

EXAMINING THE ISLAMIC STATE'S RESURGENCE IN IRAQ AND SYRIA

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Abstract: The Islamic State has gradually ramped up its attacks in Syria and Iraq since the mid-2020. This brief examines the group's recent activities in both nations to interrogate if the group is undergoing a phase of resurgence in the region. Accordingly, it maps out the different factors that are aiding the group and provides some policy implications for governments in the region.

Introduction

The self-proclaimed Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS or IS) garnered global attention in June 2014 when it drove out the Iraqi army from Mosul and Tikrit and announced that it had established a caliphate. Between 2014 and 2019, the group carried out hundreds of attacks primarily in Iraq and Syria, and then in various other parts of the world. It also churned out propaganda on the internet at a rate hitherto unseen by law enforcement agencies who struggled to keep up with and counter the content.¹ All of this helped it gain fame and inspired many attacks by individuals not formally trained by them, yet inspired by their ideology and cause. The group simultaneously absorbed many local groups in nations such as Nigeria, Afghanistan, and the Philippines, creating provinces in these nations as well.²

Over time, its various extra-judicial killings of civilians and political opponents within Iraq and Syria, ability to draw in foreign fighters and contribution to instability in these two countries were cited as justifications to attack its locations by western nations such as the United States, as well as many other regional countries, leading to further cycles of destruction in the two nations.³ By 2017, it lost more than 90% of its territory across both Syria and Iraq and by March 2019 it had lost every shred of territory it once held.⁴ Moreover, its leaders were eliminated by different security forces, a trend that culminated in the death of Abu Bakr Baghdadi, the self-declared head of the group and caliph.⁵

While most governments and casual observers celebrated these announcements, terrorism signs from 2018 demonstrated that the group would revert back to its original form as a guerrilla group.⁶ This prediction turned out to be largely true with the group's formidable finances and ideology sustaining its fighters across the world. While most of these fighters laid low and carried out only occasional attacks, the frequency of attack soon began to increase. As such, various governments and observers have noted in the first quarter of 2021 that the group is now witnessing a resurgence.⁷

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This brief, therefore, tries to understand to what extent the group is resurging. It measures this by looking at different factors such as attacks, fighters, finances, and other parameters. It then lists out reasons for the surge in its activities using counter insurgency literature to explain some of them. Finally, it maps out the policy implications of this increase in activities and provides possible steps for policy makers to engage in to combat this resurgence.

Following the numbers

According to numbers from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data, Iraq and Syria have collectively witnessed about 500 instances of the Islamic State involved in different events from January 01 to April 08, 2021 alone.⁸ This is significant given that in comparison, the same period in 2020 witnessed only about 250 events (approximately).⁹ These events include skirmishes, armed battles, attacks conducted by the group against civilians or military units as well as raids conducted by security forces against the Islamic State's members.

It is important to separate the group's activities in both Syria and Iraq since their current operations do differ, despite their common vision and one-time territory that commonly stretched over both nations.

According to analysts such as Navvar Saban,¹⁰ the Islamic State in Syria took almost two years after losing their territory to regroup and rejuvenate. And while the rate of the attacks picked up over time in Syria, ISIS focused on only a few areas for logistical reasons and their lack of funds and people due to not holding any territory.¹¹ To this end, a lot of their attacks in Syria are focused on the Deir al-Zour area where they still have a large community of supporters. The group claimed about 500 attacks in 2020 most of which were in Deir al-Zour alone.¹² Another location that the group tries to operate in is the Syrian desert, where the difficulty of securing these locations makes it easy to target the various government convoys passing through it using the Baghdad – Damascus highway, among other routes.¹³

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The Islamic State often capitalizes on the tensions between the Sunni Arab Tribes and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). For instance, due to corruption within the SDF ranks in areas such as oil-rich Deir al-Zour, members of tribes often have showdowns with the SDF. Moreover, citizens there blame the SDF for poor economic conditions despite the city's wealth.¹⁴ IS then uses these instances of local unhappiness to attack the SDF and garner support from the population.¹⁵

