The State of the Islamic State

The Islamic State group (IS) seems to have been reduced to a shadow of its former self. Public attention in the West has waned, and the priorities of the international community shifted to other issues. This warrants taking stock of the group's current status and assessing the dangers it still poses.

By Fabien Merz

At the height of its power between 2014 and 2015, the group held sway over a territory approximately the size of the United Kingdom that stretched from Aleppo, in northwestern Syria to Diyala, in northeastern Iraq. It controlled large urban centers, including Mosul, the second-largest city in Iraq, as well as Raqqa in Syria, declaring an "Islamic Caliphate" in 2014. Drawing on these initial successes and thanks to an astutely engineered propaganda campaign, the group also managed to radicalize individuals across the globe and attract unprecedented large numbers of foreign fighters, including thousands of individuals hailing from Western countries. In parallel, IS also showcased its global ambitions and reach by unleashing a campaign of terror around the world, also perpetrating and inspiring multiple attacks across Europe. Additionally, the group also established a global network of regional franchises and local affiliates.

The Old City of Mosul after being liberated from IS in July 2017. *Thaier Al-Sudani / Reuters*

Facing a multiplying number of increasingly militarily capable local adversaries and a global coalition led by the US, the group's fortunes began to wane sometime around 2016, ringing in a phase of decline. Mosul having been liberated by mid-2017 and Raqqa by the end of the same year, IS eventually made its last stand and was defeated in Baghuz, in North-Eastern Syria by the beginning of 2019. Having lost the entirety of its once vast territorial holdings, its ranks severely diminished, and its reve-

nue streams dried up, the remaining elements of the group went underground and reverted to waging a low-level insurgency in Syria and Iraq. As a corollary of this, the group's ability to directly perpetrate or indirectly incite attacks in the West also seems to have decreased.

With the COVID-19 pandemic gripping the world and the reemergence of great power competition on the global stage, at-

tention in Western public discourse seems to have waned, and the priorities of most states and multilateral institutions somewhat shifted away from IS. While the killing of the group's leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, by US special forces in Syria at the end of 2019 still garnered extensive media coverage, the announcement of the recent demise of his successor in February 2022 barely made the headlines for more than a day. This relative fall into desuetude

of the group once at the locus of global attention warrants to take stock of the current status of the once so powerful group, assess the trajectory it has taken more recently and the dangers it still poses to the region and globally. The current phase of relative calm also seems a good opportunity to reflect on what can be done to prevent the group or future manifestations of it from ever again becoming such a menace.
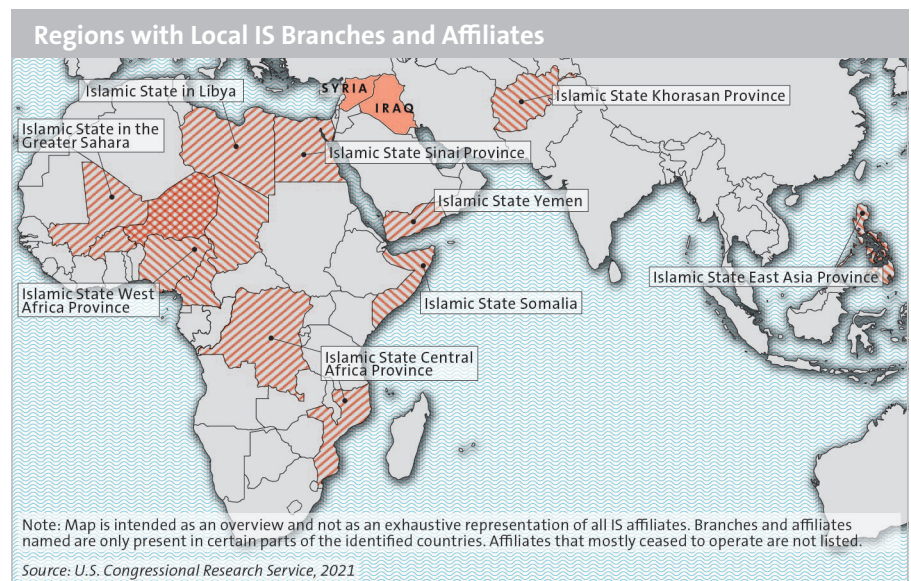
Core IS's Current State

