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The Islamic State: Territorially defeated yet persistent

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- **The year 2019 witnessed the Islamic State (IS) being swept out of Syria and Iraq as the organization lost all of its main territories. However, this hardly means absolute defeat. Although the IS shifted its focus on the global terror making use of its proxies, with the withdrawal of the U.S. troops and the subsequent Turkish offensive in north-eastern Syria, it might again obtain more breathing space and opportunities in the region.**



The change of tactics; from caliphate to insurgents

The focus of the Islamic State after its territorial defeat in Syria and Iraq has shifted. The transformation of the Islamic State's strategy does not come as a surprise. In fact, such a shift in tactics started to be apparent more than two years ago after the Iraqi forces captured the Mosque of al-Nuri in Mosul in 2017. A model of global decentralized insurgency is increasingly followed by the organization. This was largely initiated by Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi's statement formally embracing extremist groups in Burkina Faso and Mali, in which he endorsed further terrorist acts carried out by groups pledging allegiance to the Islamic State as well. Since then, increasing focus on the encouragement of global indiscriminate violence continued especially in areas where affiliates of the IS operate. Attacks and increased activity thus continue for instance in Egypt or Afghanistan.¹ The jihadi movement also established a new branch in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in an attempt to enter sub-Saharan Africa. The interest in this region was further demonstrated by IS claiming responsibility for local attacks.² The Islamic State also increasingly concentrates on Asia. It disposes of relatively strong representation mainly in Southeast Asia where it first gained foothold five years ago as the local jihadi groups pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi in 2014 after the initial success of the IS in Syria and Iraq. That year, significant jihadi groups such as Abu Sayyaf, the Maute Group or the Jamaah Ansharut Daulah voiced their loyalty to the Islamic State. Over the years, the Islamic State's increasing interest in the region was observed with Southeast Asians becoming featured in the organization's propaganda. The IS also focused on reaching directly to the region via its propaganda machine by publishing a weekly newspaper in the Indonesian language, as well as establishing a vast

presence on social media promoting the IS' ideology in Indonesian. Furthermore, a high number of foreign fighters from the region joined the IS in Iraq and Syria. Only by late 2014, less than a year after the pledge of allegiance of significant jihadi groups from Southeast Asia, over 1,000 individuals from the region joined Islamic State's ranks in the Middle East.³

The situation in Syria and Iraq

All the global efforts aside, the human core of the Islamic State still remains in the Middle East. The insurgency continues in Syria and Iraq. There is a high risk of potential sleeper cells within the region as well. Specific territories such as Hamrin Mountains, Diyala Province, and the environs of Mosul, are still believed to be bases of the Islamic State's remaining infrastructure, and the insurgents are getting on with the attacks, even though at a much slower pace. However, the Islamic State's position of the jihadist primacy in the Middle East might be endangered by the increasing power of the Al Qaeda (AQ) in the region. Although Al Qaeda's initial presence in Syria was lost when its local affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra merged with other groups and distanced itself from the Al Qaeda, Al Qaeda renewed its influence in the region in 2018 via newly formed group Tanzim Hurras al-Din (The Guardians of Religion) established by Al Qaeda loyalists. Furthermore, several Jordanian jihadi veterans with close ties to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi found themselves among the group's ranks.⁴ There is thus a relatively high chance that they might succeed in poaching local IS members. Considering the presumable high ranking position of these individuals, given their experience and ties to Zarqawi himself, it can be assumed that they might not only have a decent chance in engaging ordinary IS members but also the higher ranking ones, which would cost already scattered Islamic State additional

¹Dempsey, M. P. (2018, January 18). *How ISIS' Strategy Is Evolving*. Retrieved October 21, 2019, from <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2018-01-18/how-isis-strategy-evolving>.

²Burke, J. (2019, June 6). *ISIS claims sub-Saharan attacks in a sign of African ambitions*. Retrieved October 21, 2019, from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/06/isis-claims-sub-saharan-attacks-sign-africa-ambitions-islamic-extremist>.

³Abuza, Z., & Clarke, C. P. (2019, September 16). *The Islamic State Meets Southeast Asia*. Retrieved October 21, 2019, from <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/southeast-asia/2019-09-16/islamic-state-meets-southeast-asia>.

