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ISIS'S SECOND COMEBACK

ASSESSING THE NEXT ISIS INSURGENCY



By Jennifer Cafarella with Brandon Wallace and Jason Zhou

ISW
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Correction (July 23, 2019): The authors have retitled the assessed current phase of ISIS operations based on a review of statements released after the publication of this report. The report stated that ISIS announced a new global campaign titled “Battle of Attrition” on May 31, 2019. The authors assessed at the time of publication that this announcement signaled the conclusion of the “Soldiers Harvest II” campaign. ISIS in fact continued to use “Soldiers Harvest” to refer to its ongoing operations after this report’s publication. The authors still assess that ISIS has entered a new phase of military operations. The new phase has been marked by a more aggressive focus on attrition that exploits the conditions set during the previous campaign. Therefore, the campaign that occurred between July 2018 and May 2019 is now titled “Soldiers Harvest II (A)” and the campaign underway since May 2019 is now titled “Soldiers Harvest II (B).”

Cover: TOPSHOT - Civilians fleeing the Islamic State's group embattled holdout of Baghouz walk in a field on February 13, 2019 during an operation by the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to expel the Islamic State group from the area, in the eastern Syrian province of Deir Ezzor. - Syrian fighters backed by artillery fire from a US-led coalition battled a fierce jihadist counteroffensive as they pushed to retake a last morsel of territory from the Islamic State group in an assault lasting days. More than four years after the extremists declared a "caliphate" across large parts of Syria and neighbouring Iraq, several offensives have whittled that down to a tiny scrap of land in eastern Syria. (Photo by Delil souleiman / AFP) (Photo credit should read DELIL SOULEIMAN/AFP/Getty Images)

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ABOUT THE INSTITUTE

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ISIS'S SECOND COMEBACK: ASSESSING THE NEXT ISIS INSURGENCY

Executive Summary

The Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham (ISIS) is not defeated despite the loss of the territory it claimed as its so-called 'Caliphate' in Iraq and Syria. It is stronger today than its predecessor Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) was in 2011, when the U.S. withdrew from Iraq. AQI had around 700-1000 fighters then. ISIS had as many as 30,000 fighters in Iraq and Syria in August 2018 according to a Defense Intelligence Agency estimate. ISIS built from the small remnant left in 2011 an army large enough to recapture Fallujah, Mosul, and other cities in Iraq and dominate much of eastern Syria in only three years. It will recover much faster and to a much more dangerous level from the far larger force it still has today.

The slow-motion reduction of ISIS's territory and strength initiated by President Obama and continued by President Trump gave the group plenty of time to plan and prepare for the next phase of the war. It had a plan to recover ready before the "caliphate" fell and has been executing it during the anti-ISIS campaign conducted by the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and the U.S.-Led Anti-ISIS Coalition. ISIS deliberately withdrew and relocated many of its fighters and their families from Mosul, Raqqa, and other important cities into new and old support zones in Iraq and Syria. ISIS's forces are now dispersed across both countries and are waging a capable insurgency. ISIS retained a global finance network that funded its transition back to an insurgency and managed to preserve sufficient weapons and other supplies in tunnel systems and other support zones in order to equip its regenerated insurgent force.

ISIS began reconstituting key capabilities in late 2018 that will enable it to wage an even more aggressive insurgency in coming months. ISIS leader

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi asserted greater operational control over his forces in Iraq and Syria in June 2018 and is reconstituting command-and-control structures. ISIS is also reconstituting its capability to detonate waves of Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Devices (VBIEDs) across Iraq and Syria - the signature of its early campaigns leading up to the conquest of Fallujah and Mosul in 2014. It has already detonated VBIEDs in liberated cities including Mosul and Raqqa. ISIS also resumed standardized media releases in July 2018, indicating that it has rebuilt key media capabilities.

ISIS's insurgency will grow because areas it has lost in Iraq and Syria are still neither stable nor secure. In Iraq, ISIS has systematically eliminated village leaders and civilians who cooperated with anti-ISIS forces. Its goal is to weaken resistance and to fuel the population's distrust of the Government of Iraq. It has re-imposed taxes on local populations in its historical support zones, displacing civilians and *de facto* controlling small pockets of terrain in Iraq. In Syria, ISIS is waging a three-front insurgency against the U.S.-backed SDF, the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, and Al Qaeda's Syrian affiliate Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). Its campaign degrades governance structures and halts reconstruction efforts, contributing to the perpetuation of state failure and violence in the Syrian Civil War.

ISIS will seek to reestablish territorial control in Iraq and in Syria. It will likely succeed if the U.S. withdraws. American support on the ground in Syria coheres disparate SDF elements that would almost certainly fracture if the U.S. leaves. The U.S. presence in Eastern Syria enables vital intelligence and air operations that could not be replaced if America withdrew. It also deters Turkey from invading northeastern Syria, which would at minimum cause the SDF to pull forces away from the Middle Euphrates River Valley to defend against Turkey in the north, creating even more space in which ISIS

could re-emerge. A strong and capable SDF in eastern Syria is also necessary to prevent ISIS from using Syria as a base to fuel its campaign in Iraq.

ISIS's next breakout success could be even more devastating than its 2014 campaign. Its external provinces outside Iraq and Syria are contributing resources to its insurgency in those countries while giving the organization renewed global momentum. ISIS declared the start of a new global campaign called the 'Battle of Attrition' on May 31, 2019. Its propaganda instructed its forces to seize terrain temporarily as a way to attrit their opponents. ISIS's ability to campaign simultaneously abroad and in Iraq and Syria gives it new opportunities. Its successful reconstitution of a physical caliphate in Iraq and Syria would produce new waves of ISIS attacks in Europe and dangerously legitimize ISIS's narrative of inevitable long-term victory.

The U.S. is repeating a critical mistake by deprioritizing this effort at a pivotal moment when our gains are at their most fragile. The U.S. must take immediate steps to dampen ISIS's resurgence in Iraq and Syria, including halting and reversing America's ongoing withdrawal from Syria. More American support to the SDF will be necessary. American partners and allies should contribute, but it must recognize that it is the only country with both the ability and moral clarity to lead this effort. The U.S.

should also prioritize and expand humanitarian aid operations to help dampen the appeal of ISIS, especially among the large traumatized underage population living in displacement camps across the Middle East. These actions can help reduce the rate and scale of ISIS's regrowth and provide the U.S. the time required to develop a more robust strategy truly to defeat ISIS and establish the conditions that will prevent another reconstitution.

Turkey will oppose increased American support to the SDF. The U.S. should focus its efforts on increasing the strength and capability of Arab SDF elements, which do not threaten Turkey as much as the Kurdish elements. Supporting these Arab groups will enable the U.S. to better combat ISIS's insurgency, which is strongest in Arab areas,

and will also decrease the SDF's overall reliance on the Kurdish forces that Turkey opposes. The U.S. should condition increased support to the SDF on reforms of its behavior to ensure that it represents both Arabs and Kurds regardless of whether or not they support the political ideology of the SDF. These steps alone will not appease Turkey but they can reduce the likelihood that continued American efforts to find a durable resolution to the problem of ISIS in Iraq and Syria lead to increased tensions and the risk of conflict.

As of June 2019, ISIS likely has the capability to seize another major urban center in Iraq or Syria. It has chosen instead to pursue political and security conditions that will enable it to seize and hold larger and potentially more enduring pieces of territory in the future.

Introduction

In March 2019, the Trump Administration announced the territorial defeat of the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham (ISIS) after a five-year campaign involving some of the worst urban combat since World War II.¹ Tens of thousands of Iraqi and Syrian fighters died liberating ISIS's captive population, which paid far greater costs, yet ISIS continued to conduct devastating complex attacks around the globe and in liberated areas.² These attacks were not a sign of desperation. They instead reflected a sophisticated defensive strategy that ISIS pursued after the U.S. intervened in 2014. ISIS campaigned to prevent the strategic defeat of its caliphate, leveraging its strengths as a hybrid military force to set conditions for a renewed insurgency that is now underway.

The U.S. intelligence community assesses that ISIS will attempt to resurge, but there is little consensus on its trajectory or timeline. In May 2019, the Office of the Inspector General (OIG) of the U.S. Department of Defense reported that it received “differing opinions on the level of ISIS activity” from the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) and the fielded Combined Joint Task Force - Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR).³ CJTF-OIR claimed that ISIS “activity is significantly reduced” compared to 2018, while the DIA disagreed with this characterization in Iraq. The disagreement reflects an enduring divergence in how these organizations evaluate the ISIS threat. The DIA estimated in July 2018 that ISIS retains up to 30,000 fighters in Iraq and Syria, while CJTF-OIR assessed ISIS to be down to 1,000 fighters in December 2017.⁴

There is similar debate among experts. ISIS has continued to conduct spectacular attacks abroad, most recently on Easter Sunday 2019 in Sri Lanka.

ISIS also created multiple new *wilayats* (provinces) in locations outside of Iraq and Syria in 2019, including Central Africa and India.⁵ Policymakers and academics have disagreed for years about whether these global actions reflect opportunism or successful campaign design. Some, such as then-U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, have argued that ISIS's global operations are the “desperate actions of an enemy that sees the noose closing around them.”⁶ Others have warned that ISIS's global campaign demonstrates its sophisticated strategy and unbroken resolve.⁷

The U.S. underestimated how ISIS's hybrid style of warfare would enable it to adapt to military pressure and avoid defeat even if it lost terrain.

The Institute for the Study of War (ISW) assesses that ISIS survives as a professional global military organization. Its supporters continue to view it as legitimate and capable despite the loss of its physical caliphate. It is already resurging in Iraq and Syria. This report examines how ISIS launched a new insurgency after evading defeat.

Defining “Defeat”

The U.S. Army defines “defeat” as the moment “when an enemy force has temporarily or permanently lost the physical means or the will to fight” against its adversaries.⁸ ISIS is a difficult enemy to defeat. ISIS’s core cadre will always retain the will to fight because its identity and objectives stem from religious belief.⁹ The U.S. must therefore defeat ISIS by eliminating its physical means to fight. ISIS is composed of many local armed elements that pledged allegiance to it. One approach to eliminating ISIS’s physical means is to disaggregate the ISIS military force and then work with local partners to defeat the component parts.

ISIS, however, uses many different means to fight. ISW described ISIS in March 2015 as a “formal structured organization that plans at multiple levels of war in a conventional sense and elects at times, sometimes simultaneously, to employ multiple styles of warfare as specialized and combined means.”¹⁰ These styles of warfare include conventional maneuver warfare: attacking enemy forces directly to destroy military threats and seize terrain; guerrilla warfare: small-unit irregular attacks on enemy forces to degrade their combat effectiveness and morale, disrupt their operations, and mobilize additional guerilla forces; and terrorism: spectacular attacks against civilian targets to intimidate and inspire fear.¹¹ ISIS chooses among these means and combines them not only as its capabilities change, but also as battlefield conditions change. Its varied modes of warfare improve its organizational flexibility and resilience. The erosion of its physical means to fight one style of warfare does not necessarily render it combat-incapable or defeated.

