

FINAL SHOWDOWN: ON IS

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

The Islamic State, which at its peak controlled territories straddling the Iraq-Syria border of the size of Great Britain, [is now fighting for half a square kilometre in eastern Syria](#). The Syrian Democratic Forces, the Kurdish-led rebel group assisted by the U.S., has effectively laid siege to Baghouz, the eastern Syrian village where about 500 IS jihadists along with 4,000 women and children are caught. When the IS lost bigger cities such as Raqqa and Deir Ezzor in eastern Syria, militants moved to Baghouz and the deserts in the south. After the SDF moved to Baghouz, several civilians fled the village. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights estimates that nearly 59,000 people have left IS-held territory since December, and at least 4,000 jihadists have surrendered since February. Both President Donald Trump and the SDF commanders say victory against the IS is imminent. Victory in Baghouz will also mean the IS's territorial caliphate is shattered. Since the battle for Kobane in 2015, which marked the beginning of the end of the IS, Syrian Kurdish rebels have been in the forefront of the war. Naturally, the SDF would claim the final victory against the IS.

Analysis: Does the Islamic State still pose a threat?

However, the liberation of Baghouz or the destruction of the territorial caliphate does not necessarily mean that the IS has been defeated. It is basically an insurgent-jihadist group. It has established cells, especially in Syria and Iraq, which have continued to carry out terror attacks even as IS territories kept shrinking. The group has a presence in Syria's vast deserts, a tactic its predecessor, al-Qaeda in Iraq, successfully used when it was in decline during 2006-2011 after its leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi was killed by the U.S. When the Syrian civil war broke, the remnants of AQI found an opportunity for revival and rebranded themselves as the Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Qaeda's branch in Syria. The IS was born when al-Nusra split. The U.S., the Kurdish rebels, the Syrian government and other stakeholders in the region should be mindful of the geopolitical and sectarian minefields that groups such as the IS could exploit for their re-emergence. Mr. Trump has already announced the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Syria. The Turkish government of President Recep Tayyip Erdoan is wary of the rapid rise of the Syrian Kurds, who are organisationally and ideologically aligned with Kurdish rebels on the Turkish side. The Syrian regime, on its part, has vowed to re-establish its authority over the Kurdish autonomous region in the northeast. If Turkey and Syria attack Kurdish rebels, who were vital in the battle against the IS, that would throw northeastern Syria into chaos again, which would suit the jihadists. To avoid this, there must be an orderly U.S. withdrawal and a political solution to the Syrian civil war.

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