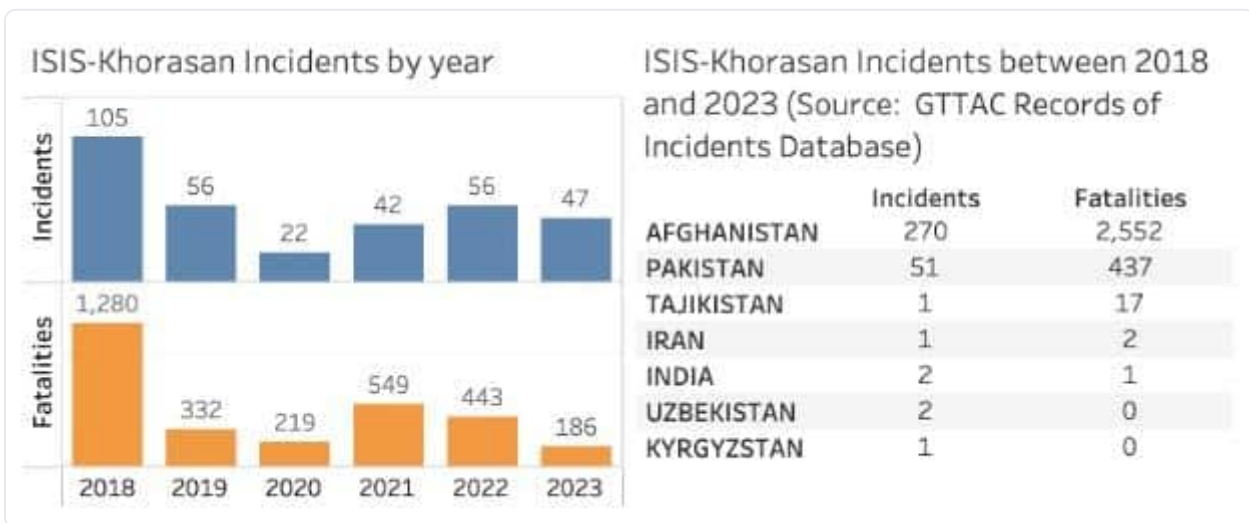


MIDDLE EAST

What Does ISIS' Survival Tell Us About Countermeasures?

JUNE 5, 2023



ISIS: The Resilient Insurgency

Despite ISIS' loss of territorial control over its so-called Islamic Caliphate and the international community's concerted effort to eradicate it, the group has proven resilient to total defeat. It has shown a remarkable ability to adapt. This resilience can be attributed to several factors, including the organizational capabilities of ISIS, the persistence of the conditions that led to its emergence, the existence of conflict zones and fragile states in different regions, and competing interests that divert the attention of nation-states away from their commitment to defeat ISIS.

It is worth noting that countermeasures against ISIS have primarily focused on military model strategies and tactics, which have not dealt with the social, political, economic, and cultural conditions that enable ISIS to endure.

To understand why ISIS has been able to survive and display “[a resilient insurgency](#)” despite the international community’s efforts to eradicate the group, it is crucial to examine the conditions that enabled the group’s emergence and expansion into other areas. [Ozeren and Cubukcu](#) have noted that Al-Qaeda in Iraq was a product of the U.S. invasion and the post-invasion period.

Whilst the invasion led to the quick demise of Saddam Hussein’s regime, the United States was not prepared for the post-invasion environment. “[Collapse of the state](#) and economy, unprecedented looting, widespread criminality, and a rising insurgency” created mass victimization of the local population. As former [US President Barack Obama](#) reiterated, “ISIL [Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, also referred to as ISIS, or Islamic State of Iraq and Syria]... came out of our invasion, which is an example of unintended consequences”.

The post-invasion era has also [resulted in](#) “deep sectarian conflict and ethnic divisions, [and] the empowerment of Sunni extremists” which presented ISIS with the opportunity to emerge as the major actor, defending the Sunnis against Shiite militia violence and the sectarian policies of the government in Baghdad.

Citing several studies, [Fisher and Asal](#) stress that “ISIS demonstrated innovations in their actions that were more likely driven by the conditions fostered by the Iraqi war... Government actions can influence the nature of the conflict involving insurgent organizations.” Put simply, ISIS took advantage of the political, social, and economic collapse in Iraq and Syria. Unfortunately, these underlying conditions persist despite ISIS’ military defeat in 2019.

As core territories, Syria and Iraq still provide a suitable habitat for the group to maintain a presence and mobility, and engage in sporadic attacks. Having evolved from an Al Qaeda affiliate to an organization capable of controlling an expansive territory, ISIS demonstrated its sophistication and strength. The organizational capabilities of ISIS, even after its military defeat, provide a good understanding of why the group has shown resilience.

