputes over land, access to AANES public services and job opportunities. Interviews in Raqqqa and al-Karama, November-December 2021.

39 According to SDF officials, an SDF reinforcement convoy came under Turkish attack on the Tall Tamr-al-Hasaka road. In Qamichli, the anti-terror court had to transfer 200 persons under trial to another location out of fear that Turkish drone runs over the court could lead to an attack. According to another security source, the mobility of IS south of al-Hasaka was eased by the gradual switch in priority of the AANES security apparatus to the north due to the escalation with Turkey that began six months before. Interviews in Qamichli, March 2022.

### 3. The Eastern Syrian Desert: A Strategic Sanctuary for IS

The al-Hasaka attack cannot be explained as an extension of IS's increased influence in eastern Deir al-Zor. Rather, it reflects a regional IS strategy across Syria and Iraq planned from its sanctuary in the Syrian desert (al-Badia). Indeed, the Syrian desert is central to IS's resurgence. It is now the new hub for IS's redeployment regionwide and the place where militants are brought together and trained before being dispatched to Syria or Iraq. It offers easy access to borders (with Iraq) and to frontlines (with NES).<sup>40</sup> It was one of the departure points for the al-Hasaka attackers, as well as a haven for escaped prisoners.<sup>41</sup> Nominally under the control of the Assad regime, this strategic sanctuary is the last space where IS is able to maintain an infrastructure of bases and training camps.

The current situation in al-Badia is the product of a number of successive power struggles between IS and various pro-regime forces. First, in 2018, the National Defence Forces (NDF) became aware of the increasingly strong connection between some Bedouin tribes and IS. The militia, then, repressed Bedouin herdsman whose role was crucial for the maintenance of supply lines for IS in al-Badia.<sup>42</sup> IS launched, in response, a wave of attacks between 2018 and 2020,<sup>43</sup> which forced the regime to keep IS supply lines open. Since June 2021, regime forces and affiliated militias, supported by Russia, have waged a counter offensive to contain IS influence in the desert. Their main objectives have been achieved, at

least partially: secure trade and traffics lines (most importantly the Salamiya-Ithriyah-Raqqah road); reduce attacks on convoys; and create a security perimeter around Palmyra and Salamiya (where Russians and minorities are present).<sup>44</sup> But rather than defeating IS, the Assad regime and its allies have, instead, entered into a series of symbiotic relationships with IS.

Early in 2022, a more stable, though violent pattern, seemed to be emerging: the level of confrontation decreased but there is no truce in al-Badia. Both sides have achieved their goals: IS has secured its supply lines; and the regime and Russian forces have protected strategic points. For all sides, trade dividends are the ultimate cement in a system of interdependence. The different parties prioritise the preservation of trade over the military defeat of the enemy. Pro-regime forces try to secure their traffic on the roads linking Iraq to western Syria through formal written pacts of non-aggression with IS.<sup>45</sup> Trade protocols and understandings enable IS to secure medical treatment or to provide mobile surgery units for their militants and their families.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, aid diversion is known in local humanitarian and security circles to be used to bribe IS. Specifically, aid from humanitarian warehouses often disappears in significant quantities. International organisations in charge of food distribution rely on local partners for distribution and little attention is given over to monitoring. Local testimonies also suggests that humanitarian access benefits from 'feeding the road', as is now frequently said in Syria, and, as a result, make IS raids less likely.<sup>47</sup>

40 Testimonies of Iraqi militants arrested by the SDF show how easy it is for militants to move across lines or cross borders, SDF online archives, <https://bit.ly/3uTnQ54>.

41 Interviews with SDF and Coalition security sources, February-March 2022. An attacker of al-Sina'a prison in contact with his family explained that four out of nine escapees were actually from Deir al-Zor and that escapees went either to Iraq or to the Syrian desert. He himself finished in the Syrian desert where he took pride in fighting the "*Hizb al-Shaytan*", a term used to qualify Hezbollah. Interviews with local residents, al-Hasaka, March 2022.