ISIS’s historical experience of defeat also adds to its resilience. The U.S. surge in Iraq from 2007-2009 effectively defeated its predecessor Al Qaeda

in Iraq (AQI). AQI fighters who lived through this period derived key lessons about how to survive and recover from catastrophic losses. AQI’s rapid regrowth as ISIS and conquest of large parts of Iraq and Syria in 2012-2014 demonstrate that the organization successfully applied many of these lessons learned. ISIS maintains expertise in how to regenerate key capabilities after defeat, which amounts to a doctrine or blueprint for recovering from losses. Thus, to defeat ISIS, the U.S. must not only render it physically unable to fight as a conventional force, but also deny it the ability to wage unconventional warfare and terrorism in ways that will enable its reconstitution.

The U.S. sought to defeat ISIS as a proto-state in Iraq and Syria.¹² Its strategy rested upon the assessment that ISIS would continue to fight for long enough as a conventional force (a “terrorist army”) for CJTF-OIR to destroy its forces, seize its terrain, and thereby defeat its organization. The U.S. Department of Defense consequently cited square kilometers of terrain as the key indicator of progress against ISIS in Iraq and Syria.¹³ The U.S. and its coalition partners disrupted ISIS’s organization and degraded its military force with overwhelming firepower, but did not eliminate its physical ability to fight. This was partly because it responded with an intelligent strategy that prioritized setting conditions for reconstitution over retaining physical control. The U.S. underestimated how ISIS’s hybrid style of warfare would enable it to adapt to military pressure and avoid defeat even if it lost terrain.

America's Intervention: A Problem for ISIS

ISIS defined itself as an organization on the offensive. It sought to provoke an apocalyptic war against the West that it believed would fulfill Islamic prophecy.¹⁴ Its strategic framework aimed to achieve this goal through simultaneous and mutually reinforcing local and global campaigns.¹⁵ ISIS adopted the slogan “remain and expand” shortly after its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, declared the caliphate at the start of Ramadan in July 2014.¹⁶ The slogan reflects the organization's equal emphasis on physical control and territorial expansion. ISIS expected to fight for generations. Then-ISIS spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani stressed in September 2014 that “If we do not reach [Rome] ... then our children and grandchildren will reach it.”¹⁷ ISIS invested heavily in indoctrinating children in Iraq and Syria in order to raise a new generation of fighters and prepare for the next phase of its generational war.¹⁸

ISIS also intended to provoke retaliation against Muslims in the West, though it may not have anticipated the speed or scale of the global intervention in Iraq and Syria. Baghdadi proclaimed in January 2014 that ISIS was “waiting” and would soon force a “direct confrontation” with America.¹⁹ The first publicly known ISIS attack cell reached Europe the same month, launching its global campaign a full six months before the fall of Mosul in June 2014.²⁰ ISIS continued to provoke the West as it rampaged across Iraq and Syria, releasing videos depicting the execution of Western hostages starting in August 2014.²¹

The U.S.-led intervention suited ISIS politically because it enabled the organization to reinforce its claim to be the defender of Sunni populations. ISIS exploited the popular uprisings of the Arab Spring to position itself on the side of Sunni Arabs against the repressive governments of Iraq and Syria.²² In November 2014, Baghdadi framed the U.S.-led intervention as an unjustified effort to repress Muslims by “Crusaders” and “Jews” who “fear the return of the [caliphate].”²³ Adnani further claimed

in November 2014 that the U.S. had allied with Iran and Syria against Sunnis.²⁴ ISIS justified its (pre-planned) attack campaign in Europe as a defensive response to U.S. intervention in Iraq and Syria. This resonated with its target audience abroad and helped ignite a campaign of inspired attacks across Europe, in which ISIS's supporters conducted attacks on its behalf without receiving direct support.²⁵

The U.S.-led intervention still posed a serious challenge to ISIS, however. The U.S. began enabling major ground operations against ISIS in Iraq and Syria in December 2014 after beginning airstrikes in August of that year.²⁶ The Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) broke the five-month ISIS siege of Kobani on the Syrian-Turkish border on January 26, 2015, defeating a substantial ISIS force with U.S. air support.²⁷ The Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) then seized Tikrit, Iraq on April 1.²⁸ These battles marked a turning point. Coalition forces had halted the ISIS expansion and begun to reverse the organization's urban gains. ISIS conducted a capable counteroffensive (see below) but was largely unable to seize and hold new urban centers after April 2015.

The U.S.-led intervention also threatened ISIS's religious legitimacy. To succeed, ISIS must credibly be able to claim that its caliphate exists and is expanding, with no legitimate competitors.²⁹ The U.S. set out to destroy the physical caliphate, threatening ISIS's ability to claim it was both “remaining and expanding,” as asserted in the slogan.³⁰ Washington simultaneously supported efforts to discredit ISIS religious claims, championing countervailing messages by clerics in Saudi Arabia and Egypt, including the leading Sunni Islamic university in Cairo, Al Azhar.³¹ The U.S. also launched a joint media center with the United Arab Emirates to undermine ISIS propaganda on social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook.³²

Initially, U.S. political objectives attempted to create viable alternatives to ISIS, threatening to destroy its appeal in Iraq and Syria. Then-U.S. president Barack Obama expressed a desire in 2016 to “address the larger forces that have allowed these terrorists to gain traction” through “inclusive governance” in Iraq and a “political process ... and

transition away from [Syrian President Bashar al-] Assad” in Syria.³³ It would later become clear that the intervention would not lead to establishment of these credible and representative governments, but this was not initially apparent. These pressures forced ISIS to adapt.

ISIS Evades Defeat, 2015–2019

By April 2015 ISIS recalibrated its strategy, anticipating substantial military losses after the U.S. and its coalition partners began to seize terrain. It pivoted away from offensive maneuver towards a defensive campaign that sought to blunt the effect of coalition operations and decrease the scope and scale of the reconstitution it would need to undertake to transition back to an insurgency. ISW characterizes this campaign as “evading defeat.” ISIS’s strategic objectives during this campaign were to deny a political victory to the anti-ISIS coalition; prevent the re-establishment of viable alternative governments; and deny rival jihadist groups an opportunity to unseat ISIS.

ISIS’s operational objectives included to destroy key Sunni Arab cities under its control, to impose high costs on counter-ISIS forces, and to retain psychological control over civilian populations as long as possible. ISIS waged five major lines of effort in pursuit of these goals: (1) seize new cities outside of Iraq and Syria; (2) increase global terror attacks; (3) conduct fortified defense of key cities in Iraq and Syria (4) attrit counter-ISIS forces, and (5) undermine religious rivals. This paper provides an overview of ISIS’s major lines of effort rather than an exhaustive accounting of all its military activities.

Seize New Cities Abroad

ISIS perceives expansion of its caliphate as a religious imperative and a key strategic method to stoke the disorder that enables further expansion. ISIS was aggressively pursuing regional expansion when the U.S. began intervening in Iraq and Syria in

August 2014.³⁴ In November of that year, Baghdadi announced official *wilayats* in Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and Algeria.³⁵ ISIS used continued global expansion to offset its losses in Iraq and Syria in 2015, seizing a zone of control in Eastern Afghanistan in May and the Libyan city of Sirte in June of that year.³⁶ It framed its operations abroad as equivalent to those in Iraq and Syria. Adnani emphasized these gains in June 2015, stressing that ISIS might “lose cities and areas but they are never defeated” and assuring followers that “if you lose land then you will regain it and more.”³⁷

ISIS simultaneously pivoted to a form of zone defense in its core terrain by seizing Ramadi, Iraq and Palmyra, Syria in May 2015. Its temporary capture of these cities signaled its continued military strength at a critical moment when it had begun losing terrain. Its operations also disrupted and redirected its adversaries in both countries to create time and space for it to prepare defenses elsewhere in Iraq and Syria.³⁸ By February 2016 the government of Iraq had recaptured Ramadi, and by March 2017, Palmyra was back under Assad regime control after multiple battles for the city.³⁹

ISIS failed to retain its territorial gains in Libya and Afghanistan in 2015. The U.S. conducted an airstrike campaign in Libya starting in August 2016 to enable a counteroffensive by local forces, which recaptured Sirte in December 2016.⁴⁰ The Taliban displaced ISIS from much of its stronghold in Nangarhar and another stronghold in Farah Province by January 2016.⁴¹ ISIS’s temporary successes nonetheless helped insulate it from the effect

of initial losses in Iraq and Syria and seeded networks that have endured in North Africa and Central Asia. In Libya, ISIS retreated to safe havens in the south of the country and began attacks again in late 2017.⁴² In Afghanistan, it retained attack networks in the east of the country and in Kabul. The UN found that ISIS's affiliate in Afghanistan (named "*Wilayat Khorasan*" by ISIS) was responsible for most of the civilian casualties from complex attacks in Afghanistan in the first half of 2018.⁴³ ISIS retains support zones in Nangarhar and Kunar Provinces.⁴⁴

ISIS continued to pursue additional land grabs in other parts of the globe. It achieved its next major success in the Philippines in May 2017 when its fighters seized Marawi, located in the country's south, three days before the start of Ramadan.⁴⁵ ISIS had reportedly wired tens of thousands of dollars from Syria to the Philippines in 2016, probably to enable the attack on Marawi.⁴⁶ The operation drew significant numbers of foreign fighters to the Philippines and propelled the ISIS expansion in Southeast Asia.⁴⁷ The group would ultimately lose control of Marawi, but its temporary seizure of the city again demonstrated to its followers that it could continue to expand and claim terrain despite its losses in Iraq and Syria.

Increase Global Terror Attacks

ISIS continued to allocate resources to its global campaign of terrorist attacks in order to support its narrative of momentum and demonstrate resilience to its followers. Its attacks mobilized and inspired supporters around the world. ISIS sought to trigger domestic crackdowns on Muslims in Europe and thereby fuel a cycle of violence that would polarize the West. The organization articulated this vision in February 2015 in the seventh issue of its English-language magazine, *Dabiq*, in "The Extinction of the Grayzone," which detailed its goal to drive a wedge between Muslims and the West. The article stressed that "Muslims in [the West] will find themselves driven to abandon their homes for a place to live in the [caliphate], as the Crusaders increase persecution against Muslims."⁴⁸

ISIS surged its global operations each year during Ramadan, demonstrating its resilience despite the loss of major urban centers such as Mosul, Iraq and Raqqa, Syria in 2017.⁴⁹ In December 2017, Russian authorities—with U.S. assistance—thwarted a major ISIS suicide plot against the Kazansky Cathedral and other targets in St. Petersburg, a prominent example of persistent ISIS efforts to expand the attack campaign to new countries.

ISIS began to leverage its *wilayats* abroad to support its global attacks and absorb foreign fighters who could not reach Iraq and Syria. Operatives in Pakistan, Canada, and the Philippines plotted a major coordinated attack in New York City in 2016 with approval from ISIS Wilayat Khorasan.⁵⁰ U.S. and British officials have stated that ISIS fighters in Afghanistan are communicating with attack cells in the West and conducting "practice runs" in Afghanistan for attacks in Europe.⁵¹ In May 2017, ISIS in Libya enabled an attack against a concert in Great Britain.⁵²

By cultivating its ability to launch attacks from its *wilayats* abroad, ISIS provided redundancy to its global attack network, making it less vulnerable to U.S.-led efforts to dismantle its external operations wing in Iraq and Syria. It also made its external provinces a destination for fighters seeking to join the caliphate. As early as March 2015, Adnani repeatedly called for Muslims to emigrate to other "provinces" abroad including Yemen, the Arabian Peninsula, Afghanistan, and West Africa.⁵³ This global footprint ensured that ISIS could survive its territorial defeats in Iraq and Syria.

