



BRIEFING PAPER

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Future of ISIS

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Summary

ISIS/Daesh, the so-called Islamic State, is forecast to lose most of its remaining territory in Iraq and Syria before long. That will be a success for the international coalition and a blow for ISIS: holding territory means revenue and a big propaganda advantage. But questions remain about what will happen to the organisation and its present and potential personnel if and when the group no longer holds any territory to call its state.

There is the problem of what will happen in Sunni-majority areas in Iraq and Syria once ISIS no longer controls them. Establishing legitimate governance in those areas has been an elusive goal in Iraq, despite an elected government and years of military and other contributions from Western countries

Then there is the question about what will happen to ISIS operatives. They may turn to more 'traditional' terrorist activities – focusing more on inspiring, facilitating and organising attacks in the Middle Eastern and European countries that most of its fighters came from.

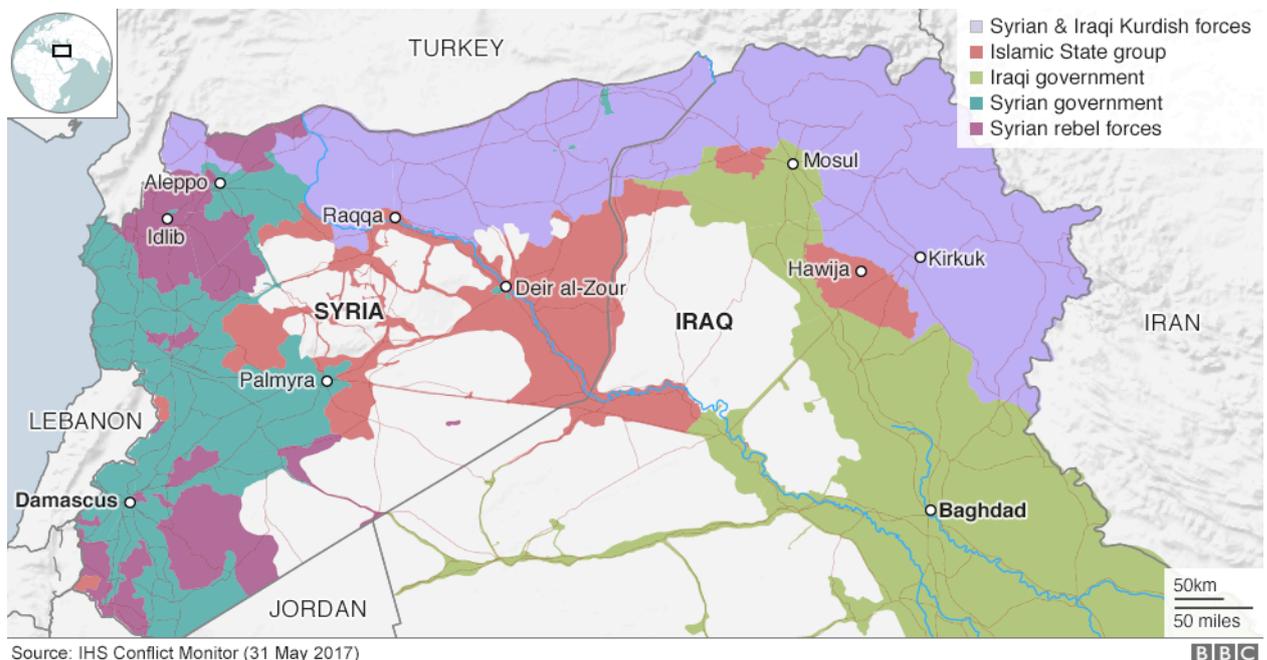
Victory in the ground war in Iraq and Syria could also lead to growth in ISIS outpost 'provinces,' such as in Egypt's Sinai or in Afghanistan.

Leaders are well aware of the dangers of dispersal, but success in detaining ISIS fighters in Iraq and Syria as the so-called caliphate disintegrates is likely to be patchy at best. Could the end of the 'Islamic State' mean more lone-actor terrorist attacks such as in Westminster in March 2017? There have been suggestions that ISIS had a more direct role than previously thought in recent attacks, such as the lorry driven through a crowd of civilians in Nice.