Identifying ISIS’s Organizational Capabilities

Even though ISIS no longer has territorial control, it still has around 5,000 to 7,000 members and supporters, with roughly half of them being fighters, [according to the United Nations](#). The

lack of governance in Syria enables ISIS to engage in attacks targeting various groups, including the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), Assad regime forces, local administrators, and tribal leaders. The operational capability, whether small or large, helps terrorist organizations maintain unity among members, encourage sympathizers, and attract new members. Accordingly, ISIS' ability to carry out successful attacks could allow the organization to maintain a grip over local populations.

Another critical factor for the survival of ISIS is the thousands of fighters who have been kept in prisons and detention centers throughout Iraq and Syria, posing a great risk. According to [US CENTCOM](#), these prisoners are characterized as “a literal ‘ISIS army’ in detention in Iraq and Syria”. Today, [detention centers and prisons](#) hold more than 10,000 ISIS leaders and fighters in Syria and more than 20,000 in Iraq. Although mostly unsuccessful, ISIS has attempted to release its imprisoned members. These prisoners have fighting experience and have been indoctrinated by ISIS ideology which could provide the group with a readily available fighting force if such attempts were successful. By attacking prisons and detention centers, ISIS also shows strength and agility, which the group could use to motivate new recruits to join. Moreover, any prospect of success in releasing the prisoners will be seen as the group's ability to survive despite the losses it suffered in recent years.

The camps where families of ISIS members have been kept pose risks of recruitment and further radicalization, which could be instrumental in the resurgence of ISIS. [According to official numbers](#), there are over 25,000 children, for example, in the al-Hol camp, and they could be the main targets for radicalization efforts. Similarly, a report by [Stanford University's Center](#) for International Security and Cooperation (CISAC) stated, “the existence of such a large, stateless population will prolong I.S.' [ISIS] influence in the region” because extending suffering could deepen grievances among these people.

The know-how gained by the group in the last decade provides insights into its capabilities. [One unique capability of ISIS](#) is its success in attracting around 40,000 foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) from diverse ethnic backgrounds in over [90 countries](#). Although the detention centers hold tens of thousands of FTFs, the exact number of returnees is unknown. Transit countries, such as Turkey, which have become host countries for the FTFs trying to return to their

countries of origin, pose critical risks for the future activities of ISIS. Importantly, owing to its effective campaign on social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Telegram, the group continues its propaganda and recruitment activities.

ISIS has managed to transition leadership to successor individuals despite several targeted killings of their former leaders, including the founder Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, to another important leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and his successor Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Quraishi, who was also killed. In contrast to ISIS, al-Qaeda has so far lacked an effective transition to a stronger charismatic leader, which could enable ISIS to continue its dominance among jihadist networks. For example, the death of Ayman al Zawahiri, the former leader of Al-Qaeda, could [provide ISIS with the opportunity](#) to establish its supremacy in Africa and South Asia.[xiv]

Whilst ISIS may have been defeated militarily, [it retains](#) wealth, financial resources, and a powerful presence on social media. [According to analysts](#), “ISIS’ Core remains intact and maintains access” to millions of dollars in Syria and Iraq. Moreover, “[the Islamic State](#) is using Iraq’s black market to stockpile millions of dollars, and in 2017, the group “[smuggled](#) \$400 million out of its territory and began laundering money through front businesses in Turkey.”

The Unstable Regional Environment

The conditions that led to the emergence of ISIS have not changed. The social and political environment in Iraq and Syria has led to the marginalization of millions of Sunni Arabs in recent years. Furthermore, tensions between the Iraqi Federal Government and Kurdish Regional Government could give ISIS a second chance to take advantage of the tensions and fill the vacuum in Iraq. In Syria, the areas controlled by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces are dominated by the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which pushes its maximalist agenda, further alienating local Sunni Arabs. This trend is reminiscent of how sectarian policies alienated Sunni Arabs in Iraq, who saw ISIS as a savior against the Baghdad central government’s sectarian extremist policies against the Sunnis. In short, the sense of collective victimization among these populations could allow ISIS to exploit their grievances for recruitment purposes once more.

In addition to Syria and Iraq, ISIS has been actively seeking ways to establish and strengthen its presence in other areas with protracted wars and emerging conflicts as well as in fragile

states. [Christine Abizaid](#), director of the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), emphasizes that “ISIS has continued to grow its global enterprise, which now includes approximately twenty branches and networks.” Outside Iraq and Syria, [the most capable branches](#) are ISIS-West Africa and ISIS-Khorasan in Afghanistan. [Africa - including](#) “the Sahel region, coastal West African states, Central and Southern Africa and East Africa” - serves “as the epicenter for ISIS’ terrorist violence.”

[ISIS affiliates and networks](#) have become very active in countries such as Nigeria, Mozambique, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Burkina Faso, South Africa, and Mali. For example, the [Allied Democratic Forces in the DRC](#) are considered one of the deadliest ISIS affiliates in Africa[xxii]. Groups like Ahl al-Sunna wal-Jama’a Mozambique also pledged allegiance to ISIS. This is a tactical move, especially in cases where there are infightings between ideologically like-minded groups - like Al-Qaeda - pledging allegiance to ISIS provides them with legitimacy in the eyes of their constituencies.