These ISIS efforts inspired sympathizers to continue attacks, despite the group's losses in Iraq and Syria. ISIS diversified its definition of the "fight" to encourage different forms of participation from supporters. For example, in April 2017, in the eighth issue of its magazine *Rumiyah*, it called for sympathizers to target the economic resources of the West, stressing that "any attack on the non-believers, including that which is financial, is jihad."⁵⁴ The rate of attacks continued to increase, in keeping with its calls for lone jihad.⁵⁵ In December 2017 Lora Shiao, then-director of intelligence at the



ABOVE: ISIS tallied 38 claimed “security operations” in 19 countries between October 2016 and September 2017 in Al-Naba #106, released on November 17, 2017. (Credit: SITE) “IS Details Year of Attacks Outside of Its Provinces in Naba #106 Infographic,” SITE Intelligence Group, November 17, 2017, https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/images/2017/11/11-17_naba_graph.jpg.

U.S. National Counterterrorism Center, stated that ISIS losses had not “translated into a corresponding reduction in its ability to inspire attacks” because of its “unprecedented” effort to “reach sympathizers around the world.”⁵⁶

Conduct Fortified Defense of Key Cities in Iraq and Syria

ISIS waged a layered defense of its urban terrain that included both fortified and area defensive tactics. It aimed to ensure that its opponents would acquire cities so destroyed and societies so fragmented that credible alternative governance would be all but impossible.⁵⁷

ISW warned in March 2015 that ISIS could choose to render the cities under its control uninhabitable in order to deny them to its rivals in Iraq and Syria.⁵⁸ ISIS focused this effort on the urban centers of Raqqa in Syria and Mosul, Ramadi, and Fallujah in Iraq—all major cities whose destruction would perpetuate the alienation of vulnerable Sunnis and thereby preserve ISIS inroads.⁵⁹ The group rightly calculated that its opponents would not commit the resources necessary to rebuild these cities.

ISIS first demonstrated this strategy in how it described its failed campaign to seize Kobani in Northern Syria. ISIS expended thousands of fighters in its siege of the city from September 2014 to January 2015.⁶⁰ Adnani described the operation as a success despite ISIS’s failure to seize the city. He congratulated the “Crusaders for the heap of rubble in Kobani” and vowing that ISIS “may lose a battle or a city or an area, but they are never defeated ... the aftermath and the victory is always for them.”⁶¹

ISIS enabled this campaign by harnessing the destructive firepower of the U.S. in Iraq and Syria.⁶² For instance, the organization fought a capable and layered defense of Mosul that CJTF-OIR commander Lt. Gen. Stephen Townsend described as the “most significant urban battle since World War II.”⁶³ ISIS mounted a similar grueling defense in Syria. The U.S. Department of Defense stated in February 2018 that the artillery battalion supporting coalition partner forces in Northern Syria had fired more rounds than any battalion since the Vietnam War.⁶⁴ The fighting ultimately damaged or destroyed 65 percent of the housing in Mosul’s Old City and rendered uninhabitable over 80 percent of Raqqa.⁶⁵

ISIS deliberately used civilians as cover and protection, driving up the human cost of clearing operations. It forced civilians to congregate in urban centers, prevented them from fleeing by mining exit routes and welding doors,⁶⁶ and executed civilians who attempted to flee nonetheless.⁶⁷ According to Lt. Gen. Townsend, ISIS killed civilians “by the hundreds” as they attempted to escape Mosul in June 2017.⁶⁸ The full scale of violence remains unknown. Hundreds of bodies remain scattered in the rubble

in Mosul and Raqqa as of April 2019.⁶⁹ ISIS used these deaths to claim (falsely) that the U.S. had come to punish Sunnis rather than liberate them from the oppressive governments of Iraq and Syria.⁷⁰

ISIS also extensively mined cities in order to destroy infrastructure and ensure that the cities would remain uninhabitable long after their recapture. It also ruined critical service infrastructure to deny access to basic utilities and planted explosives in the homes of civilians who fled to punish them upon their return.⁷¹ Examples of this sinister creativity include improvised explosive devices (IEDs) wired to light switches, corpses, children's toys, and cookware.⁷² The U.S. State Department's Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement estimated that it could take over a decade to demine Mosul.⁷³

ISIS's deliberate destruction of Mosul extended to the Great Mosque of Al-Nuri, where Baghdadi had proclaimed the caliphate on the first day of Ramadan in 2014. ISIS destroyed the mosque

with IEDs in advance of clearing operations by the ISF⁷⁴ and blamed the explosion on its opponents in an attempt to fuel Sunni religious outrage. The blast left a symbolic hole at the heart of Mosul and diverted critical reconstruction funds away from basic services.⁷⁵ It also ensured that no competing religious actor could use the symbolic location to challenge ISIS in the near term.

In the Philippines in 2017, ISIS repeated its tactic of destroying cities. It defended Marawi for five months with tactics similar to those it used in urban battles in Iraq and Syria, including extensive use of snipers and IEDs that drew heavy artillery fire and airstrikes from the Armed Forces of the Philippines.⁷⁶ ISIS covered the battle extensively in its official propaganda, including the front pages of *Rumiyah*.⁷⁷ The battle damaged over 95 percent of the buildings in central Marawi,⁷⁸ while the destruction further alienated minority Sunnis from the Philippine government, which declared much of the city a military reservation after the battle.⁷⁹



ABOVE: The destroyed Grand al-Nuri Mosque in the Old City of Mosul, Iraq. August 7, 2017. REUTERS / Suhaib Salem
TPX IMAGES OF THE DAY

Attrit Counter-ISIS Forces

ISIS also designed its urban defenses to degrade its adversaries' military capabilities. The elite Iraqi Counter-Terrorism Service (CTS) sustained casualty rates of up to 50-60 percent in the Battle for Mosul.⁸⁰ The Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga suffered at least 2,000 casualties and the ISF at least 10,000 during the campaign against ISIS in Iraq.⁸¹ The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the primary U.S. ground partner in Syria, reported at least 11,000 killed and 21,000 wounded during the anti-ISIS campaign in that country.⁸² The high number of casualties ensured that the local balance of power would not shift away from ISIS, despite its loss of physical territory in Iraq and Syria.

ISIS, in its propaganda, replaced territorial control with the attrition of its adversaries as a key measure of effectiveness. Its ability to demonstrate that it could continue large-scale fighting, even if it was no longer seizing and holding terrain, helped ensure the continued resonance of its apocalyptic narrative. Adnani first used this framing in March 2015 after the failed ISIS attempt to seize Kobani, emphasizing that the U.S. and SDF reclaimed the town only “after four months of hemorrhaging seventy percent of the capabilities of your aircraft, battleships, and forces.”⁸³ ISIS began to release large infographics through its media outlets detailing the costs it claimed to inflict on its enemies.⁸⁴ It featured similar infographics in ten out of thirteen issues of *Rumiyah*, which was published monthly from September 2016 to September 2017. The shift in messaging allowed its audience—both fighters in Iraq and Syria as well as ISIS fighters in other countries and supporters watching from afar—to take pride in its combat effectiveness, despite its losses of terrain.

Undermine Religious Rivals

ISIS sought to undermine religious rivals that could gain from its loss of territory and prestige, particularly Al Qaeda and Saudi Arabia. Al Qaeda was positioning itself to reclaim leadership of the global Salafi-jihadist movement as ISIS began to lose terrain in Iraq and Syria, and ISIS thus acted to

attract groups from Al Qaeda's network to demonstrate its continued ascendance over Al Qaeda.⁸⁵ ISIS won defections from members of the Caucasus Emirate in Russia, Boko Haram in Nigeria, and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan in 2015.⁸⁶ It also attempted to coopt Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb in December 2014.⁸⁷ The local groups that defected to ISIS likely did so in part to gain local prestige by associating with the ISIS brand. These defections only marginally affected Al Qaeda's global activity but did contribute to the perception that ISIS was out-competing Al Qaeda globally.⁸⁸ Nonetheless, Al Qaeda retained a capable affiliate in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra—now Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, or HTS—which gained momentum while ISIS lost ground in Syria.⁸⁹ ISIS intensified its operations against this affiliate in Western Syria in mid-2017, as this report will detail.

ISIS also focused on delegitimizing religious opposition from Saudi Arabia. In December 2015, Baghdadi called for Muslims to “rise against the family of Saloul [Saud], the apostate tyrants,” and the “falsely-called Islamic” kingdom of Saudi Arabia.⁹⁰ Later, in August 2018, he claimed in a video that Saudi Arabia was trying to secularize its inhabitants and ultimately destroy Islam with social reforms to “Westernize and Germanize” Muslims.⁹¹ ISIS conducted multiple successful attacks in Saudi Arabia, most notably a suicide vest (SVEST) attack that killed four security guards in the parking lot of Medina's Mosque of the Prophet in July 2016, on the second-to-last day of Ramadan.⁹² The attack challenged the religious legitimacy of the Saudis as the custodian of the two holy mosques.

Outcome

ISIS's strategy to evade defeat was largely successful from April 2015 to October 2017. It failed to hold cities abroad, but its temporary seizure of multiple urban centers invigorated its forces and stoked the enthusiasm of its recruiting base. ISIS accomplished some of its core political and military objectives in Iraq by denying to the government control of functioning cities in Ramadi, Fallujah, and Mosul while severely degrading the ISF.

It also succeeded in driving a wedge between Syrian Kurds and Arabs across Northern Syria. The U.S. relied on the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) to wage the fight against ISIS in Syria, which alienated the majority Sunni Arab population. The YPG is a branch of the secular and leftist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which has waged a long separatist insurgency against Turkey.⁹³ Its political goals are anathema to local Arabs in Syria. The YPG provoked significant local resentment in one notable example by raising a massive banner of PKK founder Abdallah Ocalan in downtown Raqqa after its liberation from ISIS in October 2017.⁹⁴ The YPG has also committed ethnic cleansing and other abuses against Arabs in Northern Syria.⁹⁵ ISIS thus possessed an enduring opportunity to position itself as the true defender of oppressed Sunni Arabs across Northern and Eastern Syria.

The ISIS campaign to evade defeat continued after Raqqa, but it had achieved its most important successes by late 2017. A subsequent section of this report will detail the group's final operations to defend a zone of control along the Middle Euphrates River Valley, which lasted until March 2019.