42 In one year, the NDF liquidated tens of thousands of head of cattle, decimating a herd of nearly four million heads. This led to the impoverishment of pastoralists who were often forced to flee, particularly in SDF-controlled areas, where they frequently settled after losing their livestock. They have been subjected to attacks by IS, which accuses them of no longer supporting them, and attacks by the Syrian regime, which, conversely, accuses them of helping IS. Interviews with researchers who have access to regime officials and with pastoralists from al-Badia who are exiled in Tabqa, June 2019 and February 2022.

43 IS conducted military-style attacks, mass kidnappings, and assassinations of Russian and Iranian commanders. Gregory Waters, "ISIS in Syria: 2020 in Review," *New Lines Institute*, 10 February 2020, <https://bit.ly/3Km76to>

44 Interviews with journalists close to the Syrian government and jihadi experts, February, March 2022.

45 According to testimonies, pro-regime forces do not hesitate to give part of the cargoes transported in exchange for IS's non-aggression. On their side, the pro-regime forces and Bedouin tribes are also engaged in the lucrative supply lines to IS business. Interviews with Syrian workers in regime-held areas, October 2021 and January 2022.

46 Testimonies of regional and local security officers, November 2021-January 2022.

47 Interviews with local humanitarian affairs staff and observers in Damascus, March 2022.

The increased competition over the control of trade and traffic between NES and Damascus and between Syria and Iraq have compounded this situation. The more competitive the market, the better IS does in instrumentalising score-settling or trafficking deals with some militias at the expense of other rivals. The violence that emerges is often less an escalation and more a form of negotiation within the terms of the existing deal.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, the links between IS with local pro-regime armed groups has, for years, fed these symbiotic relationships. Some of the key local IS leaders are former security officers or military commanders who know their counterparts on the regime side. They negotiated evacuation deals with former rebellious pockets such as Quneitra or al-Hajar al-Aswad.<sup>49</sup> This helped to ensure communication lines between the organisation and its enemies in al-Badia. Tribal mediators who have long engaged in local reconciliation add another layer of contacts between IS and the regime. The web of dependency works for the Syrian regime. In the short term, IS can live in this system of corruption and traffic.

While the Assad regime and its allies recognise that they cannot inflict a crippling military defeat on IS in al-Badia, they have tipped the military power balance. Since the summer of 2021 the regime has degraded IS's capacity to wage attacks and the organisation has been forced to adapt.<sup>50</sup> However, this rugged territory has also worked in IS's favour. The Russian airforce cannot target fighters in small groups, and the military forces on the ground are fragmented. The central Syrian desert has become a sanctuary of kinds. Areas such as Wadi Dubeit, al-Mayadin and al-Sukhnah are still under IS control, protected by huge minefields with IS on the one side and the Syrian army on the other side.<sup>51</sup> IS's command maintains there a highly bureaucratised

underground structure, indispensable for carrying out complex operations such as the al-Sina'a raid. Reminiscent of the early years in Iraq,<sup>52</sup> its clandestine administrative structures ensure a high level of logistics networks and allow for a division of tasks between specialised cells. Each cell is responsible for activities such as transporting weapons, moving militants, preparing car bombs and taxing the population. IS security personnel oversee the training of recruits and enforce secrecy and anonymity. Fighters trained in al-Badia do not know the location of their training site or the names of other network members. This compartmentalisation explains why the dismantling of cells fails to break up the organisation as a whole.<sup>53</sup>

#### 4. Exploiting the Weaknesses of Local Armed Actors: A Regional Strategy

Across Syria and Iraq, IS has been able to take advantage of various state and non-state forces to define its presence on the ground. Three main types of area can be identified: zones dedicated to military confrontation, qualified as "hot zones" by one IS leader;<sup>54</sup> accumulation zones to extract financial resources and recruit; and hideout zones from where senior commanders supervise the group's operations. The last two are "cold zones" for the organisation (Map 3).