As previously mentioned, central IS, the group's core in Syria and Iraq, has been substantially weakened over the last few years. Faced with a growing array of increasingly militarily potent adversaries and targeted by a systematic bombing campaign conducted by a US-led coalition, the group began rapidly losing significant parts of its territorial holdings by 2016. By December 2017 it had lost around 95 percent of its territory. IS's territorial control was first progressively rolled back in Iraq by a heterogeneous mix of Iraqi government forces, Shia militias often supported by and aligned with Iran and the Iraqi Kurds. Fallujah was liberated in June 2016 and IS was routed from Mosul by mid-2017. A similar dynamic unfolded in Syria with a slight time lag. The group was pushed out of Raqqa, the nominal capital of its self-stylized Caliphate, by the end of 2017 by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a Kurdish-dominated militia supported by the US. The group made its last stand as a territorial entity in Baghuz, a desert pocked in northeastern Syria, where it was ultimately defeated by the SDF at the beginning of 2019.

Having lost the entirety of its territory, its ranks severely diminished, and its financial revenue streams having mostly dried up, the remaining IS elements went underground or withdrew to remote areas. The group adapted to these new circumstances by reverting to a *modus operandi* traditionally associated with classic insurgent and terrorist groups. Over the last few years, the organization's remnants have thus waged a relatively low-intensity and mostly rural insurgency, often resorting to ambushes, bombings, and hit-and-run style operations against their local opponents. In Iraq, IS activities have been primarily concentrated in the Anbar and the Nineveh governorates, both adjacent to Syria as well as

The loss of territory has dealt a severe blow to the appeal of the IS's overall narrative.

Regions with Local IS Branches and Affiliates

Islamic State in Libya
Islamic State in the Greater Sahara
Islamic State Sinai Province
Islamic State Khorasan Province
Islamic State Yemen
Islamic State West Africa Province
Islamic State East Asia Province
Islamic State Somalia
Islamic State Central Africa Province

Note: Map is intended as an overview and not as an exhaustive representation of all IS affiliates. Branches and affiliates named are only present in certain parts of the identified countries. Affiliates that mostly ceased to operate are not listed.

Source: U.S. Congressional Research Service, 2021

in the Salahuddin, Diyala, Erbil, and Kirkuk governorates in the northern part of the country. In Syria, the group's activities seem to be mainly clustered in the northeastern part of the country adjacent to Iraq. IS's propaganda for its part pivoted from emphasizing the element of territorial control, i.e., its "Caliphate" during its expansionist phase, to reframing these new circumstances as a "divine test" that will have to be weathered.

While the group still could further destabilize the region and seems to have retained the ability to occasionally conduct large-scale operations in Syria and Iraq, it does, at least for the time being, neither pose an existential threat to the integrity of the Iraqi state nor can it impact the frozen nature of the Syrian conflict. Most observers believe that the group will try to regain strength by attempting to continuously wear down their local adversaries through terrorism and insurgent-style operations while at the same time seeking to foster and exploit sectarian tensions and grievances among local Sunni populations. This is very similar to how ISI (the Islamic State in Iraq), IS's direct forebear organization, operated between 2007, after it had been degraded due to successful US counterinsurgency efforts, and 2013, when it reemerged in full force, first in the chaos of the Syrian civil war, and then went on to rapidly conquer parts of Iraq.

Congruently with the loss of territory and the group having been forced underground,

IS is also believed to have mostly lost its capacity to carry out large-scale terrorist operations abroad, like the one in Paris in November 2015. Furthermore, the group is also believed to have a somewhat diminished ability to radicalize new supporters and persuade them to commit acts of terror in its name, an approach the group had used to great effect during the height of its power, including in Europe. Indeed, while security services becoming more efficient at foiling such attacks over the years and P/CVE (Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism) programs bearing fruits might be a part of the explanation, the general trend of decreasing attacks in Europe seems to be a good indicator for the groups somewhat diminished capability to incite so-called acts of homegrown terror.