ABOVE: *The Syrian Kurdish Women's Protection Units (YPJ) raise a banner of PKK Founder Abdullah Ocalan in Central Raqqa City in October 2017. Defence Units, Twitter, October 18, 2017, <https://twitter.com/DefenceUnits/status/920979562720321537>*

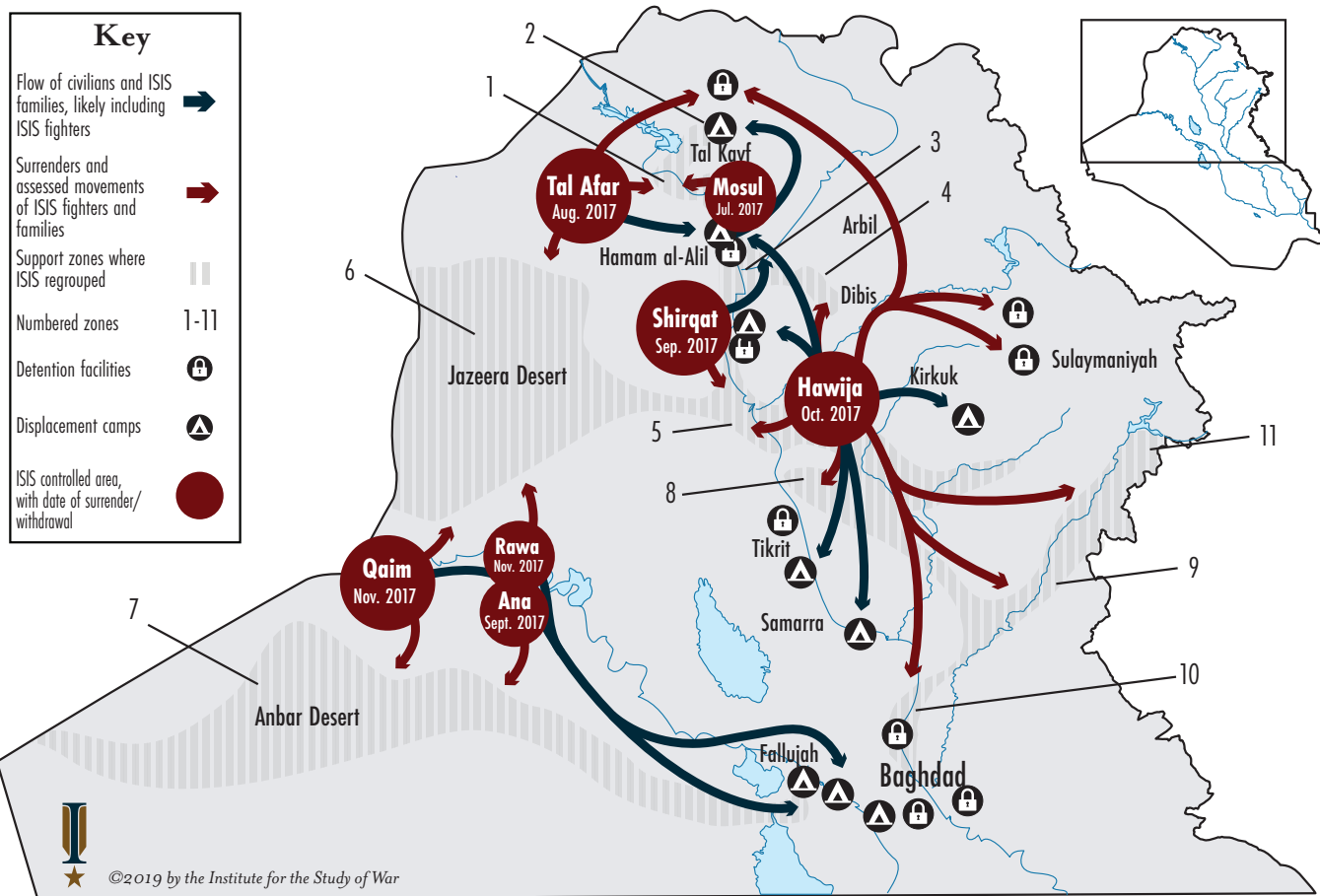
Transitioning Back to Insurgency

ISIS began a staggered transition back to an insurgency from May 2017 to February 2018, dissolving large portions of its existing structure and dispersing its forces and committed supporters. It accelerated CJTF-OIR's pivot from Iraq to Syria after the Battle for Mosul by ceding its remaining territory in Iraq and conducted a similar transition in much of Western Syria before the start of the Battle for

Raqqa in June 2017. In doing so, ISIS sidestepped the CJTF-OIR's momentum against its territorial strongholds in order to set conditions elsewhere on the battlefield to support its return to the offensive. Much of ISIS's force escaped from the zone of U.S.-led operations to seed a new insurgency elsewhere.

To accomplish this transition, ISIS fighters and their families in numerous key cities in Iraq and

ISW ISIS Forces Disperse in Iraq - July to December 2017



Graphic by Brandon Wallace and Jason Zhou

- | | | | | | |
|---------------------|------------------------|-------------------|---------------------|----------------------------|----------------------|
| 1. Badush Mountains | 3. Tigris River Valley | 5. Zaab Triangle | 7. Anbar Desert | 9. Diyala River Valley | 11. Zagros Mountains |
| 2. Tel Kayf | 4. Makhmour Mountains | 6. Jazeera Desert | 8. Hamrin Mountains | 10. Northern Baghdad Belts | |

* This map does not account for the movement of all individuals in Iraq and only shows major displacement camps and detention facilities relevant to campaigns by or against ISIS undertaken during the addressed time period. This map also does not display the full extent of ISIS's support zones during the addressed time period.

Syria dispersed through surrenders and withdrawals, rather than fighting opposing forces. ISIS notably did not force civilians to stay in its remaining territorial holdings in Iraq, indicating its intent to exploit civilian flight rather than continuing its layered defensive campaign. The pattern of these dispersals shows that ISIS deliberately planted fighters and ideologically committed supporters across both Iraq and Syria.

Iraq

ISIS likely began setting conditions for its transition by shifting fighters out of Mosul before its recapture in July 2017. The U.S. and ISF encircled and isolated Mosul but did not prevent the escape of ISIS fighters through an extensive network of tunnels.⁹⁶ One commander in the Iraqi CTS stressed that “it’s like we are fighting two wars in two cities ... there’s the war on the streets and there is a whole city underground.”⁹⁷ These fighters likely went to ground near Mosul; regrouped in Tel Afar in Iraq or the Middle Euphrates River Valley in Syria; or relocated to Hawija, Iraq.⁹⁸

Shortly thereafter, ISIS began dispersing forces from its remaining control zones to transition to a new insurgency in Iraq. At least 500 ISIS fighters and 1,400 civilians left Tel Afar, west of Mosul, to surrender to the Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga from August 29–31.⁹⁹ More ISIS fighters slipped away with the 42,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) who fled Tel Afar from May–August 2017.¹⁰⁰ ISIS repeated this practice in its other strongholds in Northern Iraq. “Hundreds” of ISIS fighters reportedly evacuated their positions near Shirqat, south of Mosul, in September 2017.¹⁰¹ ISIS ordered its local commanders to evacuate Hawija, in Southern Kirkuk Province, in June 2017.¹⁰² Approximately 1,000 ISIS fighters and 7,000 civilians later surrendered to the Peshmerga in Hawija under orders from the ISIS *wali* (governor) of Hawija.¹⁰³ Others blended with the civilian population there or withdrew to nearby safe havens, including the Makhmour and Hamrin Mountains. Additional ISIS fighters and family members likely blended with the displaced population that relocated farther into Kirkuk Province or traveled to Salah ad-Din and Diyala Provinces.¹⁰⁴

ISIS also rapidly surrendered its positions in Western Anbar Province, ceding control of three major cities within two months—September–November 2017—and retreating to the sparsely populated Jazeera Desert.¹⁰⁵ The speed of this surrender suggests that ISIS chose to disperse into insurgent cells rather than defend these areas.¹⁰⁶ ISIS fighters and families likely also blended with 60,000 IDPs who fled east down the Euphrates River Valley from Anbar Province towards Fallujah and Baghdad between January and November 2017.¹⁰⁷

ISIS’s remnant forces regrouped in eleven areas in Iraq, including remote desert, mountainous, and rural areas where it retained local support. Some ISIS forces likely also relocated to historical support zones in areas never fully cleared by the ISF:

1. **Badush Mountains.** The ISF never cleared the Badush Mountains northwest of Mosul, which likely received an influx of fighters and materiel as ISIS remnants fled Mosul in mid-2017. ISIS likely also pre-positioned weapons and other supplies in the area, including in tunnel systems. The Badush Mountains provide a base for ISIS to infiltrate Mosul City and transit northward into Iraqi Kurdistan. ISIS may have used this base to connect to IDP camps in Tel Kayf and elsewhere in Northern Ninewa Province.
2. **Tel Kayf.** Iraq has detained at least 1,400 foreign ISIS wives and their children at the Tel Kayf IDP camp north of Mosul, making it a de facto support zone for ISIS.¹⁰⁸
3. **Tigris River Valley.** The ISF has detained a number of ISIS suspects in prisons in Hammam al-Alil, Qayyarah, Shirqat, and Tikrit.¹⁰⁹ Civilians from Mosul and Tel Afar also settled in displacement camps along the Tigris River in places such as Hammam al-Alil. Civilians from Hawija also settled in displacement camps further south along the river, in Salah ad-Din Province in the Tikrit and Daur Districts.¹¹⁰ ISIS likely infiltrated these camps.
4. **Makhmour Mountains.** The Makhmour Mountains southeast of Mosul provide favorable terrain for ISIS. The area contains numerous cave and tunnel systems, where

ISIS likely pre-positioned weapons and other supplies. It also falls along a seam between the ISF and Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga and provides a base from which ISIS can project north into Iraqi Kurdistan and access IDP camps in Qayyarah and Hamam al-Alil. It can also use the area to stage operations along the Tigris River in Salah ad-Din Province.

5. **Zaab Triangle.** ISIS retained a capable local presence within the rural populated areas in the Hawija and Daquq Districts southwest of Kirkuk City. This zone also stretches into the Makhoul Mountains and the Jazeera Desert. ISIS likely pre-positioned weapons and other supplies in tunnel systems in this area before ceding control to the ISF in late 2017.¹¹¹ The organization also likely retains a presence among populations displaced from Hawija to Southern Kirkuk Province. By January 2018, Iraqi officials had forced at least 235 families suspected of ties to ISIS to resettle in the Daquq IDP camp.¹¹² ISIS has used this rural support zone to fund its operations through extortion and to stage attacks on Kirkuk City.
6. **Jazeera Desert.** ISIS has retained freedom of movement across the Jazeera Desert. It maintains staging areas there from which it can attack cities along the Tigris River. ISIS forces that withdrew from Western Anbar Province may also have relocated north into the Jazeera Desert. The group's ability to transit the desert enables it to shift resources between Iraq and Syria.
7. **Anbar Desert.** ISIS also retained freedom of movement in the Anbar Desert, south of the Euphrates River. The ISIS forces that withdrew from Western Anbar also fled south into desert safe houses. This zone provided ISIS access to existing cells and to any of its forces who may have embedded themselves in the IDP population that settled in southern Fallujah District.¹¹³
8. **Hamrin Mountains.** The Hamrin Mountains provide favorable terrain for ISIS to maintain a support zone and connect it with other support zones in Salah ad-Din and Diyala Provinces. ISIS pre-positioned weapons and

other supplies in tunnel systems in this area,¹¹⁴ and its leaders used the area to regroup.¹¹⁵ The Hamrin Mountains enable ISIS to launch attacks in areas around Tuz Khurmatu, in the disputed internal boundaries (DIBs) of Iraq.

