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ISIS: Past, Present and Future

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(Photographs top to bottom)

A flag of the Islamic State hoisted in Rashad, Iraq in 2014. Source: JM Lopez/AFP/Getty Images

On April 29, 2019, ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi resurfaced in a propaganda video after a gap of five years. Source: Military Times

Al-Amaq, the Islamic State media wing released a photo on May 1, 2019 of ISWAP militants watching the eighteen-minute video of the resurgence of their supreme leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Source: Twitter/Rida Lyammouri

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ISIS: Past, Present and Future

by
Mohit Musaddi

On April 29, 2019, the ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi resurfaced in a propaganda video after a gap of five years. Sitting cross-legged on a cushion with a Kalashnikov rifle by his side, he blamed the defeat of ISIS in Baghuz, Syria on the 'savagery', 'brutality' and 'ill intentions' of the Christians towards the Muslim community. The eighteen-minute video was followed by an audio clip, a part of which focused on the Sri Lankan bombings which took place on April 21 (Easter Sunday), claiming the lives of over 250 people. The locations of the bombings included three churches, four luxury hotels and a housing complex in Sri Lanka. The bombings were timed for maximum effect during congregations at the churches and at the peak of the breakfast rush at the hotels. Al-Baghdadi praised the attack in the clip and claimed that the suicide bombers in Sri Lanka have 'healed the hearts' of the ISIS members by taking revenge for the loss of territory in Syria and Iraq. While initially, a local outfit, the National Tawaheed Jamaath (NTJ) was held responsible for the attack, ISIS later claimed responsibility and released videos of the attackers pledging allegiance to its leader al-Baghdadi as evidence.

These events were in stark contrast to President Donald Trump's claims in March 2019 that ISIS had been defeated and that the U.S. would soon withdraw its troops from Syria. A similar claim had also been made by the Obama administration in 2010 when it claimed to have defeated the then Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) only for the ISI to increase their attacks every year since then, until it set up its so-called Caliphate in 2014.

Origins – An offshoot of the Al-Qaeda

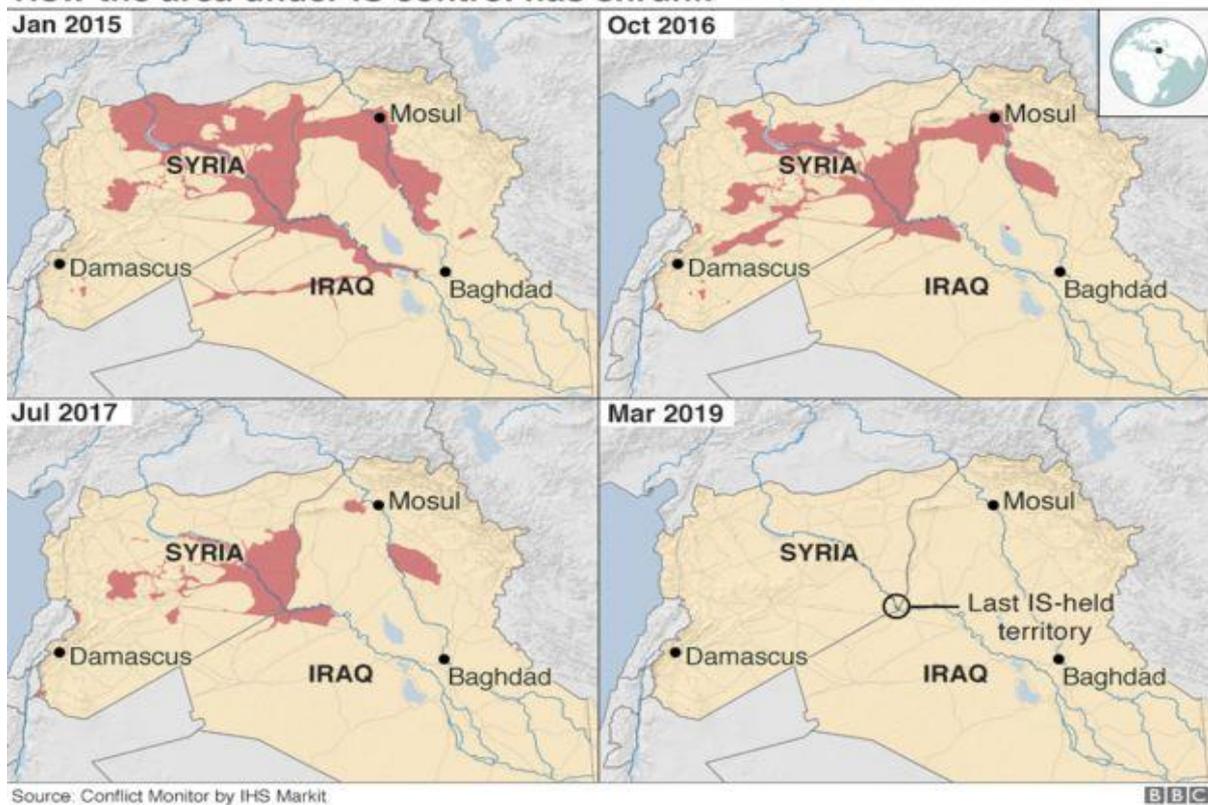
What started off as *Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad* in 1999, went through a series of name changes and quickly gained notoriety for suicide attacks on Shia mosques and Iraqi government institutions during the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. Then in October 2004, when its leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi swore allegiance to the al-Qaeda, the group began to be referred to as al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). Ultimately, in 2006, the AQI joined with several smaller Iraqi Sunni insurgent groups and declared itself as the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI).