While the loss in the capacity to perpetrate large-scale operations is predominantly a function of the group having lost a safe logistical base from which to operate, the group's diminished ability to incite acts of homegrown terrorism is probably predominantly attributable to IS's propaganda having lost in appeal. For one, the quantity and quality of the group's once impressive propaganda output has diminished in proportional correlation to the group having been continuously degraded and pushed underground. More importantly, the loss of territory has dealt a severe blow to the appeal of IS's overall narrative, which was built on creating an "Islamic state" or a "Caliphate," a claim that could be substantiated before potential sympathizers by controlling and administering a large

territory according to their understanding of the *Sharia*. In fact, the territorial component was one of the main elements that set IS apart from other jihadi groups with global ambitions such as al-Qaeda and probably one of the main reasons why it was so successful in attracting such large numbers to their cause.

However, the overall terror threat emanating from IS having diminished should by no means be misconceived as a reason to lower the high level of vigilance. The risk of single individuals or small groups striking in IS's name might be reduced relative to a few years ago, but it remains real, including in Europe. In October 2021, five individuals were for example arrested in Bonn, Germany. The suspects are accused of planning a terror attack inspired by IS. Furthermore, even so-called "low-tech" attacks perpetrated by a single individual can potentially have a devastating impact. This was maybe best exemplified by the car-ramming attack in Nice in July 2016, in which more than 80 people lost their lives, and more than 450 were injured.

Ticking Time Bombs

A further security threat as well as a series of ethical and humanitarian issues is related to the current situation surrounding imprisoned IS-members and their families. It is estimated that there are currently around 12,000 alleged IS combatants (defined by the local authorities as male IS members in fighting age) and around 60,000 family members of suspected IS members, i.e., women and children held in jails and prison camps in northeastern Syria alone. Amongst them are also a significant number of individuals hailing from Western, and particularly from European countries, according to certain estimates up to 1,200. Mainly citing security concerns, most European countries have so far been reluctant to systematically repatriate these individuals, if at all mainly focusing on unaccompanied minors. While it is true that systematic repatriation is fraught with several hurdles and risks in its own right, the current *status quo* is seen by most experts as untenable.

The jails holding IS combatants have been described as ticking time bombs by those familiar with the conditions on the ground. For one, the risk of the radical attitudes of those incarcerated further hardening is deemed to be high. Furthermore, past experiences have shown that such environments are conducive to being exploited by the detainees to expand their networks, or-

ganize themselves and plan for the future. It is for example believed that many of those who later became members of IS's senior leadership met and organized themselves while being incarcerated in Camp Bocca, a US detention camp in use in Iraq between 2003 and 2009. This means that the longer these individuals are kept in these environments, the more radical, networked, organized, and by extension dangerous they will tend to get. Making a bad situation worse, there is a real risk of these detainees getting free due to the still very precarious security situation in the region. IS has a long track record of systematically breaking its members out of jails. Even in its currently weakened state,

Jails holding IS combatants can be described as ticking time bombs.

the group for example recently launched a large-scale operation involving up to 200 fighters in an attempt to break free around 3,500 of its members from an SDF-controlled jail in Hasakah, in northeastern Syria. Even though this particular attempt could be foiled, it shows how real the risk of large-scale escapes is. Larger numbers of IS members getting freed would not only have detrimental consequences for security in the region but could also pose a severe threat to the countries of origin of the foreign fighters, including to European states.

While the jails holding IS combatants have been described as ticking time bombs, the camps holding their families in northeastern Syria can be described as their longer-fused counterparts that have the potential to cause an array of problems further down the line. Still reeling from the fight against IS, the local authorities controlling these camps lack the resources to provide for the most basic needs of such large numbers of families. Let alone do the camp authorities have the means to adequately police the camps and prevent mothers still firmly committed to IS's ideology from further inculcating their children. Many experts fear that these children, radicalized from the youngest age and brought up in an environment that tends to reinforce the narratives that are fed to them, are likely to pose a yet unforeseen multitude of problems in the long term. Most observers thus seem to believe that repatriating foreign fighters and their families seems preferable. This would, the argument goes, at least allow relocating these individuals where

more adequate measures can be taken to handle them and, if possible, reintegrate them into society.