In Syria, the desert south of the Euphrates is at the core of these hot zones. The collapse of state institutions and militia fragmentation made it possible for IS to maintain a state of open confrontation there. Then from al-Badia, the organisation projects power into a crisis-filled arc stretching from eastern Homs to the province of Diyala on the Iraqi-Iranian border.

48 According to a local analyst, if supplies decrease, and IS fighters are starved, they have no choice but to inflict immediate harm on regime soldiers, or on the trade convoys of regime war lords. Interview, March 2022.

49 Deutsche Welle, "IS' Leaves Last Pocket of Damascus," 21 May 2018, <https://bit.ly/3hleqmy>

50 Attacks on roads are contained, major attacks on the convoys stopped and the attacks on the regime forces and its affiliated militias diminished. IS fighters cannot use trucks anymore, but only motorcycles and they can move only in small numbers.

51 Interview with local researchers, March 2022.

52 Clandestineness is at the heart of the organisation's activity and is based on experience gained in the Iraqi civil war since 2003, when the organisation fought American and Iraqi forces. Adam Baczeko, Gilles Dorronsoro, Arthur Quesnay, and Maai Youssef, "The Rationality of an Eschatological Movement: The Islamist State in Iraq and Syria," *GLD Program on Governance and Local Development - Yale University*, Working Paper 7, 2016, <https://bit.ly/3Msjxpe>

53 Interviews with security officials in Iraq and the region, Baghdad, February 2022.

54 Interviews with a source close to the movement, November 2021.



where houses are rented or sold at a rapid pace without any supervision from the SSG administration or the local security forces.<sup>59</sup> In 2019 Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was killed in a similar socially atomised environment. Idlib offers sanctuary opportunities for a leadership that does not seek action there but that can communicate with the rest of the organisation.<sup>60</sup>

The security equation in SDF-controlled territory is the diametric opposite to the situation in Idlib, with a high level of population control, but a poor follow-up in terms of IS networks. The SDF has a well-established bureaucratic apparatus.<sup>61</sup> Therefore, there is tighter administrative control of the population and hiding is more difficult. But the Kurdish-led security apparatus' weaker capacity to understand and penetrate IS networks, coupled with disaffiliation from the administration in eastern Deir al-Zor, produces a society that is opaque to the security agencies. Despite its growing influence in this area, IS avoids open confrontation with the SDF,<sup>62</sup> and does not seek to provoke a collapse of AANES civil institutions that would lead to an intervention by the Coalition. This would not be in IS's interests, as its objective is, according to a source close to the organisation, to exert self-restraint and strategic patience in SDF-controlled areas until the departure of the US. Then it can wage war against the Assad regime, considered a weaker opponent and, therefore, a more suitable target for a showdown.<sup>63</sup>

In Iraq the resurgence of IS is less dramatic than in Syria. This is thanks to the strong resources of the Iraqi state and security regime established by the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) since 2014. However, in numerous areas, control over populations is almost impossible. Impoverished communities and millions of internally displaced persons (IDPs) are found in informal settlements on the outskirts of cities, such as in southern Nineveh, near Mosul, in Kirkuk, but also in the governorates of Salaheddin and Anbar.<sup>64</sup> IS can work undercover in these areas, demanding protection money, taxing trade and traffic and developing recruitment networks. Like Deir al-Zor under SDF control, these areas are not active military zones. Rather they are support points for the organisation for future attacks, which could be facilitated by any tears in the social fabric. The number and level of IS attacks is steadily increasing there.<sup>65</sup>

## 5. Apoliticism Won't Pay Off: The Dilemmas of Western Counterinsurgency Policies

The al-Hasaka attack highlights the initial contradictions raised in the early days of Western support for the Kurdish movement: the Kurds, faced with IS, can only hold out with Western support. But this support has been given without clarifying the relationship between the SDF/PYD and its mother organisation, the PKK.

