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# Counterterrorism in Syria and Iraq: The Issue of ISIS Captives in Detention. Lessons from the Algerian Experience<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This policy brief aims to re-examine the situation of ISIS captives in detention in Iraq and Syria, and the serious security threat that it might pose on the long term, especially, after the loosening of COVID-19 restrictions on movement. This policy brief proposes to extract lessons from the Algerian experience during the 1990s of counterterrorism. The Algerian approach to counterterrorism relies on both the military and the soft method. The Global War on Terror against ISIS was successful militarily, but it lacks the soft method to deal with what comes next to prevent the recreation of new terrorist groups in ISIS concentrated camps. This brief focuses mainly on the *Algerian Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation*, rebuilding trust, state's regulations of religion and border protection as effective ways to counterterrorism that can be reproduced in Iraq and Syria.

**Keywords:** ISIS, Algeria, Iraq, Syria, Counterterrorism, Soft method, Camps, Global War on Terror.

## Introduction

Thanks to the combined efforts of the U.S.-led international coalition that came together to destroy it alongside Iraqi and Syrian allies, ISIS is a diminished danger more than three years after its military defeat in Iraq and Syria. ISIS has been able to carry out assaults year after year even though it no longer controls any territory, despite the fact that the terrorist group's capacity has been significantly weakened and millions of people have returned home. The problems that the ISIS fight left behind are still with us, and there is no end in sight. This is one of the most painful human legacies. For many reasons, there is an urgent need to reevaluate the Global Coalition against Daesh's policies and strategies to counterterrorism.

The ways the Global Coalition views ISIS is problematic because it also influences its strategies to counterterrorism. They view ISIS soldiers, suspects and families as one. However, in fact, they are not. Kurilla classifies this view into three categories. First, "ISIS at large" which is a generation of ISIS leaders and fighters in Syria and Iraq, with their radical ideology. The U.S. Department of Defense estimated that 65,600 detainees are held as ISIS suspects and family members in Syria. 55,600 are in camps and 10,000 are in prison (« Syria », 2022). Second, ISIS is in custody. An actual

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"ISIS army" is being held captive in Syria and Iraq. Third, the probable successors to ISIS are here. These are the more than 25,000 kids who are in danger in the al-Hol camp. The camp's children are ripe candidates for radicalization by ISIS (USCENTCOM, s. d.). Hence, this three dimensional classification of ISIS predict catastrophic results of the Global Coalition's strategy of ISIS camps in Syria.

In fact, after years of efforts of fight against terrorism, the Global Coalition could arrest not just the terrorists but also their families and children and any suspect of terrorist activity from around the world, especially Syrians and Iraqis and gathered them in concentrated camps. Al-Hawl refugee camp in northern Syria, nearby Syrian-Iraqi border, for instance, is formally controlled by the U.S. backed Syrian Democratic Forces, but in reality it is monitored by ISIS that uses it as a camp for indoctrination and recruitment (Pantagon, 2021). Therefore, it seems clear that these camps are centers for breeding new generations of ISIS soldiers instead of serving their original objective which is counterterrorism.

To monitor this problem and the threat of ISIS in general, I suggest that the Global Coalition against Daesh should benefit from the Algerian approach, which fuse hard and soft strategies, in its decade of war on terror during the 1990s and the aftermath, for its effectiveness in annihilating terrorism from the country and protecting of borders from the expansion of global jihad from neighbors: Tunisia, Libya, Mali and Niger.

### **The Algerian Approach of Counterterrorism:**

After the Islamic Salvation Front Party (FIS) declared jihad against the Algerian government and sparked a civil war, the fight against extremism in Algeria officially began in 1990 with two insurgencies in question GIA and AIS, both affiliated with Salafi-jihadim. While the administration initially concentrated on employing the Algerian military to repress extremist groups, it soon became clear that doing so only fueled more extremism and that effective counterterrorism needed addressing the groups' ideological appeal.