⁴Clarke, C. P. (2019, August 23). *ISIS vs. Al Qaeda: What Lies in the Future of Global Jihadism?* Retrieved October 21, 2019, from <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/isis-vs-al-qaeda-what-lies-future-global-jihadism-75601>.

damage. Al Qaeda is also gaining popularity due to its efforts to appear as a moderate alternative to the Islamic State. It presents itself as an independent force in the Syrian war, more capable of strategic planning and with brighter future than the IS, while also not forgetting to nurture ties with the local population, Al Qaeda might succeed in building its image of the organization capable of standing up against Assad's regime and protecting the local Sunni population. Being more pragmatic than its rival, Al Qaeda established ties with the locals strengthening its brand in the area. Trying to reach some level of political legitimacy, Al Qaeda provides local services such as water, electricity or market control to keep the basic groceries accessible. Considering that the Al Qaeda denounces sectarianism and presents itself – contrary to the Islamic State – as unbiased force,⁵ this might prove to be a very fruitful strategy given the difficult living conditions of the local population in Syria, where over 11 million people find themselves in a need of humanitarian assistance, five million of which are believed to be in a dire (life-threatening) need of help. And while the relentless anti-Western agenda of the Islamic State put the organization in the crosshair of the international coalition, Al Qaeda gained a breathing room to consolidate its credibility and legitimacy among locals, which it now capitalizes on.⁶ Since the Syrian government seeks a regime reconsolidation rather than a reconstruction of the war-torn country, such incentives only deepen.

Nevertheless, the Islamic State managed to establish its presence firmly in Syria and Iraq, creating an ideology that lives on and which will be very hard to trample. And now, with the Turkish offensive into north-eastern Syria,

so-called Operation Peace Spring, it seems that some new opportunities are emerging for the Islamic State.

What lies ahead? Turkish offensive, new leadership and new opportunities

There are more than 100,000 Islamic State fighters and their families scattered around the former Caliphate.⁷ Many of those are now in hospitals, refugee camps or provisional prisons. It is important to note that the key detention facilities are on the territory controlled by Kurds in north-eastern Syria. And Kurdish territory most recently found itself under Turkish offensive as an aftermath of the U.S. troops pulling out of Syria. The impacts are already visible.

The detention facilities are operated by the U.S. backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), composed primarily of Kurdish militia. The SDF claims it currently holds over 12,000 suspected members of the Islamic State as well as up to 4,000 foreign fighters of the IS.⁸ Moreover, the prisons, where the jihadi fighters are held, are only of a makeshift character and the SDF lack skills and experience with the operation of such facilities. And as the repatriation efforts stumble, the capacities of the detention centers are slowly reaching a breaking point and the number of attempted jailbreaks is rising, as was confirmed by the U.S. State Department's counterterrorism coordinator, Nathan Sales, in August.⁹

As the Turkish offensive puts the region in turmoil, the affiliates of the Islamic State capitalize on the created chaos. After a Turkish shelling and subsequent riot in one of the detention camps, where the dependants of the IS are

⁵Clarke, C. P. (2019, August 23). ISIS vs. Al Qaeda: What Lies in the Future of Global Jihadism? Retrieved October 21, 2019, from <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/isis-vs-al-qaeda-what-lies-future-global-jihadism-75601>.

⁶See Gartenstein-Ross, D., & Koduvayur, V. (2019, July 1). *How to Win Friends and Wage Jihad: Understanding al Qaeda's Pragmatism*. Retrieved October 10, 2019, from <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2019-07-01/how-win-friends-and-wage-jihad>.

⁷Wright, R. (2019, May 7). *A Visit to Post-ISIS Syria: Human Crises Pose Risk*. Retrieved October 21, 2019, from

<https://www.usip.org/publications/2019/05/visit-post-isis-syria-human-crises-pose-risk>.

⁸Turkey's Syria offensive explained in four maps. (2019, October 14). Retrieved October 21, 2019, from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-49973218>.

⁹Special Envoy for the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS Ambassador James F. Jeffrey And Counterterrorism Coordinator Ambassador Nathan A. Sales. (2019, August 1). Retrieved October 21, 2019, from <https://translations.state.gov/2019/08/01/special-envoy-for-the-global-coalition-to-defeat-isis-ambassador-james-f-jeffrey-and-counterterrorism-coordinator-ambassador-nathan-a-sales/>.

held, there was a massive escape from this facility. Other camps in the area report similar scenarios of escapes as an aftermath of bombardment. Even more concerning are jailbreaks from the makeshift prisons, where the members of the Islamic State are being held. The prisoners either escape after the SDF withdraws from the area due to the Turkish offensive or are freed by the Turkey-supported opposition, the Free Syrian Army (FSA), after its forces seize the facility. This comes as no surprise since the FSA foundations stand on a non-coherent rebel group consisting mainly of the Syrian army defectors majority of who tend to incline to extremist ideologies.¹⁰

These escapes constitute a relatively significant threat, especially if they are about to continue. The problem is not only the jailbreak of the jihadists, who might pursue Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's appeal for freeing the IS detainees which he allegedly issued this September.¹¹ The prisons and detention camps are considered to be hotbeds of further radicalization. It is nothing new that the radicalization flourishes in prisons and camps due to the shared grievances as well as living conditions and other factors. There is thus no doubt that many of the escaped prisoners will remain loyal to the jihad, and furthermore, there is a high possibility that they managed to win others for their cause.