When the Arab Spring spread to Syria in 2011 and a civil war broke out, ISI and al-Qaeda jointly set-up the al-Nusra front to bring down the Assad government and establish an Islamic State in Syria. Once the al-Nusra front became popular, ISI announced its merger with the front which would be called the Islamic State

of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Al-Qaeda rejected this claim and eventually broke ties with ISIL in 2014 for not working with other groups in Syria and trying to assert its authority by naming its own leaders. Like the al-Nusra front, several other affiliates of ISIL too have had al-Qaeda links, details of which are provided in the following sections of the paper.

In June 2014, the group proclaimed a worldwide ‘Caliphate’ and began referring to itself as the Islamic State (IS). Since then, at the height of its influence it controlled territory stretching from western Syria to eastern Iraq. This territory was once the size of Britain and governed the lives of up to 12 million people.¹ Nevertheless, since 2016 onwards, the IS began to lose territory nearly as quickly as it captured it. More than three years of American-backed bombing and ground combat by the Kurdish forces in Syria led the U.S. to declare a “total elimination of... the Caliphate and 100% defeat of ISIS” on March 23, 2019.²

How the area under IS control has shrunk



Source: BBC

¹ Callimachi, Rukmini. “ISIS Caliphate Crumbles as Last Village in Syria Falls.” *The New York Times*, March 23, 2019. Accessed April 9, 2019.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/23/world/middleeast/isis-syria-caliphate.html?action=click&module=inline&pgtype=Article>.

² Mustafa Bali, Twitter post, March 2019, 11:17 p.m.

<https://twitter.com/mustefabali/status/1109338396256813056>

The series of deadly attacks on Sri Lanka proves that the Trump administration's claims of victory over ISIS were premature and unwarranted. What causes more problems for the U.S. and its allies this time around is that the ISIS is not merely limited to Syria and Iraq. It still controls some areas in Afghanistan and Nigeria, and it used to control a 100-mile stretch of coastline in Libya, a city in the Philippines and pockets in at least thirteen other countries. Moreover, with the number of active militants in the Sinai Peninsula, the Khorasan Province and South Asia, parts of Africa, Europe, South East Asia, and the North Caucasus Province amongst others, it is incorrect to consider ISIS defeated.³

Ideological Inconsistencies

Ideology wise, ISIS and al-Qaeda lean towards a similar Islamic Salafist-jihadist theology. While Islam is the religion that the groups represent, Salafism is that branch of Sunni Islam which urges followers to emulate *al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ* (the pious predecessors) and *jihad* is a concept which focuses on the physical dimension of struggle. Put together, this ideology seeks to restore the "Golden Age" of Islam that supposedly existed in the 7th century AD which was the era of the Prophet Muhammad and the first four Caliphs who came after him.

However, ISIS's interpretation of the key elements of this ideology is paradoxical. While popular literature indicates that al-Qaeda and ISIS differ on their interpretation of *jihad*, recent activities by the Islamic State prove that, ISIS adopts a hybrid-styled *Jihad*, at best.⁴ Al-Qaeda's take on *jihad*, articulated most prominently by Abu Musab al Suri⁵ point to a strategy where "the leadership of a group should only provide basic guidance, while the small, individual cells should be linked by a common aim, a doctrinal program and a comprehensive (self-) educational program".⁶ On the other hand, ISIS leader al-Baghdadi initially derived his definition of *jihad* from the ideologue, al Maqdisi. Maqdisi explained that "jihad takes two main forms according to the purpose of fighting: *qital al-nikaya* and *qital al-tamkin*. The former is carried out with the sole purpose of hurting the enemy and his interests, while the latter is concerned with consolidating one's presence within a territory."⁷

³ Detailed analysis of ISIS presence in each of the mentioned regions has been further elaborated in the 'Global Presence' section.

⁴ Arosoaie, Aida. "Doctrinal Differences between ISIS and Al Qaeda: An Account of Ideologues." *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 7, no. 7 (2015): 31-37. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26351374>.

