



# The menace of a post-territorial “Islamic State”

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IMEIS Briefing No. 01



# IMEIS Briefing

December 2017

Defeated militarily, IS has ceased to exist as a territorial proto-state. But the terror group remains a regional and global threat. IS is likely to regroup and refocus on insurgent warfare and terrorism, shift resources from the Syrian-Iraqi theater to new locations, and intensify virtual recruitment to project global reach.

## Key Points

- Territorial losses in Syria and Iraq have obliterated IS's proto-state structure, but did not end to its claims to self-styled statehood.
- Maintaining local underground presence, IS would refocus on insurgent warfare and terrorism to undermine the Syrian and Iraqi governments' ability to govern.
- Relocating IS resources to locations where governments exert tenuous control would boost native Jihadist groups.
- Defeats would be used as evidence of Muslim victimization to attract youth susceptible to its IS calls to stage headline-grabbing attacks worldwide.

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The so-called “Islamic State” (IS) has been quickly ceding ground in both Syria and Iraq over the past few months. In November, the ground war against ISIS's self-styled caliphate neared its final phases when the terrorist group lost its last urban footholds in Iraq and Syria, Albu Kamal and Rawah, respectively. IS's territorial control has been reduced to patches of largely desert, sparsely populated land in eastern Syria and western Iraq, where the terror group is likely to make a series of final, desperate showdowns. But although encircled and on the run, ISIS is likely to remain a formidable regional and global menace for years to come.

While territorial losses in Syria and Iraq have effectively obliterated IS's proto-state structure, they are not likely to put an end to its claims to self-styled statehood. IS leaders are expected to continue to assert their claim to statehood which constitutes the group's primary ideological raison

d'être. In the landscape of Salafist-Jihadism, IS and its terrorist ancestors, al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia (also known as al-Qaeda in the Land of Two Rivers or al-Qaeda in Iraq) and the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI), have distinguished themselves by their eagerness to declare an Islamic state in the territories under their control, no matter how shaky that control had been. Even when ISI was nearly wiped out in Iraq following the US troop surge in 2007-2008 and the establishment of the irregular Sunni Arab tribal formations known as the Awakening Councils (Majalis al-Sahwah), it never forsook its claim to statehood. This was at a time when unrivalled Salafist-Jihadist leaders such as Usamah bin Laden were urging a more cautious approach that privileged gaining public support over the declaration of an Islamic state or caliphate.

Cognizant of the fact that eschewing the claim to statehood would dent their Jihadist project ideologically, IS leaders are likely to adopt a two-pronged territorial approach. On the one hand, IS would seek to maintain underground presence through local Syrian and Iraqi members who have been fading back into the civilian populations in their areas of origin, as well as in sanctuaries in desert hideouts along the Syrian-Iraqi border and in the rugged Himrin Mountains which stretch across the north central Iraqi provinces of Diyala, Salah al-Din and Kirkuk. These sanctuaries would enable surviving, primarily Iraqi and Syrian, IS fighters to reorganize and engage in low-intensity insurgent warfare and terrorist attacks to undermine the Syrian and Iraqi governments' ability to govern effectively and deliver basic services and security to the population. Lessons learned from the times of the receding insurgency of IS's parent organization, ISI, as a result of the US troop surge and the activities of the Awakening

Councils would shape the calculations of IS leaders in this regard. Sanctuaries in the abovementioned areas, with their rough terrain and many valleys and caves, provided ISI fighters with shelter where they could lay low, regroup and bide their time before they resumed their operations with a vengeance with the launch of the year-long campaign code-named “Breaking the Walls” (Kasr al-Aswar) in July 2012, some 7 months after the US troop withdrawal from Iraq in December 2011. Iraqi security forces are already finding it difficult to clear and hold territory in both the Upper Euphrates in the northern Anbar desert and rugged areas around the recently-liberated town of Rutabah which is strategically located along the Baghdad-Amman road in the southern Anbar desert. Securing and keeping these vast desert areas would require the deployment of very large numbers of “clearing” combat and “holding” police troops. The “tyranny of distance” in the vast expanses of empty desert along the Syrian-Iraqi border would be difficult to surmount without adequate resources to ensure sustained surveillance and a robust intelligence gathering regime.

On the other hand, the terrorist group is likely to relocate resources and assets to other locations where tenuous government control has enabled it to establish territorial holdings. Examples include the predominantly Pashtun tribal areas astride the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, Libya's lawless desert south, the northern Sinai Peninsula in Egypt, the Sahel region in western and north-central Africa, and the Bari area in the semi-autonomous Puntland region in Somalia. The influx of battle-hardened, roving transnational Jihadist personnel to these areas would boost the ranks of, and skillset available to, native Jihadist groups. And holding territories

in these areas would enable the group to maintain a gloss of legitimacy for its claim to statehood.