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59 Al-Qurachi had only one under-equipped guard with no military formation and no security camera. Interviews with security and military leaders in Idlib and discussions with neighbours of al-Qurashi, February 2022.

60 Technical considerations also explain why in Idlib, areas controlled by Turkish-backed factions, or even Turkey, are preferred by IS leaders of a certain level. These leaders do not reside in the Syrian desert because, while security is certainly better there, its electronic isolation makes communication with the rest of the movement difficult. Interviews with Western and regional security sources, February 2022. In Turkish-controlled areas, high level IS leaders are regularly arrested, but the corruption of the *de facto* local forces makes this region a privileged destination for lower ranking IS militants after their release in Idlib detention centres. Interviews with security officers and former detainees, March 2021.

61 Quesnay and Haenni, "Surviving the Aftermath of Islamic State: The Syrian Kurdish Movement's Resilience Strategy."

62 Al-Naba confirmed that the objective of the al-Hasaka attack was not to open combat fronts against the SDF, but only to release leaders and weapons to allow the fighting to spread and move to a logic of a war of attrition. Al-Naba, "Issue n. 323," 27 January 2022.

63 Interview with a researcher specialist of the movement, Deir al-Zor, August 2021.

64 For example, the military and civilian authorities in the cities of Kirkuk and Mosul recognise their inability to control the informal settlements composed of several hundred thousand IDPs from all over the country. Observations and interviews in Salaheddin, Kirkuk, Mosul and Nineveh, January-February 2022.

65 In 2021 in Iraq, IS launched over 257 offensives, killing 387, and injuring 518 people. On 21 January 2022, an IS fighting group managed to take control of an Iraqi army outpost and killed 11 soldiers. A similar operation was carried out in Kirkuk against a federal police station. IS also proved its ability to move by taking control of a village overnight in the vicinity of Kirkuk. Al-Jazeera, "Suspected ISIL Fighters Kill 11 Iraqi Soldiers 'In Their Sleep'," 21 January 2022, <https://bit.ly/3MtmupB>

The *de facto* autonomous region of NES feeds and strengthens the PKK by offering it a sanctuary and a space to accumulate human, financial and organisational resources so that it can militarily take on the Turkish army or its Syrian proxies.<sup>66</sup> As a result, Ankara has become more anxious and has already launched three military operations since 2016.<sup>67</sup> Since the summer of 2021, the conflict between Turkey and the PKK has spiked dramatically. Turkey decided to respond to Kurdish-led insurgency activities led in Turkish-controlled areas in northern Syria. It did so with systematic targeted strikes against various SDF positions along the border. The old game of tit-for-tat actions and retaliations that had formerly taken place between the PKK and the Turkish army inside Turkey and Northern Iraq has crossed into Syrian territory and the two operation theatres in Syria and Iraq are now connected organically. The Winter Eagle Operation launched by Ankara on 2 February 2022 reflects this new reality: it is the first Turkish military operation simultaneously carried out on Syrian and Iraqi soil. This new interconnectivity has important political consequences: it makes any separate truce between Turkey and the PYD impossible. Any negotiated solution for NES will have to somehow integrate the PKK into the equation. But, at a time when Turkey and the Kurdish movement are entering a new round of confrontation, putting down the bases for a political process has become more complex and uncertain.

To address Turkish concerns, Western states concentrate on military cooperation, while avoiding support for the AANES bureaucracy, seen as a political project.<sup>68</sup> Anxious not to “legitimise the PYD”, in the words of several Western diplomats, these states are conducting stabilisation programs, but mainly through partnerships with civil society organisations. They are concerned with any direct engagement with AANES institutions at the central level.<sup>69</sup>

This simply means giving the PYD free rein to define the political project in NES on its own terms, something which exacerbated the military escalation with the Turkish army. Pursuing a stabilisation strategy without supporting the development of strong institutions is doomed to failure with the current multiple destabilisation efforts against the political order of NES. But, on the other hand, supporting these institutions unconditionally confirms Turkish fears of the creation of a “PKK statelet” on their southern border and feeds the current military escalation on the Syrian-Turkish border. Therefore, a sustainable stabilisation plan in NES must be political to be sustainable: in other terms it needs to include a proactive commitment to address the Turkey-PYD conundrum.