1. The end of the 'caliphate'?

In both Syria and Iraq, the picture is one of solid progress against ISIS,¹ which has lost about half its fighters since the peak, according to the statement issued after the Coalition summit held in Washington on 22 March 2017.² The Syrian government, helped by Russia and Iran, has also improved its position markedly, re-establishing control over Syria's second city, Aleppo. It now looks unlikely that the Syrian government will fall, barring a dramatic change of policy from the US.

In Iraq the official Iraqi Security Forces have gained control of most of the territory around Baghdad and along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. They have surrounded ISIS in part of Iraq's second city of Mosul, cutting ISIS's stronghold there off from the ISIS capital of al-Raqqah. According to the statement from the anti-ISIS coalition summit, Iraq has recovered about 60% of the territory once held by ISIS.



[Source: IHS Conflict Monitor \(31 May 2017\)/BBC](#)

The Syrian government has taken Palmyra from ISIS and Aleppo from mainstream rebel groups. 'Syrian partners', according to the summit statement, have cleared more than a third of the territory ISIS once controlled in Syria.

The Turkish border is now inaccessible to ISIS, following Operation Euphrates Shield, which pushed ISIS away from the western end of the border. Analysts interpreted this as motivated as much by a desire to thwart any unification of Kurdish-held areas as to defeat ISIS.³

ISIS cut off from Turkey

¹ For more on the campaign, including the UK's military contribution, see the Commons Briefing Paper [Syria and Iraq: update June 2017](#)

² [Statement by Ministers of the Global Coalition: Meeting on the Defeat of ISIS](#), US Department of State, 22 March 2017

³ For more on the situation in Iraq and Syria see Commons Briefing Paper [Syria and Iraq since the cruise missile attacks](#), 2 May 2017

The loss of territory will be a major blow to ISIS. It will reduce the group's tax base and ability to raise money from such things as oil and antiquities; most importantly, perhaps, it will undermine the group's contention that its victories are divinely ordained and that Muslims owe their allegiance to the caliphate.

2. Strategies

2.1 ISIS

The group's origins are in the Sunni resistance to the US occupation of Iraq in the first decade of this century. During that period the group's predecessors (*Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad*, then Al-Qaeda in Iraq) pursued insurgent strategies, attacking US and Iraqi security forces, mainly inside Iraq. They also carried out attacks designed to incite sectarian hatred, bombing Shia mosques in Iraq, for example, with the aim of binding Sunnis to their cause and to undermining the legitimacy of the Baghdad government. Participation by former members of Saddam Hussein's security forces has helped the group by bringing experience in the running of a repressive state.⁴

ISIS ideology sets the goal of a single Islamic state under the leadership of a Caliph – the first time that there had been such role since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire after the First World War. ISIS aims to return society to the time of the Prophet Mohammed and to follow what they see as a literal interpretation of the words of the Quran and the Hadith – accounts of the words and deeds of the Prophet.

The creation of a 'complete society' for Muslims and encouraging them to leave home and join it have been the highest objectives of ISIS.⁵ As Muslims joined the new 'caliphate', it would expand to take in Muslim-majority countries and, ultimately, the whole world. The ISIS magazine *Dabiq* and other propaganda set out those goals and discuss perfecting that 'truly Muslim' society.

ISIS declared the inception of the 'caliphate' in June 2014, following the successful operation to oust the Iraqi government from much of Anbar province and then Mosul. Since then, ISIS has demanded the allegiance of Muslims worldwide, although mainstream Muslim organisations have rejected the caliphate and its call for allegiance.⁶

While holding territory in Iraq and Syria, ISIS has continued to concentrate on the 'near enemy' – in this case, the governments of Iraq and Syria, which it considers to be apostate (to have abandoned Islam). It has also continued to prioritise the battle with Shias and the oppression of religious minorities in Iraq and Syria such as Christians and Yazidis.

It has tried to intimidate local populations by well-publicised punishment of dissenters, and has tried to outbid rival violent *jihadi* groups by the scale of its atrocities. Many commentators argue that ISIS needs to convincingly displace rivals Al-Qaeda, and that could mean spectacular mass-casualty attacks in the West.