Ideological arguments notwithstanding, IS is not merely a territorial entity but rather a multifaceted terrorist enterprise. Territorial losses in Syria and Iraq are likely to prompt IS to rejuvenate its virtual operations in a heated pursuit to recruit members worldwide. Recent battlefield setbacks would provide IS with fodder for its online propaganda. Military defeats would be utilized to boost IS's narrative of Sunni Muslim victimization and self-proclaimed claims of defiantly standing up to a global conspiracy against its "true and unadulterated" version of Islam. Victimhood has long been a primary motif in Salafist-Jihadist discourse and is often utilized for recruitment, maintaining internal cohesion, boosting morale in times of adversity, and legitimating violence against those branded as enemies or infidels.

IS Virtual recruitment would continue to focus on attracting restless, idealistic youth who have accumulated frustrations, anger and resentment. Targeting Muslim youth living both in Islamic countries and on the fringes of western societies would enable IS to continue to project global reach and spread violence across the world. IS has already proven itself adept at utilizing social media and the Internet to recruit and radicalize youth in the privacy of their bedrooms. Some of these recruits are likely to form or join sleeping cells that would plan and provide logistic and intelligence support necessary to conduct spectacular attacks in the long-term. But the odds are that most of these homegrown terrorists would lead socially isolated lives in small groups of like-minded Salafist-Jihadists who would be susceptible to answering IS leaders' calls

to carry out headline-grabbing "lone wolf" attacks using crude material, such as driving vehicles into crowds or indiscriminate knife stabbing attacks.

Surviving IS members would also be inclined to join other existing or rising jihadist organizations. While the possibility that some survivors, especially medium- or high-ranking members, would form new incarnations of IS is not to be ruled out, most former members of IS are likely to swell the ranks of existing Jihadist outfits. The odds are that al-Qaeda would be the main beneficiary of this trend. There has already been some movement of battle-hardened IS fighters to the province of Idlib on the Syrian-Turkish border in northwestern Syria, which is controlled by the Syria Liberation Association (Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham), a coalition of Jihadist groups including the Syria Conquest Front (Jabhat Fath al-Sham), the former Syrian branch of al-Qaeda known as the Nusra Front until it broke off ties with al-Qaeda and rebranded itself in July 2016. Likewise, the Taliban have reportedly been receiving some former IS fighters from Afghanistan and Pakistan.

A more ominous threat to global security is the return of battle-hardened foreign fighters, who numbered in the tens of thousands, to their native countries. These fighters have accumulated not only considerable combat skills and capabilities but also significant experience in producing and deploying improvised explosive devices. True, some returnees are likely to be disillusioned utopians or adventurers whose firsthand experiences with IS had led them to become disenchanted with the group and its unbridled use of atavistic violence. But many are likely to be unrepentant terrorists. They would exert their energies to set up sleeping cells and take part in radicalizing native youth and

turning them into homegrown terrorists. By engaging in activities aimed at proselytizing Salafist-Jihadism they are likely to contribute to spreading IS influence and ideas. Herein lies the most dangerous aspect of IS. IS is an idea that preys on impressionable and angry Muslim youth worldwide. Ideas cannot be quashed by military force. Rather they need to be debunked by puncturing their allure and shattering the narratives that underpin them.

Revenge has been a hallmark of IS and other Salafist-Jihadist groups. Chances are that IS has never been as eager as it is now to stage attacks, especially of the spectacular mass-casualty variety, in countries that have deployed personnel and other resources to Syria and Iraq to fight the terror group. This is important for IS leaders to maintain the group's aura of strength and resilience. Topping the list of potential target countries would be leading western nations, such as the US, UK, France, Germany and Italy, as well as Russia and Iran. It is to be expected that IS would benefit from existing diffuse networks of radical Jihadist and Islamist groups in planning and conducting attacks in their own countries. Some of these attacks might be coordinated by, or carried out at the behest of, IS's Foreign Security (al-Amn al-Khariji) branch – an arm of the group's shadowy multi-branch intelligence apparatus tasked with plotting terrorist attacks around the world. Despite battlefield reversals, the dreaded IS intelligence apparatus is believed to be still active even in areas liberated from the clutches of the terror group. However, other attacks are likely to be carried out without coordination with IS leaders. The latter type of attacks fits the amorphous, loosely networked pattern of Salafist-Jihadist terrorism whereby attacks are carried out by diffuse, ideologically-

motivated, autonomous cells or individuals that subscribe to the apocalyptic vision of IS but have no organizational ties with it. This explains why some attacks claimed by IS worldwide might not necessarily have been planned or ordered by the group.

To remain in the terrorist tradecraft, IS would need a steady stream of funding. Territorial losses have resulted in precipitous drop in IS finances. They deprived IS of opportunities to tax the economic activities of businesses and individuals in territories under its control and to engage in the smuggling of natural resources produced in those areas. To compensate for these losses, IS is expected to deepen its engagement in organized crime, extortion, kidnapping for ransom, blackmail and money laundering to generate funds. Behind-the-scene investments in legitimate businesses to generate income that can be diverted to fund IS activities would also be an option.

Thus, losing the trappings of a territorial state is not likely to sound the death knell of IS as a terror group. Like other Salafist-Jihadist groups of its ilk, IS is adaptable, resilient, innovative and transformative. It is likely to fester while taking on different, muted forms for years to come.