⁵ Abu Musab al-Suri is best known for his 1600-page book titled, "The Global Islamic Resistance Call". His interpretation of *jihad* has inspired al-Qaeda.

⁶ Arosoaie (2015)

⁷ *Ibid.*

This ideology was in sync with ISIS activities when it held territory, but since then they have largely shifted to an al-Qaeda styled tactic for fulfilment of *jihad*. With the help of sleeper cells and local terrorist outfits around the world, ISIS only provides 'basic guidance', while the individual cells carry out the attacks. Its propaganda now claims that the proto-state was a way of building a global platform to "ensure the movement's future by mobilizing tens of thousands of supporters, imbuing them and their kin with its creed and its mission".⁸

Global Presence

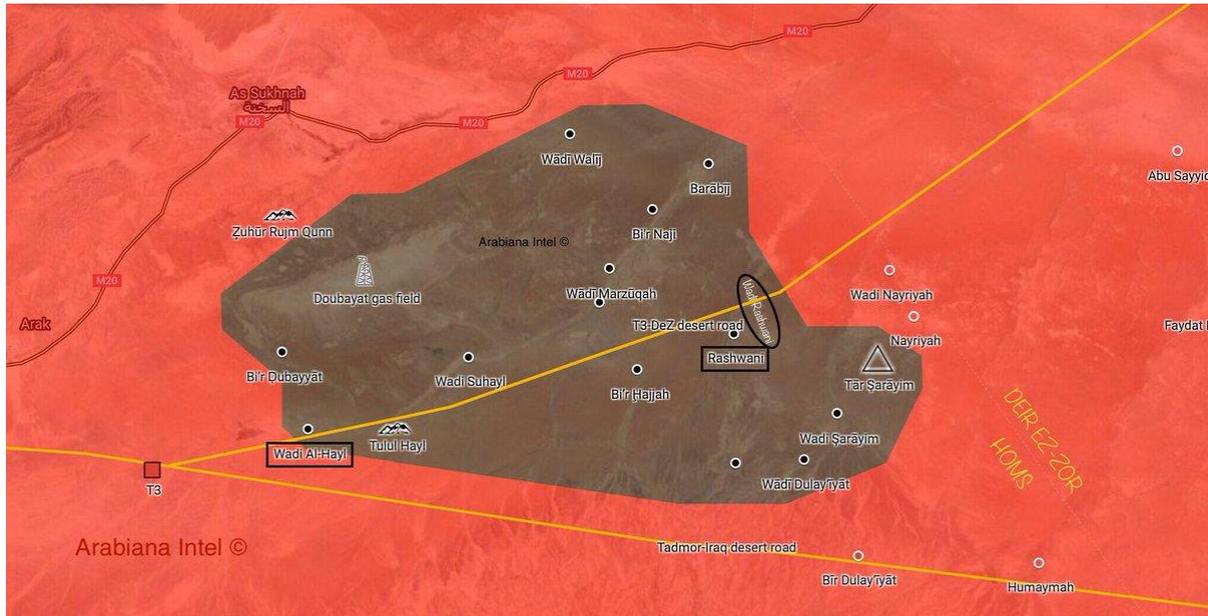
Iraq and Syria

After the loss of all its territory in Iraq and Syria, ISIS is now expected to operate in a more decentralised manner as a global guerrilla terrorist outfit. In Syria itself, ISIS continues to be a threat with most of its fighters operating out of the "desert region between Palmyra and Deir al-Zor".⁹ Recent attacks in April 2019 which killed at least two dozen pro-government fighters in Syria have strengthened the ISIS presence in the desert region of central Syria. In Iraq too, the attacks have not died down and even in 2019, ISIS has been involved in several skirmishes with the Iraqi security forces and the Shi'ite and Sunni militias affiliated with the Iraqi regime. Thus, ISIS remains a threat in the region as it "continues to transition from a proto-State structure into a terrorist network".¹⁰

⁸ Winter, Charlie & Aymenn al-Tamimi. "ISIS Relaunches as a Global Platform". *The Atlantic*, April 27, 2019. Accessed April 27, 2019. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/04/the-sri-lanka-bombings-were-a-preview-of-isis-future/588175/>

⁹ *Ibid*, pg. 6.