The Algerian approach hasn't only eradicated the country from terrorism; it also has developed immunity against future radicalization and recruitment. For instance, IS was unable to persuade Algerians to support their cause. Only 170 people joined the organisation, compared to around 3,000 Tunisians and 1,500 Moroccans who joined IS and many more who tried to. Even Jund Al-Khilafa (Soldiers of the Caliphate), the Algerian affiliate of IS, was unable to pose a serious danger to the nation. These data show a significant shift from former times, prior to Algeria's comprehensive war on terrorism: Algerians were among the first combatants to head to Afghanistan in order to join the

worldwide jihad movement against the Soviet Union; many combatants then joined extremist groups during the 1990s civil conflict (Bendaoudi, 2018). Thus, given the long-term success of Algeria in its war against terror, it is promising to apply similar approach to countries that suffer from terrorism such as Syria and Iraq.

### *The Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation*

The Algerian approach against terrorism metamorphosed from hard to soft strategies. At first, “in response to the increasing violence and in line with its ‘eradicator’\* strategy, the government decided in 1993 to task the Directorate-General for National Security with waging ‘total war’ against the armed groups,” (Sour, 2015: 29). Parallel to this military war on terror, the regime encouraged “repentant” insurgents to speak out in public as part of the development of its “soft” strategy. In their testimony, which was aired on television during prime time, the former guerrillas referred to the guerilla fight as “hell” rather than as a source of honor and pride (Hasan et al., 2012: 81). The confession of repentant terrorists portrayed their recruitment as search for survival sources and social reasons rather than being convinced with the ideology itself.

As a result, the youth, who could serve as a source of guerrilla combatants, were put at the center of the regime's economic strategy. The government also provided them with contracts with the Ministry of Defense in addition to positions in the public sector, bonuses, and help with home construction. The state persuaded many young men to enlist by providing them with the security of home and a steady income as opposed to the chance of death in the maquis. By creating this “social net” or clientelistic network, the regime assisted common Algerians in avoiding financial incentives to join an armed Islamist group (Sour, 2015: 30).

With the election of President Boutaflika, the ultimate goal of state was to put an end to the civil war by implementing a policy of national reconciliation and establishing reasonable terms for the reintegration of Islamists who were ready to give up their weapons. Eventually, in July 1999, he introduced the Civil Harmony Law. According to this law, Radical Islamists who surrendered and renounced violence before January 13 were given conditional amnesty. Islamist insurgents who had not killed anyone, committed rape, or detonated explosives in public were eligible for amnesty. Reduced prison terms, but not complete amnesty, would be given to insurgents who had committed such crimes (Hasan et al., 2012: 84).

After the civil war's end in 2006, Boutaflika unconditionally granted fighters who turned up their weapons amnesty. The government also started an innovative rehabilitation program that allowed

terrorist fighters and inmates to confess their guilt and give up their radical ideology (Bendaoudi, 2018).

### *Rebuilding Trust*

The ability of a government to uphold and strengthen security in regions under insurgent control will help to increase its legitimacy among the populace and solidify its support base. The potential of the insurgent to use violence as well as his organizational and support systems must be identified and destroyed in order to maintain government control over areas where the insurgency had an impact (Santos, 2011: 6). Hence, if this support structure is left in place, the insurgency will only be able to regain the powers it lost and preserve its ability to carry out violent attacks in that region. The Algerian government hence adopted a number of economic measures to build this kind of trust.

In order to provide its inhabitants with new economic prospects, the Algerian government launched substantial economic reforms in 2000 that included infrastructure and large-scale projects. These economic initiatives attempted to improve the government's connection with the populace, which had deteriorated throughout the so-called "dark decade," and to bring in more direct foreign investment. In order to help the families of the missing and deceased heal from their losses, Algeria also addressed the problem of the victims of the country's tragedy (Bendaoudi, 2018).

### *State's Regulations of Religion and the Introduction of Salafiya Al-Elmia*

The state has had absolute control over religion in attempt to restrict radicalism and to reintegrate moderate Islam. The state has direct control over mosques, imams, and other civil officials, as well as a number of other domains. The state provides guidance on family regulations, and personal status is governed by a variant of sharia.

To offer religious interpretations and thereby govern the religious domain, the state employs a range of methods. The High Islamic Council is one of these tools, as it is in charge of all matters relating to Islam, as well as correcting erroneous conceptions and interpreting Islamic principles (ijtihad). The President appoints and supervises the members of the council. If necessary, the council can also issue fatwas. The National Scientific Council of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Waqf, which is made up of imams, theologians, scholars, and scientists from Algeria's forty-eight districts, was established in May 2017 to be the official body that issues fatwas.