Furthermore, the difficulties for the Coalition in mitigating the political consequences of its counterinsurgency efforts against IS in NES highlights both a structural problem and a problem of scale. The Coalition has no willingness to engage with *de facto* local forces. After all, they are all, in different ways, pariahs in terms of international norms and Western alliances. They are either listed as terrorists or linked to organisations that are so classified, like HTS in western Syria or the SDF further east. Alternatively, local forces are ostracised by Western countries, as is the case with the Assad regime and the Iranian-backed militias. This political paralysis creates blockages in each zone of control.

In areas under the control of HTS, the Coalition focuses on a humanitarian approach. Meanwhile, HTS has permanently defeated the ability of IS to act in its zone of influence and has confronted all groups itching for global jihad against the West. But the weakness of HTS’s administrative apparatus and its proximity to Turkey, makes it attractive to IS leaders wishing to coordinate regionally without acting locally.

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66 For details on the broader PKK – Turkey escalation, Berkay Mandiraci, “Turkey’s PKK Conflict: A Regional Battleground in Flux,” *International Crisis Group*, 18 February 2022, <https://bit.ly/35Cc1aD>

67 Khayrallah al-Hilu, “The Turkish Intervention in Northern Syria: One Strategy, Discrepant Policies,” Research Project Report, (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, 14 January 2021) <https://bit.ly/3skp0nQ>

68 As one western diplomat expressed it: “We don’t engage with them politically and we provide only military support to them”. Interview, Brussels, January 2021.

69 Only the US is more directly involved in supporting AANES institutions, particularly the internal security forces. But even this level of engagement is difficult to articulate. As one US official said, the US only supports local councils, not the AANES. This is a purely rhetorical distinction as the local is organically linked to the AANES. Interview, Washington, April 2021.

The development of the capacity of the SSG would have the potential to make up for this weakness. But the SSG's organic links with HTS make any foreign support impossible, and its financial capacity is underdeveloped.

In NES, the Coalition has privileged a security-based approach, given the Kurdish movement's political project. Its apolitical stance prevents any prospect of lasting stabilisation. Indeed, Turkey's continuing retaliatory actions and the SDF's geostrategic alignment with the US are pushing all the forces present, from Turkey to Damascus, *via* Russia, to destabilise or confront the AANES militarily. The more efficient the AANES is in terms of stabilisation, the more it will face external pressures from Ankara and Damascus, where it is perceived as a hostile and separatist political project. NES will not be viable over the medium term without a negotiated solution with either Ankara or Damascus.

In the southern desert, the problem of stabilisation lies not only in the pariah nature of the dominant forces (Shiite militias and the Syrian Army). But there is also their ambiguous attitude towards IS. Rivalries for traffic control and trade routes are pushing the holding forces into interdependent links with IS forces. Meanwhile, the regime is too weak to stabilise the area. Russia has nothing to offer save repression with limited results. Iran is, instead, seeking to reposition itself around areas of US influence (in NES and in the al-Tanf pocket to the south) and it is less interested in confronting IS.

Further east, the Iraqi Forces, supported by the Coalition, managed to strike hard at IS. But the increasingly polarised situation between the US and the pro-Iranian militias, in addition to real cooperation gaps between the Coalition and the Iraqi Army,<sup>70</sup> have, since the assassination of Qassem Soleimani in January 2020, prevented the implementation of an effective counterinsurgency policy. As in Syria, IS benefits from rivalries between different armed groups and redeploys in the disputed territories between Iraqi Kurdish forces and the government in Baghdad.

In the current post-caliphate period, most forces in a given area have specific agendas that take precedence over the goal of defeating IS. As a

result, IS keeps a foothold, less thanks to any intrinsic strengths, than due to the agendas of local opponents, nurtured by their engagement in the war on terror.