¹⁰ United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Report. *Twenty-second report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2368 (2017) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities*. S/2018/705, July 27, 2018. <https://undocs.org/S/2018/705>, pg. 7



Recent attacks in April 2019 which killed at least two dozen pro-government fighters in Syria have strengthened the ISIS presence in desert region of central Syria. Source: Maps & Conflicts Database

Egypt

In close proximity to Iraq and Syria is Egypt and the Islamic State has continued to maintain “a low but continuous level of offensive initiatives against the Egyptian security forces, especially in the Northern Sinai Peninsula.”¹¹ The main group operating in Egypt is the Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis (ABM) which had links to al-Qaeda before it pledged allegiance to the IS in 2014. Subsequently, it changed its name to Wilayat Sinai (WS) in late 2014 and has been responsible for major attacks in the region including the downing of a Russian aircraft over the Sinai region. It is also responsible for the deadliest terrorist attack in Egypt at a Sufi mosque in the Northern Sinai region in November 2017 which claimed the lives of 311 people. Indeed, according to a UNSC report of 2018, WS may yet consist of up to 1,000 fighters who continue to exhibit signs of resilience.¹² Other countries in North Africa where the ISIS presence has been reported include the mountainous regions in West Tunisia, Morocco and Libya. Libya has experienced a relative decline in violence since the fall of ISIS’s stronghold in Sirte in December 2016.

¹¹ MAITIC (2019), <https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/isis-defeated-overview-possible-developments-fall-isis-enclave-lower-euphrates-valley/>, pg. 18

¹² UNSC Report. <https://undocs.org/S/2018/705> pg. 11



After months of denial, Egypt admitted to ISIS's role in the downing of the Russian passenger plane Metrojet flight 9628 after the Wilayat Sinai published photos claiming to show that IEDs hidden inside a can of Schweppes Gold Pineapple Juice were responsible for the disaster. The attack killed all 224 passengers and crew on board.

Source: The Independent

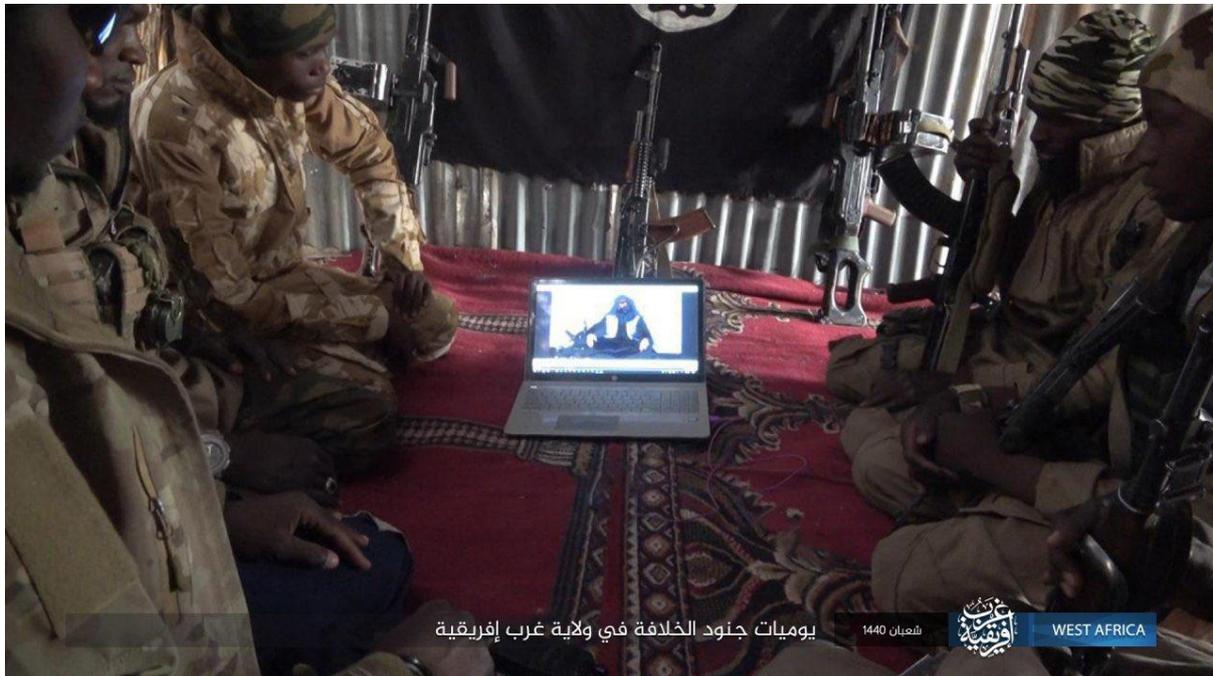
Yemen

The ISIL also has presence in Yemen which was strengthened by funding from the coalition in Yemen to fight the Houthi rebels. While the main enemy of ISIS-Yemen (ISIS-Y) has been the Zaidiyyah Houthis, of late, they have been more involved in fighting the AQAP (al-Qaeda in Arabian Peninsula) which is also a significant force in the region.