ISIS aims to return society to the time of the Prophet Mohammed

⁴ ['How Saddam's men help Islamic State rule'](#), *Independent*, 11 December 2017

⁵ Brandon Carlos, 'What Does *Dabiq* Do? ISIS Hermeneutics and Organizational Fractures within *Dabiq* Magazine', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 2017, Volume 40-Issue 3

⁶ ['Not in our Name: British Muslims Condemn the Barbarity of ISIS'](#), Muslim Council of Britain press release, 20 August 2014

As the international coalition to fight ISIS gathered in 2014, the ISIS leadership released a statement calling on followers to retaliate against military and civilian targets in the West, at the same time calling on Muslims in the Middle East and North Africa to rise up against their governments. The statement urged ISIS supporters to use any and all methods of attack against Western targets.⁷

In 2015, ISIS published an audio message calling for Muslims to conduct a “holy war” against the US and Russia, in which those countries participating in the campaign against ISIS in Iraq and Syria were mentioned by name.⁸

2.2 Al-Qaeda

Al-Qaeda’s strategy was not traditionally to hold territory. The group believed in the coming caliphate, but its leader Osama bin Laden did not believe that it could come in his lifetime.

Al-Qaeda has traditionally prioritised the fight against the ‘far enemy’ (particularly the US) and it has placed a premium on attacks in the West – for example, 9/11. Its strategy has concentrated on attrition: the idea that Western governments could be persuaded to change their foreign policy by the emotional and physical cost of prolonged terrorist campaigns.⁹

Bin Laden “sought to secure Muslim popular support rather than stoke messianic fervour.”¹⁰ Al-Qaeda’s use of intimidation was far less pronounced than was the case with ISIS and the second leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, issued an order in 2013 that Al-Qaeda operatives should avoid indiscriminate targeting that might result in the deaths of Muslims and non-combatant women and children.

Bin Laden “sought Muslim popular support”

In February 2014 Al-Qaeda disavowed ISIS, which had until then been an affiliate. Since then the two groups have been rivals.

In Yemen, however, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula has gained control of considerable territory. Some even argue that the present anti-ISIS campaign is in fact empowering Al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula seems to be refraining from attacking US interests, taking advantage of the fact that attention is focused on ISIS to build up its presence on the ground.¹¹

⁷ Jane’s IHS Markit, Islamic State

⁸ *Ibid.* For information on the campaign, see the Commons Briefing Paper [ISIS/Daesh: the military response in Iraq and Syria](#), March 2017

⁹ Celine Marie I Novenario, ‘Differentiating Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State through strategies publicised in *Jihadist* magazines’, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 2016, vol. 39, No. 11, pp953-67

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p959

¹¹ Katherine Zimmerman, ‘[AQAP Expanding behind Yemen's Frontlines](#)’, *Critical Treats*, 17 February 2017

3. Outlook

3.1 Sunni areas 'liberated'

Western interventions in the Middle East and North Africa have had a habit of backfiring: in Afghanistan, Libya and Iraq, regime change was not followed by a stable and effective state, and hostile forces have been strengthened in some cases.

One reason why ISIS was able to take control of largely Sunni areas in Iraq and Syria is that the residents of those areas did not trust their respective governments or their armed forces. There have been attempts to prevent the exacerbation of sectarian and ethnic tensions as those areas are retaken from ISIS – by limiting the role of Shiite militias in the operation to drive ISIS out of Mosul, for example. Nevertheless, there have still been reports of atrocities in Fallujah and Mosul.¹²

Expensive efforts to foster the establishment of good governance in Iraq after the 2003 invasion were often frustrated. The arrival and eventual expulsion of ISIS from Sunni areas in both Iraq and Syria is unlikely to have made that job any easier. On top of that, a new Iraqi parliament will be elected in 2018, and some pro-Iran Shias aim to replace Haider al-Abadi, the present Prime Minister, with someone more hostile to the West, who would expel US forces.

Transition to a government acceptable to Syrians, Sunnis and other groups alike, will be crucial to the task of pacifying former ISIS areas in both countries. This outcome does not seem any closer after recent advances by the Syrian government,¹³ and in any case the question of how to govern Raqqa and the rest of ISIS-controlled Syria is likely to come up before any general Syrian settlement.