## Conclusion: Time to Rehabilitate Politics

Western countries have refused to endorse a political outlook and *de facto* accept the by-products of the war on terror. As such they have consolidated the Kurdish political projects in Iraq and Syria in a highly polarised political and geostrategic field. Because of terrorist nomenclature and strategic alignments, they have refrained from engaging with militarily effective but politically problematic forces (HTS and the PMF). The war of attrition waged by IS opens the space for counterinsurgency geopolitics. From Damascus to Qandil, the forces that confronted IS instrumentalise their perceived legitimacy – defined in terms of the numbers of martyrs rather than popular or internal recognition – to foster local influence or regional and international legitimacy. The Assad regime is waiting for normalisation with the Arab world. The PYD and HTS aim now to create a *fait accompli*, to develop a patronage relationship with a sponsor and to seek international recognition through it. For the PMF, the objective is to deploy themselves as a political-military force by making their way into the institutions of the Iraqi state or by weakening the Peshmerga in the disputed territories. This geopolitics of counterinsurgency is a space filled with high expectations and hopes, but with little prospects of success.

By sticking to a risk averse apolitical approach and by refusing to engage with these geopolitics of counterinsurgency, the Western-led Coalition risks squandering its successes and efforts for stabilisation. The absence of boots on the ground now has a price: the rising struggle for influence among groups that are certainly pariahs, but that are indispensable in a situation where no nation state will be able to root them out. After years of a focus on security and humanitarian issues, it is time to rehabilitate political engagement. The West needs to rethink diplomacy in asymmetric terms in an increasingly un-Westphalian political landscape.

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70 Interviews with military personnel, Baghdad, April 2022.

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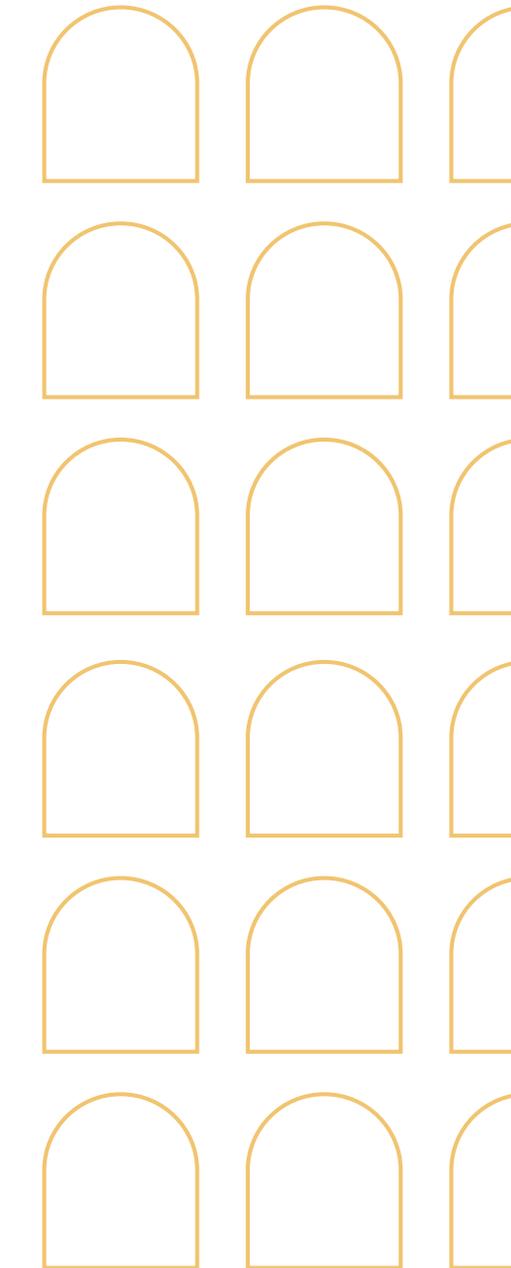
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