West Africa

ISIS has also maintained a strong presence in West Africa, particularly in the regions of Nigeria, Niger and Chad. The Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) has been the main belligerent in the region. A breakaway faction of the Boko Haram, ISWAP has overrun or shut down at least 14 government military

bases in areas of its dominance in 2018 alone.¹³ Their aim to establish a Caliphate in the region has gained momentum over the past year through a series of attacks in and around the Lake Chad Basin area. The intensity of ISWAP's activities has continued to increase in the first half of 2019 with the IS's Amaq News Agency regularly releasing videos of beheadings of opposition soldiers. Other parts of Africa do not face as grave a threat from ISIL although Somalia remains a focus for future ISIL operations.¹⁴



Al-Amaq, the Islamic State media wing released a photo on May 1, 2019 of ISWAP militants watching the eighteen-minute video of the resurgence of their supreme leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Source: Twitter/Rida Lyammouri

North Caucasus

ISIS presence is also on the rise in the Russian North Caucasus region of Chechnya, Dagestan and Ingushetia. The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) declared at the end of 2018 that a network of ISIS operatives had been exposed.¹⁵ The operatives were allegedly responsible for collecting donations in Russia for the Islamic State and the Jabhat al-Nusra. Although the current threat level from ISIS in the region remains relatively low, it may only be a case

¹³ Salkida, Ahmed. "SPECIAL REPORT: Why Troops Are Losing Ground To ISWAP", January 02, 2019. Accessed April 09, 2019. <http://saharareporters.com/2019/01/02/special-report-why-troops-are-losing-ground-iswap>

¹⁴ UNSC Report. <https://undocs.org/S/2018/705> Pg. 13

¹⁵ MAITIC (2019), https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/app/uploads/2019/03/E_047_19.pdf pg. 22

of temporary weakness with the group likely to re-emerge if its militants who fought in Syria are allowed to return home.

Europe

ISIL remains a menace for Europe too as active cells on the continent continue to receive funding and supply of arms. The Islamic State has set up a network which allows its grassroots members to continue to operate independently and deploy an intelligence capacity even when the central command has been uprooted. The problem in Europe and particularly Western Europe is part of a deeper cultural phenomenon caused by difficulties of integration and even rejection by the wider society that the Muslim community lives with.¹⁶ Western European countries have not ruled out future ISIS attacks, especially in light of documents found in Baghuz – the last ISIS held territory in Syria – which revealed that the group had plans to carry out attacks on a high-speed train in Germany and on an oil pipeline in Switzerland.¹⁷

Although Europe is not part of the so-called ISIL Caliphate, the main threat still arises from the home-grown radicals who had gone to Syria and Iraq and received formal training in arms. Baghdadi has often released recordings in which he calls upon his operatives and supporters to increase their offensives and attacks, particularly against the West. With the collapse of the Islamic Caliphate, an important potential threat is from the return of the foreign fighters and their families to their countries of origin.

President Trump has urged the Western European countries to take back the foreign fighters to their countries of origin, but Europe has at-large avoided the issue because “of the fear that the operatives may return brainwashed with a Salafist-jihadist ideology combined with military experience”.¹⁸ Only Germany has claimed that in principle, its citizens have a ‘fundamental right to return’, which would of course not be without consequences.

South-East Asia

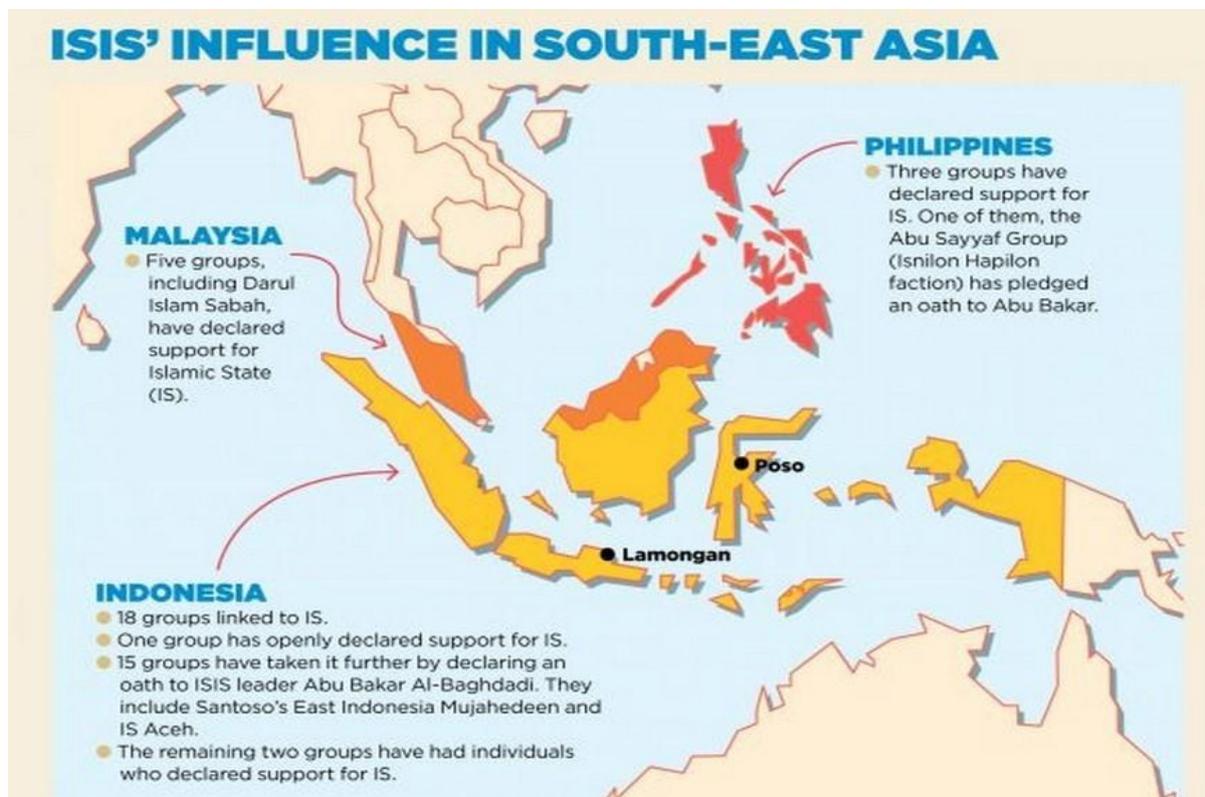
Another region that merits attention as being increasingly infiltrated by the ISIL is South-East Asia. Countries like the Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia have witnessed a rise in attacks by the Islamic State since 2016. The presence of al-Qaeda in Indonesia in the form of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) is complemented by