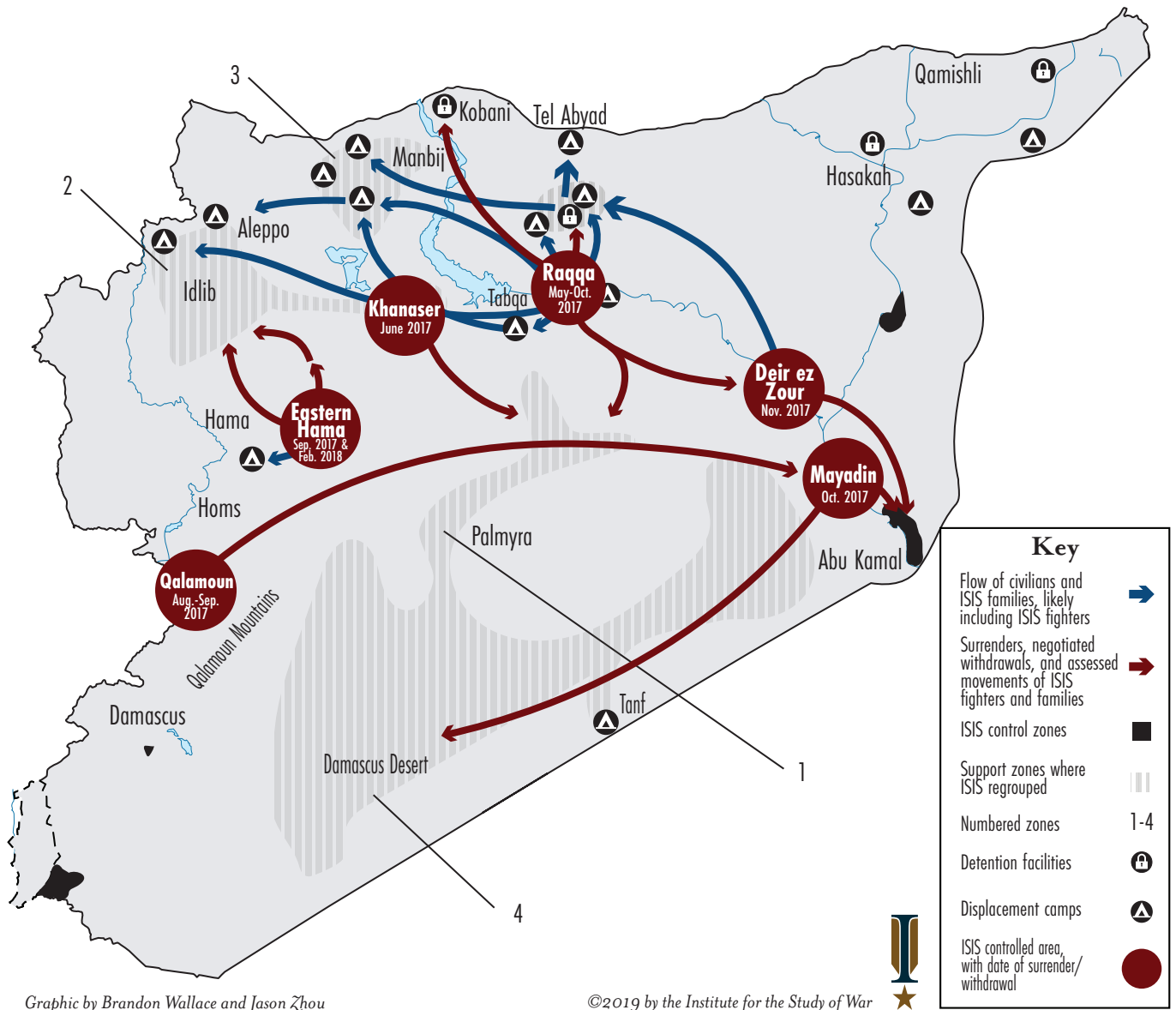
9. **Diyala River Valley.** The ISF and Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) claimed that they cleared ISIS from Diyala Province in January 2015 without U.S. support, but ISIS retained capable networks in the Diyala River Valley.¹¹⁶ ISIS has waged a slow but steady campaign of attacks from this area since 2015, exploiting the dense vegetation to conceal its forces and operate unimpeded in rural villages around Lake Hamrin. It also has a support zone in in Khanaqin District in Northern Diyala Province. ISIS reportedly transferred additional forces into Diyala Province in July 2018 from Hawija via the Hamrin Mountains.¹¹⁷
10. **Northern Baghdad Belts.** The Northern Baghdad belts provide ISIS with a safe haven to regroup, evade security forces, and threaten Baghdad. Its zone of operations includes the Tarmiyah and Taji Districts, which the ISF never fully cleared in 2015.¹¹⁸ ISIS also likely uses this zone to move between Anbar and Diyala Provinces. The ISF holds some ISIS fighters and family members in prisons near Baghdad.¹¹⁹
11. **Zagros Mountains.** ISIS quietly expanded its support zones in Iraqi Kurdistan sometime before mid-2017. It likely developed safe havens in the Zagros Mountains, which extend from Iran through northeastern Diyala Province into Iraqi Kurdistan. Iraqi Kurdish Salafi-jihadist group Ansar al-Islam largely merged with ISIS in 2014, likely providing ISIS with its networks in Iraqi Kurdistan.¹²⁰ According to Iran's Intelligence Ministry, in August 2016 ISIS fighters entered Iran from the mountains of Iraqi Kurdistan to conduct a major complex attack in Tehran in June 2017.¹²¹ Kurdish ISIS fighters likely withdrew to support zones in Iraqi Kurdistan during the ISIS dispersal across Northern Iraq. Iraqi Kurdish forces also transferred detained ISIS fighters to multiple prisons in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Syria

ISIS conducted a similar transition in Northern Syria. It decided to fight hard against the U.S. and the SDF on the eastern bank of the Euphrates River while ceding substantial territory to pro-Assad regime forces in Western and Eastern Syria. The

group also dispersed forces to seed insurgencies in multiple areas across Syria. It shifted forces to the outskirts of Idlib Province to launch an offensive against Al Qaeda in Syria and regrouped in the central Syrian Desert to prepare for future insurgent operations against the Assad regime.

ISW ISIS Forces Disperse in Syria - May 2017 to February 2018



Graphic by Brandon Wallace and Jason Zhou

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- 1. Central Syria Desert
- 2. Idlib Province
- 3. Northern Aleppo and Raqqa Provinces
- 4. Southeastern Damascus

* This map does not account for the movement of all individuals in Syria and only shows major displacement camps and detention facilities relevant to campaigns by or against ISIS undertaken during the addressed time period. This map also does not display the full extent of ISIS's support zones during the addressed time period.

ISIS evacuated its leaders, foreign fighters, and their families from Raqqa in Northern Syria in the months before the SDF attacked Raqqa in June 2017.¹²² These evacuees included members of attack cells that likely continued onward to Europe and Afghanistan via Turkey.¹²³ ISIS thus returned a number of hardened fighters to their home countries, setting conditions for the next phase of its global campaign. The organization reportedly dispersed 5,600 fighters among thirty-three countries in 2014-2017.¹²⁴

ISIS also transferred fighters and families out of Raqqa to the Middle Euphrates River Valley of Eastern Syria before June 2017.¹²⁵ It later negotiated a mass withdrawal of at least 250 fighters and 3,500 family members from Raqqa to Deir ez-Zour Province in October 2017.¹²⁶ ISIS likely also embedded cells within the 275,000 IDPs who fled Raqqa to other parts of Northern Syria between April and October 2017.¹²⁷

ISIS simultaneously evacuated besieged pockets of fighters in Western Syria through negotiated deals with Assad and his backers. Lebanese Hezbollah and the Lebanese Armed Forces allowed roughly 300 ISIS fighters and 300 family members to withdraw from the Syrian-Lebanese border to Deir ez-Zour Province in Eastern Syria in September 2017.¹²⁸ ISIS used two similar deals with the Assad regime to transfer forces from eastern Hama Province in central Syria to the outskirts of Idlib Province.¹²⁹ It evacuated a smaller pocket in southern Aleppo Province, east of Khanaser, to rural areas south of Raqqa.¹³⁰

ISIS then ceded large parts of central and Eastern Syria to Assad, Russia, and Iran in late 2017 to wage a concerted defense against the U.S. and SDF on the eastern bank of the Euphrates River. It began deliberately surrendering territory to pro-Assad regime forces in October 2017 after initially defending areas near Deir ez-Zour City against an offensive that began in August 2017.¹³¹ ISIS ceded almost all of its territorial control on the western bank of the Euphrates in a one-month period in late 2017, including Deir ez-Zour City, Mayadin, and Abu Kamal on the Syrian-Iraqi border.¹³² It

redirected forces from these cities to reinforce its control zone on the eastern bank of the Euphrates. The group nonetheless reserved sufficient capabilities to prepare for future insurgent operations against the Assad regime.

ISIS also laid the groundwork for a new support zone in the Syrian desert southeast of Damascus. It reportedly deployed a detachment of fighters from Deir ez-Zour Province through central Syria to rural Damascus Province in late 2017.¹³³ These fighters used logistics routes that passed close to the Syrian-Jordanian border and the base maintained by CJTF-OIR at Al-Tanf Border Crossing.¹³⁴

ISIS's dispersed forces regrouped in four support zones from roughly June 2017 to February 2018.

1. **Central Syrian desert.** ISIS regrouped in the central Syrian desert west of the Euphrates River. The area features large swaths of ungoverned territory as well as mountainous regions that broadly provide transit routes between Western and Eastern Syria. It also includes tunnel networks and industrial areas near the oil fields of southern Deir ez-Zour Province. The territory positions ISIS to attack oil facilities and military positions held by the Assad regime in Central and Eastern Syria.
2. **Idlib Province.** ISIS established a rural support zone on the outskirts of Al Qaeda-dominated Idlib Province in Northern Syria. This zone allows ISIS to disrupt pro-Assad regime supply lines to Aleppo City and provides a base from which the group can transit to Turkey and the central Syrian desert. ISIS also likely embedded its fighters among the IDP population that reached settlements in Idlib Province.¹³⁵
3. **Northern Aleppo and Raqqa Provinces.** ISIS probably embedded fighters among the IDPs who fled Raqqa for displacement camps in northern Aleppo and Raqqa Provinces. These cells will likely provide the networked basis for future insurgent attacks in Northern Syria.¹³⁶ This presence may enable ISIS to attack in areas held by Turkey as well as Al Qaeda-dominated Idlib Province.¹³⁷ The SDF transferred detained ISIS fighters to prisons in Ayn Issa and Kobani.¹³⁸

4. **Southeastern Damascus.** ISIS retains a safe haven in the complex web of natural caves and tunnels in the volcanic Al-Safa region.¹³⁹ This zone also includes the Rukban IDP camp on the Syrian-Jordanian border. This support zone positions ISIS to infiltrate Jordan and attack the U.S. in Al-Tanf. It also provides a staging

area for attacks against pro-Assad regime forces in Southern Syria.

ISIS at that time also retained four control zones in Syria: on the eastern bank of the Euphrates River in Deir ez-Zour Province; the Khabur River in southern Hasaka Province; the southern suburbs of Damascus; and the Golan Heights, in Dera'a and Quneitra Provinces.

The Coalition Loses Focus in Iraq

After Mosul and Raqqa were recaptured, the U.S. Department of Defense issued public statements that conveyed a level of success at odds with ISIS's transition to a new insurgency in Iraq and Syria. In October 2017 Lt. Gen. Paul Funk, then serving as CJTF-OIR commander, stated that the ISIS surrender signaled that "they're giving up ... [and] their leaders are abandoning them."¹⁴⁰ Then-secretary of defense James Mattis similarly asserted that "the caliphate is on the run, we're breaking them."¹⁴¹ These statements, though rhetorical, led to a misplaced sense of victory against ISIS.