Even if ISIS is successfully defeated and prevented from dispersing, there are plenty of other groups willing to replace it.

The prospect, then, of *jihadi* violence emerging yet again in Sunni areas of Iraq and Syria after the eventual defeat of ISIS is very real. The stabilisation and reconstruction of areas cleared of ISIS is a priority for the US-led coalition, but that will be easier said than done.

One analyst calls on the US to be ready for the long haul:

The United States, probably via its local partners, must prepare for a grinding counterinsurgency campaign and help allies erect structures of governance in areas the Islamic State once ruled. These are both difficult tasks, to put it diplomatically.¹⁴

3.2 Changing strategy?

ISIS, the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham, is different from other terrorist organisations, as its name suggests, by holding territory and

¹² 'Shia militias in Iraq', IISS Strategic Comments, 31 March 2017

¹³ For more on the conflict, see the Commons Briefing Paper [Syria and Iraq since the cruise missile attacks](#), 2 May 2017

¹⁴ Daniel L. Byman, '[What's beyond the defeat of ISIS?](#)', Brookings Institution, 27 September 2016

declaring itself the 'caliphate'. Its main objectives of setting up and running a 'complete society' for Muslims, perfecting it and encouraging Muslim immigration from other countries will be irrelevant if it loses its territory.

There has been plenty of discussion of a possible change of strategy by ISIS, particularly since the group claimed the November 2015 Paris attacks.¹⁵

A loss of territory could mean that it fades away, with its surviving operatives switching to other groups. Or it could change its strategy to become more like other groups such as Al-Qaeda.

Another way that ISIS distinguished itself from Al-Qaeda and other competitor organisations was by promising to be harsher against non-believers. There seems little reason for this strategy to be stopped after a loss of territory.

Analysts worry that ISIS after a defeat in Iraq and Syria could be more dangerous than at present.¹⁶

Lone-actor events

Although its hold on territory in Iraq and Syria is not ended yet, ISIS has already diversified its activities to include organising, facilitating and inspiring attacks in the Middle East, Europe, the US and elsewhere.

It is already more difficult for would-be citizens of the caliphate to journey to live in Syria; as the propaganda value of holding territory is lost, it will also tend to be less attractive. Those people who might have travelled to Iraq and Syria may choose to carry out attacks in their home countries instead.

Mass-casualty attacks such as those in Paris, Brussels, Orlando, Istanbul and Kabul have been claimed by ISIS recently and these attacks may have been directed by planners in Syria rather than being lone-actor events merely inspired by the group, as many thought at first.¹⁷

As ISIS loses physical space, a natural response might be to redouble its efforts in cyberspace, attempting to inspire attacks and support to demonstrate its continued influence.

London attacks 2017

ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack on Westminster Bridge and at the House of Commons in March 2017, and for the London Bridge attack in June 2017, although the involvement may have been in inspiring rather than organising the attacks.

Tehran attack

In June 2017 four armed gunmen went on a shooting spree in the Iranian Parliament, while at the Ruhollah Khomeini mausoleum others set off a bomb, killing a total of 17. To hit Iran was not a new objective

¹⁵ See for example '[A Change of Strategy for ISIS?](#)', *The Atlantic*, 14 November 2015

¹⁶ '[Why a Dying Islamic State Could Be an Even Bigger Threat to America](#)', RAND Corporation, 9 March 2017

¹⁷ '[Not 'Lone Wolves' After All: How ISIS Guides World's Terror Plots From Afar](#)', *New York Times*, 4 February 2017

for ISIS, which has long aimed to target the Islamic Republic. In this ISIS differs from Al-Qaeda, which used Iran as a safe haven and centre for raising finance.¹⁸ While Al-Qaeda has links to Iran (some of Osama bin Laden's family lived there under close Iranian surveillance), ISIS has always been more openly sectarian and *takfiri* – prone to denouncing others as *kafir*, or unbelievers.