¹⁶ *Ibid*, pg. 29

¹⁷ Schneider, Oscar. “ISIS planned new terror attacks in Europe”. *The Brussels Times*, April 16, 2019. <http://brusselstimes.com/world/14995/isis-planned-new-terror-attacks-in-europe>

¹⁸ MAITIC (2019), <https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/dilemma-isis-captives-held-sdf-forces-analysis-possible-solutions/>

the presence of the ISIS-affiliated Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD). The 2002 bombing of a nightclub in Bali by JI which killed 204, first raised alarms of the threat from Islamic terrorism. Thereafter, the JI was replaced by other militant organisations such as the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) who pledged allegiance to ISIS. Most notorious among the groups was the JAD which orchestrated an attack where “an entire family – mother, father, two teenage sons and two younger daughters – blew themselves up in back-to-back attacks in three churches in Surabaya, the second largest city in Indonesia, in May [2018]”.¹⁹ The most recent attack – a set of bombings in a cathedral in Jolo, Philippines – on January 27, 2019 has also been claimed by the JAD. Militants in the region dream of a ‘crescent-moon-shaped’ Caliphate, comprising of Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines which would be free of secular government. Philippines is the worst hit country in the region and what exacerbates the problem is that the Filipino government refuses to acknowledge the threat of ISIS. It has downplayed the ideological element of the group and continues to stress that ISIS does not pose a major threat to the region.