The U.S. later began to recognize its error. Then-secretary of homeland security Kirstjen Nielsen noted in February 2018 that ISIS fighters in Syria were "going underground, dispersing to other safe havens, including on the internet, and returning to their home countries."¹⁴² U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) Commander General Joseph Votel testified in March 2019 that ISIS made a "calculated decision to preserve the safety of their families and ... their capabilities by taking their chances in camps for internally displaced persons, and going to ground in remote areas and waiting for the right time to resurge."¹⁴³

The government of Iraq, meanwhile, refocused its attention on internal politics after regaining Mosul. In September 2017 the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) held a referendum on independence, ignoring strong warnings from the U.S.

and Baghdad. The government of Iraq retaliated by seizing Kirkuk City and a number of other key locations along the DIBs between Kurdish and Arab Iraq in October 2017.¹⁴⁴ The crisis disrupted coordination between the Peshmerga and ISF and created security gaps that granted ISIS additional freedom of movement along the DIBs.¹⁴⁵ It also required the U.S. to expend diplomatic efforts to mitigate the risks of further escalation between the KRG and Baghdad, taking critical focus off the political challenges associated with post-ISIS stabilization.

Iraq's May 2018 parliamentary election drew the country's focus further from the fight against ISIS. Haider al-Abadi, then serving as Iraq's prime minister, announced the final defeat of ISIS in Iraq on December 9, 2017, after the ISF seized the last city held by ISIS in Anbar Province.¹⁴⁶ The statement marked the end of his prioritization of military operations and the start of his election strategy leveraging the successes against ISIS. Political maneuvering over the election began in earnest by January 2018.¹⁴⁷ The election ultimately resulted in a deadlock that took further political and diplomatic attention away from ISIS.¹⁴⁸ Instability in Basra and Southern Iraq exacerbated this problem in mid-2018 and drew military forces southward, away from the stabilization of recaptured areas.¹⁴⁹ These challenges prevented Iraq and, by extension, the U.S. from taking proactive measures to disrupt the next ISIS insurgency as it formed.

The Next ISIS Insurgency Starts to Form

ISIS Requirements for Reconstitution

ISIS required far less effort to reconstitute an insurgent force than did AQI after 2011. ISIS spokesman Abu Hassan al-Muhajir noted this fact in April 2018 when he asked, “What victory do you speak of, O America, when the mujahidin ... [have] a condition that is better than the one from which you fled in Iraq several years ago?”¹⁵⁰ Political conditions favored ISIS, as discussed above, and the organization also retained a sizeable fighting force. The

DIA assessed that ISIS retained 30,000 fighters as of July 2018, roughly the upper limit of the CIA’s assessment in 2014.¹⁵¹ ISIS also continued to receive foreign fighters at a rate of 50 to 100 per month.¹⁵² In contrast, AQI had an estimated 700 fighters when the U.S. withdrew from Iraq in 2011 and continued to receive fewer than 10 foreign fighters per month. In ISIS, unlike AQI, the senior leadership is largely intact.¹⁵³ The U.S. eliminated multiple high-value ISIS targets but at nowhere near the rate or scale of its anti-AQI campaign.¹⁵⁴

ISIS Entered Its Reconstitution Phase Better Off Than AQI ...

	Capability	Essential for Insurgency	AQI (December 2011)	ISIS (May 2017)
Military	VBIED Networks	Yes	Degraded	Degraded
	Leadership	Yes	Degraded	Intact
	Command-and-Control	Yes	X	Degraded
	Weapons and Munitions	Yes	X	Intact
	Training Camps	Yes	X	Degraded
	Fighters	Yes	Roughly 700	Roughly 30,000
	Foreign Fighter Pipeline	No	Less than 10 per month	50 – 100 per month
	Combined Arms	No	X	Disrupted
Web	Media Apparatus	Yes	Degraded	Degraded
Financial	Cash Reserves	Yes	UNK (Likely low thousands)	At least \$400 million

KEY

X = Destroyed = Capability rendered combat ineffective until reconstituted

Degraded = Capability must be partially reconstituted

Disrupted = Adversary is unable to use the capability in the desired manner under current conditions

Intact = Organization can field the capability at desired scale and for intended purpose

Military doctrine consulted for definitions: “ADP 1-02 Terms and Military Symbols” published August 2018. Sources available in ISW report “ISIS’s Second Comeback” published June 2019

...And Retains Some High-End Capabilities AQI Never Had

	Capability	Essential for Insurgency	AQI (December 2011)	ISIS (May 2017)
Military	Drone Program	No	N/A	Disrupted
	External Operations	No	N/A	Dismantled (& shifted abroad)
	Internal Police	No	N/A	Degraded
	Cyber Infrastructure (cyber planners, key physical nodes, etc)	No	N/A	Disrupted
	Industrial Scale Weapons Manufacturing	No	N/A	X
	Chemical Weapons Production	No	N/A	X
Web	Online Supporters	No	N/A	Intact
Financial	Global Financial Network	No	N/A	Intact
Political	Robust Governance Entities (courts, prisons, etc.)	No	N/A	Degraded

KEY

X = Destroyed = Capability rendered combat ineffective until reconstituted

Degraded = Capability must be partially reconstituted

Disrupted = Adversary is unable to use the capability in the desired manner under current conditions

Intact = Organization can field the capability at desired scale and for intended purpose

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Reconstituting an insurgency requires far less infrastructure than fielding a terrorist army. ISIS needed only to reconstitute some of its command and control, its media apparatus, and its high-end explosive capability in order to organize and field its dispersed forces as an insurgency.¹⁵⁵ It also needed money and weapons but had preserved enough of these resources to jumpstart an insurgency. ISIS smuggled at least \$400 million out of Iraq and Syria and hid money, weapons, and other supplies in

extensive tunnel networks and other underground caches for future use.¹⁵⁶

The organization also retained capabilities that AQI never had on the same scale, which enabled ISIS to transition rapidly to insurgency. ISIS continued to operate a global financing network that was based in Iraq and had branches stretching from the Middle East to Africa to Europe. This infrastructure includes the extremely successful Al-Rawi Network, which had invested "tens of millions" of dollars in real estate, car washes, and other legitimate

businesses across the Middle East as of 2018.¹⁵⁷ The ISIS network of global *wilayats* also began to provide revenue to the group in Iraq and Syria in late 2018.¹⁵⁸

ISIS also retained some combined arms maneuverability and other advanced capabilities such as drones.¹⁵⁹ The U.S. and its coalition partners continued to disrupt—but did not eliminate—these high-end capabilities. ISIS continued to use them against less-capable forces not supported by the U.S., including the Iraqi PMF, pro-Assad regime forces, and Al Qaeda. These capabilities enabled ISIS to conduct more effective attacks against its opponents, degrading them faster than the equivalent campaigns by AQI.

The ISIS Insurgency Strategy

ISIS launched a new insurgent campaign consistent with its longstanding methodology to build an insurgency and ultimately seize territory.¹⁶⁰ In its first issue of *Dabiq* in July 2014, it published former AQI emir Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's five-step plan for establishing a caliphate:¹⁶¹

1. **Emigration** (*hijrah*)
2. **Congregation** (*jama'ah*)
3. **Destabilization of existing governments** (*taghut*)
4. **Consolidation** (*tamkin*)
5. **Caliphate** (*khalifah*)

ISIS defined the congregation phase as forcing opponents to withdraw from rural terrain, enabling it to regroup and then launch its destabilization campaign against state authorities. AQI progressed quickly through a congregation phase to a destabilization campaign in 2012, called “Breaking the Walls.”¹⁶²

ISIS's dispersed forces also returned to a “congregation” phase to regroup and began immediate campaigns to destabilize the government of Iraq, the SDF, the Assad regime, and Al Qaeda across

Iraq and Syria in mid-2017. The ISIS campaigns advanced at different rates due to local conditions and the staggered nature of its transition. Its forces appear to have operated on relatively local levels with signs of higher operational intent. Its attacks, which ranged from complex direct attacks on fixed positions to guerrilla-style raids to terrorist attacks against civilian populations, demonstrated its continued hybridization.

ISIS's launch of its next insurgency occurred roughly from June 2017 to June 2018. During this phase, the group focused on reestablishing local support zones and setting conditions for future insurgent operations by expanding its freedom of movement, degrading local resistance, and disrupting counter-ISIS forces across Iraq and Syria. It also began to reconstitute media capabilities, to reconstitute local revenue streams including extortion of the local oil industry, and to seize additional weapons and ammunition.¹⁶³ The following sections detail ISIS's major lines of effort in Iraq and Syria.

The Cycle of Violence in Iraq

ISIS benefitted from self-perpetuating cycles of distrust and fear created by its campaigns in Iraq. Its opponents and victims conducted widespread reprisals against alleged fighters and their families after the recapture of Mosul. The UN reported in June 2018 that it had received reports of abuses against civilians by the ISF and “affiliated forces” from 2014 to mid-2017, including “acts of revenge in the form of interceptions, enforced disappearances and killings” targeting Sunni Arabs, as well as extrajudicial “executions of suspected ISIL fighters” captured in Iraq.¹⁶⁴ One Iraqi Kurdish security official told reporters in July 2017 that “bodies are turning up in the Tigris River ... they're being shot on the roadside ... this is what post-Mosul is.”¹⁶⁵ Similar reports have emerged from other liberated areas including Anbar Province.¹⁶⁶ The retributive violence against Iraqi Sunnis further legitimizes the ISIS claim to be their defender against the predatory government of Iraq.

ISIS's Early Insurgent Operations in Iraq

In Iraq, ISIS began a decentralized insurgent campaign to expand its freedom of action in historical support zones, advancing fastest in the Zaab Triangle in the north. It also launched a vicious campaign to punish security forces and civilians across Iraq in order to degrade local resistance to its reconstitution. ISIS sleeper cells, which had remained dormant in latent support zones, conducted destabilizing attacks to support this resurgence and deny legitimacy to the Iraqi state. Towards this end, ISIS exploited the growing (or perhaps enduring) Sunni distrust of Iraq's government and the Iraqi Kurds' deep sense of injustice caused by the takeover of Kirkuk City.

ISIS conducted a surge of attacks in Baghdad in July-August 2017, immediately after its loss of Mosul. It likely intended to demonstrate its continued resilience and draw the ISF back towards central and Southern Iraq. Iraq's Baghdad Operations Command reported that it repelled three ISIS SVESTs attempting to attack a headquarters of the Iraqi Army in Yusufiyah, south of Baghdad, on July 14.¹⁶⁷ ISIS's Wilayat Baghdad later claimed responsibility for four IEDs targeting markets and traffic in Sadr City and Nahrawan on July 15-16.¹⁶⁸ On July 20, the ISF intercepted and destroyed an additional ISIS vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) to the southeast of Fallujah that was en route to Baghdad.¹⁶⁹ Iraqi forces later reported the disruption of three attacks against shrines in Karbala, Najaf, Samarra, and Kufa and a planned attack on Iraqi Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani on July 30.¹⁷⁰ ISIS detonated three VBIEDs in and around Baghdad on August 27-28.¹⁷¹ ISIS forces based in Taji and Tarmiyah in the Northern Baghdad belts likely conducted these attacks in Baghdad.

