Geopolitical and sectarian fault lines in Iraq and Syria enhance the threat from the IS

What is the issue?

- If a lasting solution to the jihadist control of Idlib is not found, the future IS militants would also take refuge in this region.
- The U.S. should not throw Syrian Kurds at the mercy of Turkey once the IS threat is minimised.

What is the recent incident?

- IS militants has carried out an attack on a prison in northeastern Syria's Hasakah, to free thousands of jihadists.
- This is their largest since the death of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, IS founder, in 2019.
- But it was a failure as American soldiers joined the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a Kurdish militia, to push back the militants.
- Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi, the leader of IS blew himself up along with his family, like his predecessor did 3 years ago, when U.S. special forces approached his hideout in Idlib.
- Idlib is the province controlled by jihadists linked with al Qaeda.
- The death of Qurayshi has come at a time when the terrorist outfit has been trying to revive its fortunes in Iraq and Syria, its core region.

How did the IS transform under him?

- Under his leadership, the entity had transformed itself from a 'Caliphate', with control over some key cities in Iraq and Syria, into an underground insurgency with global branches.
- The IS continued to operate like a loose confederation of autonomous networks.
- Its Afghan and West African branches expanded operations.
- In Iraq and Syria, it staged occasional attacks indicating that it is **only the physical Caliphate that has been destroyed.**

Why should Syria recapture Idlib?

- It is more than a coincidence that both Baghdadi and Qurayshi were hiding in Syria's Idlib.
- The province is controlled by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, a globally designated terrorist outfit that was formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra, the Syrian branch of al Qaeda.
- Idlib is now run by Abu Mohammad al-Joulani, the al Qaeda militant who was sent to Syria by Baghdadi in 2013, in the early stages of the civil war, to open a branch of his outfit.
- If a lasting solution to the jihadist control of Idlib is not found, the future Baghdadis and Qurayshis would also take refuge in this region.
- However, the Syrian government's efforts to recapture the territory have not been successful as there is strong regional opposition, especially from Turkey which fears another refugee influx.

What must be done?

- Another important lesson the IS's recent attacks provides is that the Syrian Kurds remain a key ally in the fight against the IS, as the Hasakah incident has shown.
- The U.S. should not throw them at the mercy of Turkey — like the Trump administration once did — once the IS threat is minimised.
- They should be incorporated into a larger regional counter-terror strategy.
- Lastly, the IS has learned how to survive these occasional setbacks. It has lost its Caliphate and its top commanders but there are thousands of foot soldiers spread across Iraq and Syria, waiting to strike.
- The still open wounds of the civil war in Syria and the lingering sectarian sentiments in Iraq have let them survive so far.
- As long as these geopolitical and sectarian faultlines remain in Iraq and Syria, the IS threat will not vanish.

Reference

1. https://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-opinion/death-of-a-terrorist/article38390052.ece