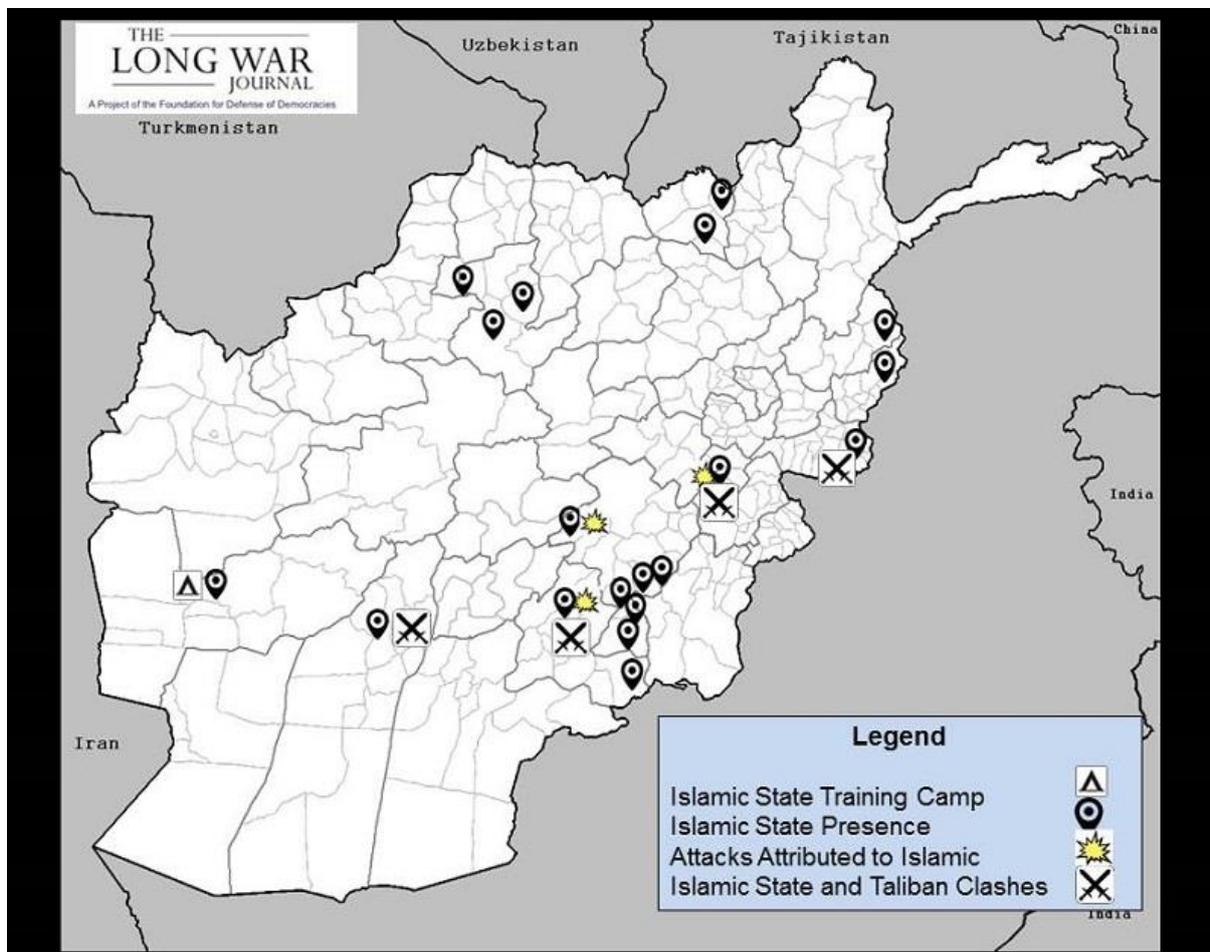


In Southeast Asia, ISIS aspires to form a crescent-shaped Caliphate comprising of Malaysia, Indonesia and Philippines. Source: OAM (Middle East)

¹⁹ Beech, Hannah, and Jason Gutierrez. “ISIS Bombing of Cathedral in Philippines Shows Group's Reach into Asia.” *The New York Times*, January 28, 2019. Accessed April 15, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/28/world/asia/isis-philippines-church-bombing.html>

Khorasan Province and South Asia

ISIS also maintains a very strong presence in Afghanistan where it aspires to form a Caliphate in the Khorasan Province which will include Pakistan and Iran. In January 2015, it first established Wilayat Khorasan and declared Hafiz Saeed Khan, an ex-member of the Afghan Taliban as its leader. Since then, it has increasingly recruited defectors from the Taliban, even though it abhors Taliban owing to the latter’s vision of possessing a narrow ethnic and nationalistic base. ISIS currently maintains “presence in the eastern provinces of Kunar, Nangarhar and Nuristan, and is also active in Jowzjan, Faryab, Sari Pul and Badakhshan provinces in the north” of Afghanistan.²⁰ The most recent demonstration of its capabilities has been the two suicide bombings – one near the airport in Jalalabad and the other during a procession in Kabul – in March 2019. Even though al-Qaeda is the intellectually stronger group, ISIS has posed a more immediate threat in the region.



The Islamic State presence in Afghanistan. Source: Long War Journal.

²⁰ MAITIC (2019), https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/app/uploads/2019/03/E_047_19.pdf, pg. 16

The ISIS's conceptualization of the Khorasan Province includes countries of South Asia and therefore presents a danger to the Indian subcontinent as well. The ISIS has claimed responsibility for the series of suicide bombings which rocked Sri Lanka on April 21. The National Investigation Agency (NIA) of India have revealed that they had stumbled upon videos of the NTJ leader and mastermind behind the attacks, Maulvi Zahran Bin Hashim while probing an ISIS module in Coimbatore, India. Yet again, the ISIS has managed to stage an attack using a local terror outfit. In this case, it was the little known NTJ, who had earlier come to notice for defacing Buddha statues in the past. The worst attack in Sri Lanka since the end of the civil war in 2009 was made possible also because of a breakdown in the working of the Sri Lankan government owing to rifts between the President and the Prime Minister since early 2019.

It is also worrying for India that despite best efforts by the NIA, new instances of IS indoctrination have routinely cropped up in different parts of the country. While the country has largely avoided any major attacks by ISIS, the militant group on April 30 released a poster naming one Abu Muhammed al-Bengali as its new emir in 'Bengal'. This announcement comes a day after the Islamic State carried out an explosion near a cinema theatre in Dhaka. Bangladesh has had its own share of ISIS terror in the past, the deadliest of which was on July 1, 2016 when five militants took hostages and opened fire at the Holey Artisan Bakery in Dhaka.