Assassinate local political, tribal, & security leaders
ISIS is waging a campaign of targeted assassinations to degrade local resistance and punish Iraqi Sunnis whom it accuses of collaborating with the government of Iraq. ISIS cells began assassinating local village mukhtars, tribal leaders, and security officials in mid-2017. In the first ten months of 2018, ISIS assassinated at least 148 individuals in Diyala, Anbar, Salah ad-Din, Baghdad,

Ninewa, and Kirkuk Provinces.¹⁷² The assassinations ranged from the beheading of a tribal militia commander in his home in Mosul to the shooting of the aide-de-camp of the Second Iraqi Special Operations Forces Brigade commander in Baghdad.¹⁷³ This campaign remains ongoing.

This assassination campaign reflects premeditated operational design. ISIS's previous meticulous recordkeeping enabled it to identify and assassinate potential leaders of local resistance, and a new religious ruling justified this. The ISIS Delegated Committee, the group's top decision-making body which is subordinate to Baghdadi, issued a religious ruling (*fatwa*) on May 17, 2017, endorsing a broader interpretation of *takfir* (excommunication), justifying the killing of greater numbers of Muslims.¹⁷⁴ These assassinations deterred people from collaborating with the state and widened social cleavages, which provided ISIS with greater freedom of action. They also demonstrated that supposedly liberated populations are still not safe, exacerbating the alienation of Iraqi Sunnis from the government of Iraq.

Degrade Iraqi Service Infrastructure

ISIS launched a campaign to erode the state institutions of the government of Iraq. This campaign particularly targeted service infrastructure in Diyala, Salah ad-Din, and Kirkuk Provinces.¹⁷⁵ ISIS had long targeted infrastructure to distract security forces and degrade the legitimacy of the state. It escalated these attacks in order to block the rehabilitation of liberated communities and create new exploitable vulnerabilities after its loss of Mosul. In August 2017, ISIS launched eight attacks in a week against electrical pylons in Diyala Province.¹⁷⁶ Three ISIS fighters with SVESTs temporarily seized the Jalasiyya Power Plant near Samarra on September 2, 2017.¹⁷⁷ The Iraqi Electricity Ministry reported eight attacks against an electrical line between Diyala and Kirkuk Provinces in July-August 2018.¹⁷⁸ ISIS also targeted for assassination members of the Electricity Ministry and other service providers.¹⁷⁹ The attacks likely forced redeployments of security forces and further degraded public confidence in the government of Iraq.¹⁸⁰ This campaign is ongoing at the time of publication.

Restore Social Control in Historical Support Zones

ISIS advanced most rapidly to reestablish historic support zones in the Zaab Triangle and Kirkuk Province. It conducted spectacular attacks against Kirkuk City and Tuz Khurmatu in order to draw security forces into the cities while it expanded operations in rural Kirkuk and Salah ad-Din Provinces. ISIS detonated an SVBIED and SVEST near a Shi'a mosque and the headquarters of an Iraqi Shi'a militia in Kirkuk City on November 5, 2017.¹⁸¹ On November 10, the Diyala Provincial Council Security Committee announced that security forces had foiled four "terrorist plots" against pilgrims and public gatherings in Diyala Province during religious observance of the Shi'a holiday of Arba'een.¹⁸² IS An SVBIED was detonated in a market in a Shi'a Turkmen district of Tuz Khurmatu on November 21, probably by ISIS.¹⁸³ These attacks inflamed ethnic tensions and helped preserve security gaps that ISIS could exploit along the DIBs.

ISIS also expanded its operations in the countryside of southern Kirkuk Province. It began to claim responsibility for insurgent attacks against civilian and military targets south of Kirkuk City in December 2017.¹⁸⁴ By March 21, 2018, when it claimed responsibility for three separate attacks along the Baghdad-Kirkuk Highway in Daquq District, it had established fake checkpoints to extort the population and target security forces.¹⁸⁵ It attacked Shi'a and Sufi shrines in Daquq District with VBIEDs and IEDs in January and March 2018, respectively.¹⁸⁶ ISIS was likely increasing extortion of civilians by at least this time.

ISIS conducted supporting operations in northern Salah ad-Din Province. For example, it claimed responsibility for detonating eight SVBIEDs

targeting four locations held by Iraqi Shi'a militias northwest of Baiji on November 23, 2017.¹⁸⁷ This attack reflects ISIS's selective use of high-end capabilities such as VBIEDs, in this case to degrade opposing forces and create additional freedom of movement in an important transit zone connecting its support zones in the Zaab Triangle and the Jazeera Desert.

Disrupt the 2018 Iraqi Election

ISIS also conducted multiple attacks meant to destabilize the capital ahead of Iraq's May 2018 parliamentary elections. ISIS detonated four SVESTS in Baghdad on January 13-14, 2018. On January 13, two ISIS militants detonated SVESTs in Tayaran Square.¹⁸⁸ Hours later, an IED was detonated in the Jamila District of the capital, adjacent to Sadr City,

while a third SVEST was detonated at a police checkpoint in Aden Square in northern Baghdad, possibly aimed at the convoy of Baghdad Provincial Council chair Riad al-Adad. ISIS detonated a fourth SVEST in Tarmiyah, north of Baghdad, on January 14.¹⁸⁹ These attacks showed the inability of Iraq's government to provide security in Baghdad and undermined the core election platform of then-prime minister Haider al-Abadi.

ISIS also attacked political targets in early 2018. The ISF intercepted and destroyed a

VBIED near Iraqi National Congress Party headquarters in the Mansour District of Baghdad on February 13, 2018.¹⁹⁰ ISIS detonated two SVESTs targeting the headquarters of the Sunni Solution Party in Hit, Anbar Province on April 7, 2018, killing one of the party candidates.¹⁹¹ It also assassinated a candidate of the secular-leaning National Alliance Coalition in Qayyarah on May 7, 2018.¹⁹²

Baghdadi also began an internal purge as he reasserted central control, arresting and executing clerics and other leaders who disagreed with his broad interpretation of takfir (excommunication) and dissented publicly with his rulings.

These attacks did not prevent the election from taking place, but did demonstrate (in particular, to Iraq's Sunnis) that ISIS was not defeated and remained committed to its political objectives in Iraq.

ISIS's Three-Front Insurgency in Syria

ISIS's military disposition during this period was stronger in Syria than Iraq. It launched an immediate insurgency to destabilize Al Qaeda-dominated Idlib Province in Northern Syria and thereby undermine Al Qaeda's efforts to govern and unite opposition groups under its leadership. ISIS also exploited an operational pause by the SDF in Eastern Syria to degrade pro-Assad regime forces on the western bank of the Euphrates River and rebuild its insurgent networks in liberated areas of Northern Syria. The wide geographic spread of these operations indicate that ISIS sought to set conditions for a countrywide resurgence in Syria. The attacks degraded the security and governance structures of all major belligerents in the Syrian civil war, contributing to the perpetuation of complete state collapse in Syria.

Destabilize Al Qaeda-Dominated Idlib Province

ISIS went on the offensive against Al Qaeda in Idlib Province beginning in July 2017. Turkey, Russia, and Iran brokered a de-escalation zone and cease-fire in Idlib in May 2017 to enable progress towards a political settlement of the Syrian civil war.¹⁹³ The deal granted an opportunity to Al Qaeda. Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, the successor to Al Qaeda's formal affiliate in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra, established a "General Conference" in Idlib Province in July 2017 that would morph into a formal governing entity named the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) on November 2, 2017.¹⁹⁴ Also in July, HTS claimed it had arrested more than 100 ISIS

members across Idlib Province.¹⁹⁵ The arrests may have included ISIS foreign fighters who relocated to Idlib Province from Raqqa City. They suggest that ISIS had begun preparing new attack networks in Idlib Province in the same month that HTS began its new project with the SSG.

ISIS launched a ground offensive against HTS in Idlib Province in October 2017, its biggest military attack on Al Qaeda in Syria since 2014.¹⁹⁶ It attacked at least fifteen villages held by Al Qaeda in southern Idlib Province, likely with reinforcements from its evacuation of eastern Hama Province.¹⁹⁷ Pro-Assad regime forces (who had tacitly enabled the maneuver) exploited the upheaval to attack and seize territory from both HTS and ISIS in a wide swath of southern Aleppo and eastern Idlib Provinces by February 2019.¹⁹⁸

ISIS then reverted to an insurgent campaign in Greater Idlib Province. It is possible its land grab was a distraction from a main effort to infiltrate the province. ISIS likely played a major role in a wave of at least twenty assassinations targeting HTS and other opposition groups across Idlib Province on April 26-27, 2018.¹⁹⁹ Russia and Assad also probably conducted some of the attacks, and their cells may have assisted ISIS. Assad had established a network of covert cells in Greater Idlib Province by at least mid-2018.²⁰⁰ Russia may be supporting this effort. The Assad regime's elite Tiger Forces, which Russia backs, have posted videos to social media revealing a covert presence in Idlib.²⁰¹ Regardless of who was responsible, the attacks were disruptive to HTS and likely created increased freedom of movement for ISIS.²⁰²

ISIS continued a lower-intensity assassination campaign against HTS in Idlib Province through June 2018.²⁰³ A series of small-scale attacks—using methods ranging from small arms fire to IEDs, SVESTs, and VBIEDs—killed roughly three people a day from April-June 2018.²⁰⁴ ISIS also used its support zone in Idlib to coordinate at least one attempted attack in Lebanon.²⁰⁵

ISIS also began to target other Al Qaeda-linked groups in discredit them, compete for foreign fighters, and erode Al Qaeda's support in Syria. On April 27, 2018, in ISIS's weekly newsletter, *Al-Naba*, it declared the Al Qaeda-linked Hurras al-Din (Guardians of Religion) to be apostates, warned Muslims against "supporting them in any way until they repent from their apostasy," and urged believers to "fight them for their disbelief."²⁰⁶ Hurras al-Din was formed in Idlib Province on February 27, 2018, as a hardline splinter group of HTS.²⁰⁷ The group includes top Al Qaeda officials such as Abu Hammam al-Shami, previously military emir of Jabhat al-Nusra.²⁰⁸ ISIS is likely responsible for assassinations targeting Hurras al-Din and other foreign fighter groups linked to Al Qaeda, including the Turkistan Islamic Party.²⁰⁹

Degrade Pro-Assad Regime Forces in Eastern Syria

In January-May 2018, the SDF temporarily halted its operations against ISIS in order to respond to a major cross-border intervention by the Turkish Armed Forces in the majority-Kurdish Afrin Canton of Northern Syria.²¹⁰ ISIS exploited this operational pause to attack pro-Assad regime forces on the western bank of the Euphrates River in Eastern Syria.²¹¹ It launched a series of attacks against these forces in Deir ez-Zour Province in March 2018, likely to increase its freedom of movement into the central Syrian desert. ISIS detonated at least two SVBIEDs on the outskirts of regime-held Mayadin on March 24-26. Local activists also reported several unidentified blasts in the neighboring town

of Asharah. From March 28 through April 1, ISIS conducted a major attack, with hundreds of fighters, against regime-held Abu Kamal on the Syrian-Iraqi border.²¹² It used these attacks to inflict heavy casualties on pro-Assad regime forces and help invigorate its defense of the Middle Euphrates River Valley. The attacks also marked the start of a low-grade insurgency against pro-Assad regime forces in the Syrian desert.