The SDF push against the group in 2019/2020 did not successfully reduce IS' attacks in the region.¹⁶ Similar issues were seen when the Syrian regime backed by Russian forces launched several attacks against IS forces in February 2021, to re-gain control of different strategic locations such as the Deir al-Zour–Damascus highway. These operations while successful in reducing IS' attacks in the region by almost 90% in February – March led to further attacks in other parts of Syria. Moreover, IS' superior desert warfare experience has led the Syrian regime to be constantly subject to different attacks, thus making it difficult to obliterate IS' presence in the region.¹⁷

In Iraq too, IS' increasing complexity and casualties over times in these two nations is evident. For instance, in May 2020, the group conducted a complex multi-pronged operation against Popular Mobilization Front (PMF) forces, a trend that followed more direct attacks as opposed to the asymmetric attacks that the group usually favours.¹⁸ Another significant attack occurred in January 2021 in Baghdad where the group conducted twin suicide bombings killing more than 30 and wounding more than 100 people.¹⁹ This is also a slight shift in its tactics back to suicide bombings, a tactic the group avoided for a while to conserve manpower.

The group's fighters often hide in the remote Makhmur mountains area – which lies between the Iraqi government's zone of control in the south and the Kurdish-run north from where they are able to launch operations on both the Kurds and the Iraqi government in places like Diyala, Salah al-Din, Kirkuk, and Nineveh.²⁰ Indeed, just like the SDF–Tribal tensions in Syria, the group is similarly able to gain from tensions between the Kurdish Peshmarga and the Iraqi government and PMF which have recently flared up.²¹ Their primary strategy is to launch wars of attrition on the Iraqi security forces and wear them down by steadily killing their forces.²²

At the same time, the Islamic State is also facing strong offensives against its positions by international partners such as the British which launched a 10-day offensive into different caves where hundreds of the Islamic States' fighters were hiding.²³

Another aspect to consider regarding its strength is its finances. During its peak in 2014, the group was estimated to have controlled more than two billion US dollars from oil revenues, taxes, smuggling and various other means.²⁴ Most of this money was lost according to Navvar Saban, but the group did retain some of it over the years. In addition, the fact that it is engaged in launching raids with small teams means that it does not have to expend too much money to conduct operations. Nor does it have to spend too much on acquiring weapons either since most of its operations in parts of Syria are focused on killing military forces and raiding armouries and weapon stockpiles. The group is thus clearly rejuvenating its attacks across many parts of central Syria and some parts of Iraq and cautiously but steadily expanding its footprints to remain relevant. Several factors explain this.

Preventing a Resurgence

Insurgency history is replete with instances of different groups losing and regaining control of territory. Counter-insurgency scholar David Kilcullen terms this as the Sisyphus effect whereby government groups unable to sustain the control of territory repeatedly lose and gain back their territory to insurgent groups.²⁵ The reasons for this are many, but largely related to expending resources to maintain control and win over the population.

Iraq is a classic example of the insurgent Sisyphus effect whereby Al Qaeda had won territory in the mid 2000's, lost it by the end of the decade and again won it back close to the mid 2010's. This was due largely to the Nouri al Maliki government's poor management during IS' rise and the intense Sunni – Shia violence with the incumbent Shia government turning a blind eye to the atrocities committed by Shia militias against various Sunnis in the nation.²⁶ Moreover, rising economic woes, corruption in the reconstruction efforts, poor distribution of resources and the government's inability to provide good infrastructure to the Iraqi people paved the way for another uprising against itself.²⁷

This effect seems to be repeating to some extent although not in the exact same way. Despite losing most of its territory by 2018/2019, the group did not lose all its fighters or many of its massive resources accrued while governing Iraq and Syria. According to

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United Nations figures as of August 2020, for example, almost 10,000 fighters belonging to the group were still laying low all over Iraq.²⁸ These fighters have regrouped and are largely responsible for the new attacks that are being conducted.

Another major challenge that has occurred is the refusal of most countries to repatriate their citizens who fought in Syria and Iraq. These countries fear they will not be able to prosecute them and will have to set them free, which could be a security threat for these nations.²⁹ The continued presence of these foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria can prove to be a threat if they resume fighting the government or training others in different arenas including insurgency tactics, propaganda, media communication and so on.