The death of the organization's leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who was recently killed by the U.S. forces, might seem as a major blow to the Islamic State. However, although it indeed is quite a victory for the global counter-terrorism efforts, the impact is not going to be that much critical to the organization given the organization's return to its guerrilla roots and proven high adaptability. Even though the search for the new long-term leader of the IS might be a difficult task considering the charisma and al-Baghdadi's achievements – especially his success in

challenging Al Qaeda's monopoly as the leader of global jihad – something which al-Baghdadi's predecessor Abu Musab al-Zarqawi never achieved¹² –, the organization is well equipped to eventually choose al-Baghdadi's successor. There will most certainly be consequences, nevertheless. It is possible that some level of fracture might emerge within the IS' leading ranks, which might subsequently lead to adoption of new strategies or aims of the organization. It is, however, at least problematic to anticipate the direction of such development. The newly-emerged power vacuum might also result in a greater degree of independency of the IS' global affiliates who seem to be concerned predominantly with local grievances while being less attached to the global narrative of the organization.¹³

The development in north-eastern Syria is currently ambiguous and it is hard to anticipate overall impacts. It is, however, clear that the Islamic State is capitalizing on the current turmoil in the region and that there are still strong foundations that it can build upon. An increasing rivalry between the Islamic State and other jihadi groups striving for the jihadist primacy is likely. Al Qaeda seems to be making good use of the mistakes the IS did. Being able to capitalize on the current situation in Syria, Al Qaeda's star is rising again in the region. However, the Islamic State has a firm standing in the Middle East. Be it tens of thousands of its loyalists scattered over the region, various sleeper cells, lasting remains of its infrastructure, the persisting ideology disseminated by its supporters or the escaped prisoners returning to its ranks. There is thus no doubt that with the US troops withdrawing and the attention turning to other pressing issues in war-torn Syria, various jihadi groups will be getting more breathing space on which they will undoubtedly capitalize. Keeping in mind also the current turmoil in north-eastern Syria it is hard to expect the situation to ease off. In fact, quite the contrary. There is a

¹⁰Seligman, L. (2019, October 14). *Turkish-Backed Forces Are Freeing Islamic State Prisoners*. Retrieved October 21, 2019 from <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/10/14/turkish-backed-forces-freeing-islamic-state-prisoners-syria/>

¹¹*ISIS leader purportedly urges members to free detainees from camps*. (2019, September 16). Retrieved October 21, 2019, from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/sep/16/isis-leader-urges-members-to-free-detainees-from-camps>.

¹²Zelin, A. Y. (2019, October 29). *Baghdadi Is Dead But His Legend Lives On*. Retrieved November 6, 2019, from <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/10/29/baghdadi-is-dead-but-his-legend-lives-on-isis-terror/>.

¹³Clarke, C. P., & Amarnath Amarasingam. (2019, October 28). *Baghdadi's Death Will Make Global Affiliates More Independent*. Retrieved November 6, 2019, from <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/10/28/isis-baghdadi-death-islamic-state-affiliates-more-independent/>.

České vize pro Evropu, evropské vize pro Česko
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prospect of new Syrian refugee crisis as Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan threatens to “open the gates and send 3.6 million refugees” to Europe – a scenario that the EU anticipated but did not plan for accordingly.¹⁴ And since the U.S. is quite unpredictable regarding its current north-eastern Syria policies, sound and coherent message of the transatlantic allies cannot be voiced, and the effect of condemnations and arms embargoes of the EU countries

towards Turkey seems insignificant¹⁵ it really is time for the EU to start thinking about the right approach instead of waiting for Washington’s intervention.



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¹⁴ Baboulias, Y. (2019, October 24). *The Next Syrian Refugee Crisis Will Break Europe's Back*. Retrieved November 8, 2019, from <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/10/24/syrian-refugee-crisis-europe-greece-turkey-balkans/>.

¹⁵ Pierini, M. (2019, November 7). *Can Turkey's Prickly Relationship with the EU Be Repaired?* Retrieved November 8, 2019, from <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2019/11/07/can-turkey-s-prickly-relationship-with-eu-be-repaired-pub-80296>.