Decades-long, conflict-ridden Afghanistan has become another hotspot for ISIS activities. According to a recent Pentagon report, Afghanistan “has become a significant coordination site for the Islamic State [ISIS] as the terrorist group plans attacks across Europe and Asia, and conducts ‘aspirational plotting’ against the United States.” U.S. military officials also characterize [the Afghan branch, ISIS-Khorasan](#), as “the most dangerous threat to the United States in 2023” and caution that [the group’s ultimate goal](#) is to “strike the American homeland.” In addition to plans to target the West, [ISIS-Khorasan](#) has been trying to expand its activities to Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and India.

There is no shortage of conflicts in the Middle East and Africa, where the latest emerging theatre is Sudan. Given its strategic location and the involvement of various nation-states and non-state actors, it is fair to assume that ISIS would not stay idle and would seek to take advantage of the situation.

Introducing More Effective Countermeasures

To effectively deal with ISIS’ resilience, a concerted effort is needed that addresses both policies of countering its terrorist activity and targeting the root causes of radicalization. Whilst military counterterrorism strategies have successfully defeated ISIS’ territorial control, efforts

to address the underlying factors have received little attention due to a lack of will or limited resources. For instance, [the Global Coalition Against Daesh \(GCAD\)](#), which brought together over 80 countries, has achieved success in defeating ISIS militarily. However, the resources allocated to targeting ISIS ideology and addressing the conditions that contribute to the spread of radicalization have not yielded the intended outcomes.

Part of the problem lies in conflicting or fading interests among nation-states that have dedicated resources to global counterterrorism efforts. These nation-states may need to sustain a different level of dedication to large-scale efforts due to domestic or international issues that could directly or indirectly affect their commitments or divert their attention and resources needed to sustain such efforts. For instance, the heightened tension between Russia and the United States due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine has affected other areas where both countries were expected to cooperate, such as fighting against ISIS.

In the ongoing battle against ISIS, pre-existing tensions among state actors and their non-state proxies pose a serious threat. If these tensions escalate, they may divert the focus and resources from defeating the terrorist organization. The ongoing tensions between the United States and Iran, the Iraqi Federal Government and Kurdish Regional Government, or Turkey and the Syrian Democratic Forces could exacerbate further. Turkey, for instance, is apprehensive about [the Kurds gaining autonomy](#) in Syria as it might encourage PKK-linked groups to succeed in their geopolitical objectives, thus creating a ripple effect in Turkey. In response, Turkey has adopted a three-fold strategy, including a military incursion into the SDF-controlled areas, reconciliation with Assad, and expanding and deepening its control over northern Syria through proxy groups. However, such policies could increase the tension between Turkey and the SDF and between Turkey and the United States. These tensions could weaken the efforts of the US-led coalition against terrorism and create new breathing grounds for ISIS.

There is no easy answer to the question of how to effectively target ISIS. However, there are steps that can be taken at both policy and tactical levels. For example, though normalization in Syria is not feasible in the short term, repatriation of family members of Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs) back to their country of origin is a tactical step that should be taken at an

accelerated pace. This could create momentum among the members of the coalition by claiming ownership of the problem rather than disregarding it. Such steps could also ease the burden and risks in the camps where FTFs are held, and accordingly, resources – both human and logistical – could be allocated to other areas where ISIS is active.

Moreover, the United States should provide a clearer message regarding the future of Syria. Clarity on this issue can foster a better understanding of the coalition’s objectives, including how to counter ISIS’ ideology and prevent its resurgence.

The ideal counterterrorism strategy should focus on both countering terrorists and countering underlying conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism simultaneously. Whilst dealing with ISIS through military operations could be effective, countering ISIS ideology and the conditions the group exploits are also equally important.

The Global Coalition to Defeat Daesh/ISIS (GCAD) has been a successful initiative to combat the threat of ISIS in the Middle East. However, it is essential to consider expanding this model to other regions where ISIS establishes and expands its presence. A region-specific collaboration, such as the Global Coalition to Defeat Daesh/ISIS Africa Focus Group, should be prioritized.

It is imperative to assist local governments in building their counterterrorism capacities: by providing training, intelligence sharing, and resources to enable them to effectively combat terrorism within their borders. Counterterrorism strategies ought to also address socio-economic disparities, political grievances, and other key factors that ISIS exploits to recruit and radicalize. Therefore, though dealing with ISIS through military operations could be effective, countering ISIS ideology and the conditions the group exploits are equally important.

The resilience of ISIS is a reminder that defeating extremism requires more than military action. Addressing the underlying conditions that allow extremist groups to thrive is crucial, which requires adopting a comprehensive approach that addresses the social, economic, political, and cultural factors that enable ISIS to endure.

The article was first published in [Manara Magazine](#).

Orion Policy Institute (OPI) is an independent, non-profit, tax-exempt think tank focusing on a broad range of issues at the local, national, and global levels. OPI does not take institutional policy positions. Accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions represented herein should be understood to be solely those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of OPI.