The attack pointed up the fact that ISIS and Al-Qaeda remain rivals; the Iran attack could be a good recruitment tool, particularly in the face of bad publicity over losing territory. ISIS may also want to push Iran closer to Russia and the US-led coalition, to make any collaboration between Iran and the West more overt. One commentator argues that the attacks should dissuade the UK from aligning itself too much with the Sunni side in the region.¹⁹

Iran announced that the attackers were recruited inside Iran – they had left Iran to fight with ISIS and returned, suggesting that they were probably Iranian citizens. That would make the attack comparable to other 'home-grown *jihadi*' attacks that ISIS has claimed in Europe and elsewhere, and points up the risk of returning fighters.

Dispersal

ISIS territory in Iraq and Syria is likely to be retaken. But there are several formal provinces, or *wilayat*, outside the main 'caliphate' in Iraq and Syria: territory in Sinai in Egypt and in Yemen are well-known examples. There are also many groups who aspire to be part of ISIS. It would be optimistic to assume, therefore, that the military planners and fighters it has gathered will simply go away if and when ISIS is expelled from the territory it controls in the Levant.

Surviving outposts?

Relatively generous salaries to ISIS operatives have attracted many and when territory is lost the organisation's ability to fund these will be sharply reduced. Nevertheless, the religious motivation of those who joined the group should not be underestimated,²⁰ and this may not be diminished by the end of the 'caliphate'.²¹

Many fighters and commanders are likely to return to their home countries, where there is a danger that they could carry out terrorist attacks. Those who carry out attacks in their own countries are less likely to be troubled by border security, and spontaneous attacks are less vulnerable to detection by the security services.

Some ISIS 'provinces' will probably survive. These could be strengthened if experienced ISIS operatives transfer to them from Iraq and Syria, so an expansion of the ISIS presence in Libya, Egypt or Yemen is impossible to discount.

¹⁸ William McCants, '[What the Islamic State wants in attacking Iran](#)', Brookings Institution, 8 June 2017

¹⁹ Micheal Axworthy, '[The Tehran attack makes it clear: we're on the same side as Iran against Isis](#)', *Guardian*, 8 June 2017

²⁰ Lorne L. Dawson and Amarnath Amarasingam, Talking to Foreign Fighters: Insights into the Motivations for Hijrah to Syria and Iraq, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 2017 Volume 40, Issue 3, pp 191-210

²¹ Graeme Wood, '[What ISIS Really Wants](#)', *The Atlantic*, March 2015

Security services are also worried about the potential for an increase in the number of attacks, to a greater or lesser extent organised by ISIS, in countries such as Lebanon, Tunisia and Jordan, as well as in the West.

Jordan is particularly worrying because of its political and economic fragility, its huge numbers of refugees from the Syrian conflict and its proximity to Israel. An attack that destabilised the precarious monarchy could present a threat to Israel that led to Israeli intervention, especially given that a majority of Jordanians are of Palestinian origin. Violent *jihadi* organisations would welcome the opportunity to engage Israel directly.

Jordan worries

Governments are aware of the problem. The statement after the Washington summit in March said that steps are being taken to prevent weapons and fighters dispersing from areas retaken from ISIS.²²

Many analysts argue that sustained state-building is the only way that the cycle of violence might be stopped:

If the Islamic State is to be defeated and stay defeated, military measures will need to be combined with economic, technical, and political assistance designed to improve state and local capacity. Popular grievances that have given rise to extremist movements need to be better addressed.²³

Persuading Western publics that such an effort is advisable may be difficult, particularly in the context of the increasing problems in Afghanistan, where this approach has been tried most comprehensively. The statistical likelihood of the average Western individual being harmed in a terrorist attack is relatively small,²⁴ even if the suffering in the Middle East is not. Preventing terrorist attacks will nevertheless remain high on the political agenda in Western countries; how to achieve that will still be a difficult question.

²² [Statement by Ministers of the Global Coalition: Meeting on the Defeat of ISIS](#), US Department of State press release, 22 March 2017

²³ [‘Why a Dying Islamic State Could Be an Even Bigger Threat to America’](#), RAND Corporation, 9 March 2017

²⁴ [‘Do you feel like you’re more likely than ever to be hit by a terror attack? This is why you’re wrong’](#), *Independent*, 15 July 2016

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