The Algerian government has also promoted Salafiya Al-Elmia, often known as quietist Salafism, as an alternative to this harmful doctrine. Those who were dissatisfied with the violence of terrorist groups have options in the form of moderate ideas provided by Salafiya Al-Elmia. Salafiya Al-Elmia

academics emphasize how the importance of their goal of personal “purification and education” will eventually result in an Islamic state devoid of violence. They renounce political activism in favor of personal religious practice (Bendaoudi, 2018).

### *Protecting Borders*

Algeria has implemented a strict security strategy based on two tactics: coercion and deterrence. The Algerian army proactively increased its military spending and capabilities during the height of the IS threat, with an increase of 176%, bringing total yearly spending to \$10.4 billion. Algerian forces concentrated on border security to prevent entry of other regionally active terrorist organizations (Bendaoudi, 2018).

### **Reproducing Algerian Counterterrorism Measures to Solve the Issue Detention**

Like GIA and AIS in Algeria, ISIS soldiers’ main motive is money. “[m]oney, not ideology, was the primary motivation for joining AQI [Al-Qaeda in Iraq]” (Gerges, 2021: 84). This new model of caliphate’s economy relies mainly on local recruitment. Jones and Solomon argue that, “given the origins of much of its fighter population, ISIS’s state-building project has unsurprisingly been heavily reliant on the economic networks that local Sunni tribes had constructed. A – Perhaps optimistic – estimate puts ISIS’s 2015 revenues at \$900 million (Solomon et al., 2016). Thus, the basic platform of both jihadi organizations is identical. Especially that both groups recruit members, exploiting the economic failures in the respective countries. As a result, the Algerian scenario can be applied to ISIS.

First, the Global Coalition should employ something similar the Algerian Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation by granting general amnesty for ISIS captives in detention who are willing to repent and who have not committed war crimes such as rape and murder. This applies, especially, to women and youth in camps. This step would guarantee that a new ISIS army is not recreating itself within these camps. It also would attract ISIS insurgents who are still affiliated with ISIS because they have no other choice to put down arms and repent.

More importantly, the Global Coalition should unify their efforts to return these captives to their homeland and ensure their reintegration in society by providing suitable jobs and sources of incomes. Children of ex terrorist should also be released and sent to rehabilitation to get better education and welfare instead of being left in camps, exposed to radicalization and future recruitment.

Second, to regain trust with the affected population, the Global Coalition should coordinate with the concerned governments to implement reforms, similar to Algerian reforms in terms of politics and

economy. The Algerian state transformed its electoral system from majoritarian to proportional to host diversity and challenge fragmentation. Further, it also granted special state assistance to victims of terrorism to erase the dark memory between the state and the people. Similar measures can be introduced in Iraq and Syria.

Third, the Global Coalition in collaboration with the concerned states should have more control of religious institutions and education to spread a more tolerant version of Islam, in attempt to replicate the Algerian Salafiya Al-Elmia. After all, GIA, AIS and ISIS share one common ideology which is radical salafism, and hence replicating the same measure should be effective.

Finally, the Global Coalition should coordinate with the concerned governments to put more efforts to protect borders especially Syrian-Iraqi borders that ISIS uses to export soldiers, arms and resources. There should be more investment in border protection rather than expenditure on raids on ISIS leaders such as the last raid on Syrian village, Atmeh to kill al-Qurayshi because history has already proved that killing emirs and caliphs would not affect these terrorists' groups because they would reelect a new emir every time.

## Conclusion

The issue of ISIS captives in camps in Syria and Iraq poses a huge threat regionally and globally as these camps are hosting and nurturing a literally ISIS army on one hand, and a potential whole generation of radicalized descendants of ISIS soldiers. The Global Coalition against Daesh that is responsible for these camps needs to act immediately.

Given the similarities between the nature of terrorist groups in Algeria during the Civil War and ISIS, and the social and especially the economic factors that motivate both groups, and given the outstanding success of the Algerian government to counterterrorism, lessons from the Algerian experience should be exploited.

Fighting terrorism is not a question of military war on terror alone, but it also requires soft approaches. The Algerian government focused on amnesty and the reintegration of the repentant insurgents, regaining trust with the affected population, controlling religious institutions and more focus on border protection in its war on terror. If the Global Coalition coordinates with the concerned governments to treat the issue of ISIS camps and the remaining affiliated ISIS soldiers, a major threat should be prevented.

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