In India, a UNSC report has claimed that ISIL in Afghanistan was responsible for at least one attack in the Kashmir region.²¹ ISIS-inspired terrorists were also responsible for the Bhopal-Ujjain Passenger train bombing in March 2017.²² A NIA report has further stated that there was a conspiracy to bomb a rally of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. In recent times, Kerala and Tamil Nadu have reportedly witnessed increasing ISIS presence.

(How) Can ISIS be Defeated?

ISIS has in a way evolved from a rogue state sponsoring terrorism to a stateless ideology which employs insurgent tactics around the world. To adapt to the new reality of functioning without territory, ISIS has begun to change the nature of its activities in at least three ways.

²¹ *Ibid*, pg. 16

²² Singh, Kanishka. "What is the ISIS Khorasan Module? Everything you need to know", *The Indian Express*. March 08, 2017. Accessed April 08, 2019. <https://www.msn.com/en-in/news/newsindia/what-is-isis-khorasan-module-everything-you-need-to-know/ar-AAo0xjr>

First, the group has decentralized its media network and increased importance of the semi-autonomous operational areas outside Iraq and Syria. Despite its media network being weakened since the fall of the Caliphate, it has witnessed a resurgence since the latter half of 2018. Second, “the Islamic State has quietly shifted from insistence on a strict gender hierarchy to allowing, [and] even celebrating, female participation in military roles”.²³ Contrary to the popular belief, not all women are forced to join IS and many do it willingly. They are as radicalised as men and the counterinsurgency tactics adopted by states will need to evolve based on the exact nature of the role provided by ISIS to its women cadres. Finally, and most importantly, ISIS has now positioned “itself as a global guerrilla terrorist organisation operating in many arenas, decentralized and not bound by a territorial framework and not taking upon itself the burden of a population.”²⁴ In Syria, it has already begun to operate out of sparsely populated deserts of Palmyra and Deir al-Zor. Elsewhere, the militants have blended in with the local population which makes it difficult for the state to drive them out.

The White House may have declared victory by driving the group out of the territories it held in Iraq and Syria, but it has only defeated ISIS in conventional warfare for the time being. Once the group established its so-called Caliphate in 2014, ISIS was countered by the tactics of conventional warfare unleashed by the U.S. and Russia and the groups allied to the two powers. The fight against the ISIS has now evolved into a counterinsurgency operation led by the regional countries which need to be supported by the U.S. in the areas of intelligence and funding rather than manpower. Kinetic operations will no longer suffice in defeating ISIS. The counterinsurgency needs to focus on defeating the Jihadi Salafism ideology which is the mainstay of the Islamic State.

The following steps could prove to be a useful starting point. First, the existing de-radicalization programs need to be strengthened. Although there are ongoing programs in Canada, the United States and other Western countries, they have largely been unsuccessful as homegrown terrorism has dominated ISIS-inspired attacks in the West in recent years. The governments need to increase investment into their de-radicalization programs and develop a process via which they can limit ISIS in conquering the ‘hearts and minds’ of their recruits.

²³ Mironova. Vera. “Is the Future of ISIS Female”, *The New York Times*. February 20, 2019. Accessed April 13, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/20/opinion/islamic-state-female-fighters.html>

²⁴ MAITIC (2019), https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/app/uploads/2019/03/E_047_19.pdf, pg. 3

Second, there needs to be increased financial support for local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to provide counselling services to the youth. Increased funding on countering ideologically inspired violence and creation of new data bases containing research results and experience-based practices may prove beneficial to counter ideologically-based violent threats.

Third, non-state actors need to be increasingly brought to the fold. Since the ISIS uses web-based platforms like YouTube, Facebook and Twitter, governments need to work alongside these media giants to identify the ISIS channels propagating their ideology on the web. It is absolutely essential to starve ISIS of recruits and prevent them from becoming indoctrinated by its ideology. Google does operate a think-tank called *Jigsaw* which tackles global security challenges using technology, but more specific efforts to counter ISIS need to be made.

Most importantly, ISIS propaganda mustn't be allowed to reach delusional Muslims around the world. ISIS has created a sense of virtual community to which those who have otherwise felt adrift and detached from their real communities have been drawn. For instance, the public availability of the recent propaganda video by ISIS leader al-Baghdadi has been widely covered by almost every news media outlet around the world. This video has the potential to attract more recruits from around the world and provide a boost to the profile of the Islamic State. There must be attempts to limit the reach of such propaganda material as much as possible. The future of ISIS will depend upon the degree of success or otherwise of the above mentioned deradicalization tactics.



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