In addition, both Iraq and Syria are unable to prosecute many local fighters as well due to a combination of factors including a lack of evidence and poor legal systems.³⁰ Even those who are prosecuted often end up in prisons where there is a high chance of further radicalization or continuation of anti-government activities. Indeed, in the 2010s, camp Bucca was dubbed as the Jihadi university that spawned Abu Bakr Baghdadi.³¹ It is not unlikely that camps holding Islamic State fighters will create new figureheads and ideologues over time.

Finally, the COVID–19 pandemic also whittled away military attention on the group given that militaries were often dealing with the disease’s spread within their own quarters or were engaged in humanitarian activities. Additionally, many military operations had to scale down to avoid large gatherings. All this means that consequent Covid -19 outbreaks gave space to terrorist groups like ISIS to regain traction in the short term.³² This factor manifested even in Syria and Iraq which suffers from abysmal public health and hygiene infrastructure leading to an increased reliance on the military for relief works.³³ Therefore, the COVID–19 pandemic was one more factor that bolstered the Islamic State’s resurgence in activities.

Outlook

It is clear that the group’s activities have significantly increased over time. This increase is likely quite sustainable due to the various factors that have supported it. However, if it will lead to the group once more claiming territory is a difficult question. For one, it is quite likely that the group, like Al Qaeda, encountered the challenges of holding on to territory and thus has

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seemingly changed its strategy. However over time, as the group strengthens, it is possible that it will try to at least capture smaller land masses and control them intermittently, similar to what Al Qaeda does in Yemen. These land grabs will be guided by opportunity, rather than the intention of governing territory. Whether this once more translates to a caliphate seems unlikely at least in the near future.

However, a reversion to a caliphate is not the only measure of what regaining strength could mean for the group. Indeed, as several other reports affirm, such as the previously mentioned Crisis Group report, the 2014 declaration of a caliphate was an outlier in the history of insurgencies.³⁴ Moreover, ISIS' rise in 2014 was also facilitated by Western support, as some of the weapons and money supplied to anti-Assad rebels were later funnelled to IS, in addition to the support of different nations with predominantly Sunni populations in trying to bring down Bashar al Assad.

Accordingly, a more accurate measure of the group's strength is not if it can regain control of territory and begin quasi-governmental operations, but if the group can launch more attacks both in its core territory and in other parts of the world.³⁵ As the sections above have demonstrated, this is a phenomenon that is currently occurring. Moreover, ISIS' key goal of remaining relevant is achieved through these activities, making it, therefore, an important factor in measuring ISIS' impact. As explained, various factors have contributed, necessitating several counter measures.

First off, it is imperative for governments to keep in mind that a sole military approach is inadequate to challenge and eliminate the group's power. It has to be combined with soft measures that are both broad and focused in nature. Broadly, different nations should make a strong effort to ensure that both Iraq and Syria rebuild themselves. For Iraq, having suffered from 40 years of war and conflicts starting from the 1980's when it went to war with Iran, the nation is in dire need of strong reconstruction efforts. Yet, these efforts cannot follow the past trajectories ripe with corruption and incomplete or shoddy work leading to renewed hatred for the government.³⁶ It should rely on local efforts and sustained approaches.

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Simultaneously, the government must also work on rehabilitation efforts to re-integrate its citizens back into the folds of normal life. This is quite a tall order given that both countries have been ravaged by war for years. Yet, it is possible to combine both the broad and narrow approach by engaging local citizens in the reconstruction efforts thus, helping them own their rise back to their feet. This approach can prove more effective than just foreign forces trying to beat down Islamic State members without securing their gains.

The Islamic State has proved over the years to be an extraordinarily resilient organization with the ability to bounce back, despite significant loss of fighters and finance. This is evidenced by its activities over the last year or so with increasingly frequent and complex attacks on various targets in its former heartlands of Iraq and Syria as well as in parts of Africa. It is incumbent on the governments of both nations as well as the international coalition to boost its efforts by also focusing on the soft approach. This process will take years due to the accumulated years of damage sustained by both nations, but the end result may be entire regions completely liberated of the group's violent grip.

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