IS's Global Network

While at the height of its power in Syria and Iraq, central IS showcased its global ambitions by establishing a number of regional franchises/branches, or in their own nomenclature *Wilayah* for "Provinces" in Arabic. Mostly, they did so by either co-opting local jihadi groups or by convincing members of local groups to splinter and pledge allegiance to IS leadership. By 2015, regional branches and local affiliates could be found amongst others in Libya, Algeria, Yemen, Egypt, Afghanistan, Nigeria, the Sahel Region, Somalia, and the Philippines. Despite core IS's waning fortunes in Syria and Iraq, the number of local affiliates has recently increased and now also includes branches in the Central African Republic and in Mozambique. The exact nature of the relationship and links between IS core and the different regional branches and affiliates was always difficult to gauge. However, it seems safe to assume that there were and still are quite significant variations in terms of IS core's degree of involvement with and influence on the different branches.

The strength, capabilities, and relevance of these different regional branches and affiliates have also fluctuated significantly over the years. These fluctuations were often closely linked to local dynamics. IS's Libyan branch for example brought the port city of Sirte under its control in 2016 but was later driven underground by other warring factions. IS's Sinai branch was for its part for example deemed a powerful terrorist actor, waging a bloody insurgency against Egyptian security forces and claiming responsibility for the bombing that brought down the Russian passenger flight in 2015, killing 224 people. However, the group has since then been significantly weakened by a draconian counterinsurgency campaign launched by the Egyptian government. Other affiliates, such as in Algeria or Somalia, were relatively small to begin with and never managed to build significant momentum.

The aforementioned local branches and affiliates seem to have either never been able to establish themselves or have been significantly deteriorated and lost in significance. Others, in turn, have more recently gained momentum, maybe most significantly in Subsaharan Africa. IS's "West Af-

rica Province" seems to have recently superseded rival jihadi groups and begun consolidating power across the Chad Basin. The group's franchise in the Sahara region, the "Islamic State in the Greater Sahara", has continued to exploit local power vacuums and wreak havoc across the region despite the prolonged presence of French troops. The group's new affiliates in Mozambique and the Central African Republic (both operating under the umbrella "Central Africa Province") have more re-

IS tends to thrive where there is instability.

cently also gained momentum and significantly increased their operational tempo. IS's "Khorasan Province" operating in Afghanistan seems recently also to have gained some traction, mainly due to the security vacuum caused by the US and NATO withdrawal in summer 2021 and the Taliban taking over the country. Despite their recent successes, IS branches and affiliates in Subsaharan Africa and Afghanistan seem to remain predominately focused on regional objectives and less on exporting terrorism beyond their traditional theaters of operation. Even though they can thus increasingly threaten regional stability and foreign interests in the regions they operate in, they do, at least at present, not seem to pose significant threats to the domestic security of European states.

Preventing IS 2.0

As exemplified by the rise of the group in Syria, Iraq and elsewhere, IS tends to thrive where there is instability, weak state institutions, and where certain parts of the population are disenfranchised or outright oppressed. The group is not likely to disappear and might even reemerge if the initial root causes that enabled it to rise in the first place are not addressed. This will mean stabilizing the regions in question and making incremental progress towards more inclusive political systems that end structural marginalization and the oppression of certain segments of the population. A particular emphasis should also be put on ensuring that measures aimed at countering terrorism are as well-calibrated as possible. Numerous studies have shown that systematic overreach by security services tends to create grievances, thereby ultimately fueling terrorism. Disregarding these findings while seeking to fight terrorism would be akin to continuing cutting off one head of the metaphorical hydra only to have two grow instead down the line.

The task of denying groups such as IS fertile ground seems indeed herculean. In most places where IS maintains a presence, the current conditions are a very far cry away from where they ought to be. Sustainably addressing these issues will take a long time and a lot of political will as well as the combined and unabated efforts of lo-

cal actors and the international community. At the same time, it is worth remembering that while IS found fertile ground in regions plagued by conflicts and instability, the influx of vast numbers of foreign fighters from across the globe, including from Europe, also contributed to the group's surge. Preventing IS, or similar groups from rising again will thus also need addressing the respective domestic factors that contributed to these individuals falling for IS's propaganda. The current period of relative calm seems a good opportunity for every society that had to grapple with this unsettling phenomenon to reflect and make the necessary adjustments. As shown many times over the last decade in Europe and beyond, if left unaddressed, these issues are likely to quite literally blowback.

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