Dealing with Defeat of the IS

What is the issue?

- With declining control over Syria, the IS is possibly facing a defeat in the region.
- However, the search for a political solution in Syria should continue to ensure that the IS does not resurface in the region.

How has IS's control shrunk?

- The Islamic State, at its peak, controlled territories spanning the Iraq-Syria border of the size of Great Britain.
- It is now fighting for half a square kilometre in eastern Syria.
- The battle for Kobane in 2015 marked the beginning of the end of the IS.
- Since then, Syrian Kurdish rebels have been in the forefront of the war.
- 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, an eastern Syrian village, several civilians fled the village.
- The efforts by Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the Kurdish-led rebel group assisted by the U.S., have resulted in a blockade in Baghouz.
- About 500 IS jihadists along with 4,000 women and children are caught in Baghouz.
- The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights estimates that nearly 59,000 people have left IS-held territory and at least 4,000 jihadists have surrendered in recent times.

Does this mean the IS's defeat?

- Victory in Baghouz will also mean the IS’s territorial caliphate is shattered.
- However, the IS 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 thus has a presence in Syria’s vast deserts.
- This is a tactic its predecessor, al-Qaeda in Iraq (AOI), 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.
- Given these, the liberation of Baghouz or the destruction of the territorial caliphate does not necessarily mean that the IS has been defeated.

What lies ahead?

- The U.S., the Kurdish rebels, the Syrian government and other stakeholders in the region should be mindful of the geopolitical and sectarian minefields of the IS.
- Mr. Trump has already announced the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Syria.
- The Turkish government of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is wary of the rapid rise of the Syrian Kurds. Click here to know more.
- Syrian Kurds 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, north-eastern Syria would again be in a crisis, facilitating the jihadists.
- To avoid such a crisis, there must be an orderly U.S. withdrawal and a political solution to the Syrian civil war.

Source: The Hindu

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