Destabilize SDF-Held Eastern Syria

ISIS also launched an insurgency against the governance structures established by the U.S. and SDF in Northern Syria. The SDF released over one hundred suspected ISIS fighters in Manbij and Tabqa, west of Raqqa City, from March through June 2017, and ISIS likely gained an infusion of local fighters from these prisoner releases.²¹³ The SDF conducted similar prisoner releases in Tabqa, Raqqa City, and other areas in Eastern Syria beginning in August 2017.²¹⁴ These prisoners may have included ISIS commanders who helped the group reestablish command-and-control structures. By late 2017, ISIS had reestablished a capable networked presence in Manbij,²¹⁵ and it detonated four IEDs targeting the SDF in Manbij in November and December 2017.²¹⁶ In March 2018, an IED killed two U.S. and one British service members conducting a raid against ISIS in Manbij. The SDF-affiliated Manbij Military Council asserted in April 2018 that ISIS "still has cells present in all areas."²¹⁷

ISIS Delays in the Euphrates River Valley

ISIS retained two territorial zones of control, the Khabur River and Middle Euphrates River Valleys in Eastern Syria, even as it transitioned to an insurgency elsewhere in Iraq and Syria. It ceded its control along the former relatively quickly, but fought hard to defend its control zone along the latter in order to buy time and space for its pivot back to insurgency. The SDF launched Operation Roundup on May 1, 2018, to clear the remaining territory held by ISIS in Deir ez-Zour Province.²¹⁸ ISIS successfully prolonged this fight for nearly a year, despite estimates that the campaign would take only “weeks.”²¹⁹ CJTF-OIR characterized ISIS as “fanatically determined to hold onto the last vestiges of its caliphate” and admitted in March 2019 that the U.S. had “consistently underestimated ...

by a significant margin” the size of the ISIS defensive force.²²⁰

ISIS used fortified defenses, similar to its defenses in Mosul and Raqqa City, to delay the SDF’s advance and impose significant casualties. It also conducted multiple counterattacks deep behind the front lines in order to disrupt the SDF. For example, ISIS launched a major attack on the SDF-held Omar oil field on August 19, 2018,²²¹ as well as multiple attacks against four SDF-held front-line villages during a sandstorm on October 11-12.²²² It also detonated an SVBIED near a makeshift displacement camp near the Conoco and Isbah gas fields east of Deir ez-Zour City on November 4.²²³



ABOVE: A boy looks at the camera near Baghouz, Deir ez-Zour Province, Syria. March 5, 2019. REUTERS / Rodi Said TPX IMAGES OF THE DAY

The ISIS defensive campaign in the Middle Euphrates River Valley ended with a mass surrender of besieged fighters and family members near Baghouz in Eastern Syria on March 23, 2019.²²⁴ This deliberate surrender set conditions once again for ISIS's insurgency by dispersing ISIS's fighters and family members to prisons and displacement camps. The SDF transferred approximately 5,000 ISIS fighters to prisons in Northern Syria,²²⁵ while other ISIS fighters managed to withdraw from Baghouz and enter Iraq via the Jazeera Desert.²²⁶

The SDF was unprepared to absorb the approximately 63,000 ISIS family members and other civilians that emerged from underground tunnels in Baghouz.²²⁷ It relocated them to the Al-Hawl IDP camp in Northern Syria, surpassing its capacity by more than 30,000 people.²²⁸ Dozens of journalists present for the surrender documented the event and portrayed to a global audience that ISIS members

remained devout and firmly unrepentant until the end.²²⁹ ISIS benefitted from such coverage.

The Al-Hawl camp quickly became a de facto support zone for ISIS in Northern Syria. Many female ISIS members in Al-Hawl remain ideologically committed to the group.²³⁰ Baghdadi reportedly ordered female followers to surrender to the SDF in February 2019, possibly with the aim of infiltrating displacement facilities like Al-Hawl.²³¹ Some women in the camp were active participants in ISIS security structures like the religious police,²³² and many are likely continuing to instill their ideology among the camp's 50,000 children. The indoctrination of even a fraction would provide a substantial generational boost to ISIS, which may already be using the camp to stage operations and could ultimately attack it in order to release its broadly supportive population back into Northern Syria.

Baghdadi Centralizes His New Insurgency

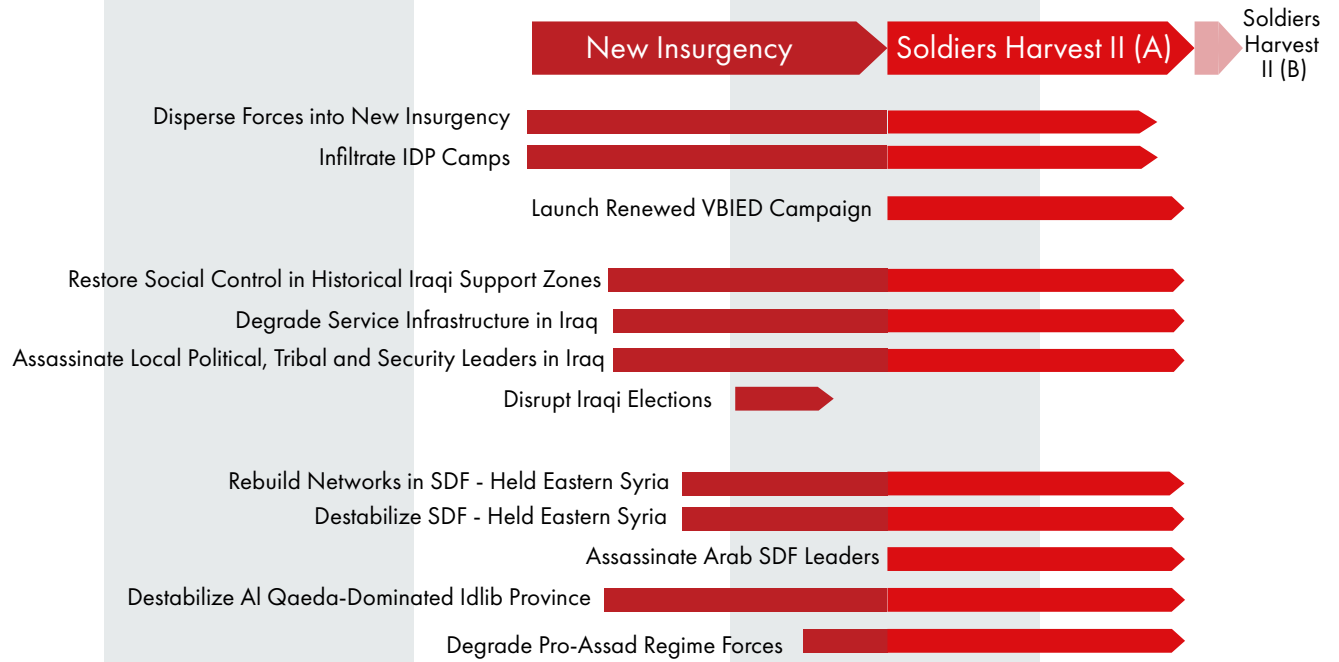
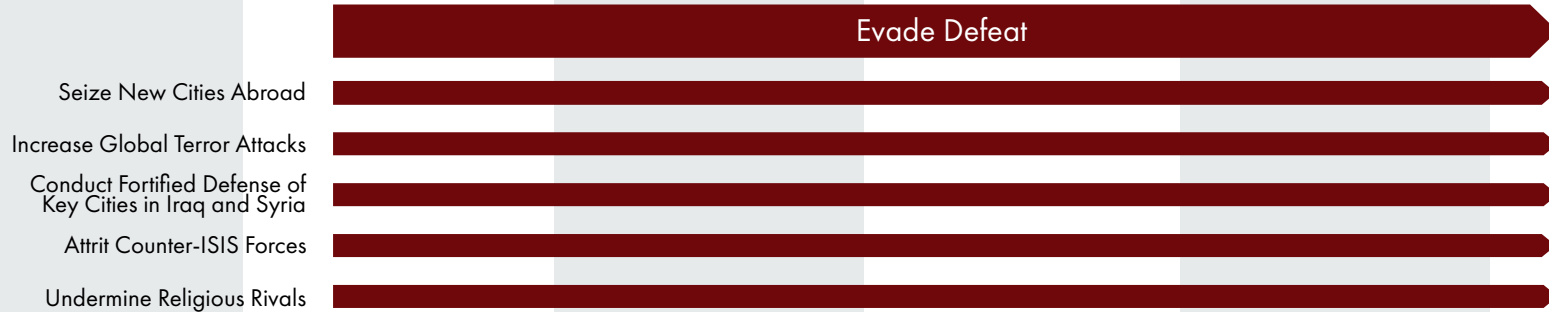
Baghdadi began to reassert greater operational control over dispersed ISIS insurgent forces beginning roughly in June 2018. He established separate *wilayats* to serve as operational headquarters in Iraq and Syria.²³³ This configuration is new for ISIS and indicates greater centralization under Baghdadi. He likely chose to implement these reforms at this time so as to better manage and unite his dispersed forces within a directed campaign designed to accelerate the reconstitution of ISIS and expand its new insurgencies in Iraq and Syria.

Baghdadi also began an internal purge as he reasserted central control, arresting and executing clerics and other leaders who disagreed with his broad interpretation of *takfir* (excommunication) and dissented publicly with his rulings.²³⁴ Several ISIS clerics had published a more moderate ruling on *takfir* in September 2017, directly contravening previous guidance from Baghdadi.²³⁵ ISIS's Diwan al-Amni (Security Bureau) reportedly detained Abu Yaqub al-Maqdisi—the group's top religious

cleric—and then executed him on July 11, 2018.²³⁶ Subsequent arrests targeted his supporters.²³⁷ A failed mid-September coup attempt by a foreign fighter cell that targeted Baghdadi was likely provoked by these arrests.²³⁸ Baghdadi also purged hundreds of incompetent, disobedient, or untrustworthy commanders, ordering the execution of up to 320 ISIS members, including several high-level commanders.²³⁹

This purge and other signs of internal friction suggest that ISIS's return to insurgency was not a completely controlled transition in Iraq and Syria. The group is still likely reconstituting an effective command-and-control structure. CJTF-OIR assessed that ISIS was in the “early stages of coordinating a more centralized command-and-control structure” in Iraq as of March 2019, and noted that it had “worked to reestablish national and transnational financial networks, and reconstitute several media nodes.”²⁴⁰ Baghdadi may have greater operational control in Syria.

ISIS's Campaign



Key

Campaign Phase

Line of Effort

Major event

Actors

ISIS

Pro-Assad Forces

Anti-ISIS Coalition in Iraq and Syria

Anti-ISIS Coalition Global

ISIS Seizes Ramadi, Palmyra 5/17/15; 5/20/15

ISIS Seizes Sirte (Libya) 6/9/15

ISIS Seizes Marawi (Philippines) 5/23/17

Baghdadi Centralizes Control ~June 2018

Baghdadi Appears in New Video 4/29/19

2014

2015

2016

2017

2018

2019

2014

2015

2016

2017

2018

2019



Anti-ISIS Coalition's Campaign in Iraq and Syria



Enable Military Defeat of ISIS

Enable Sustainable Military Capacity of Partners

Leverage Cohesive Coalition Effects

Pro - Assad Regime Operations against ISIS

ISIS Seizes Palmyra 5/20/15

ISIS Recaptures Palmyra 12/11/16

2014

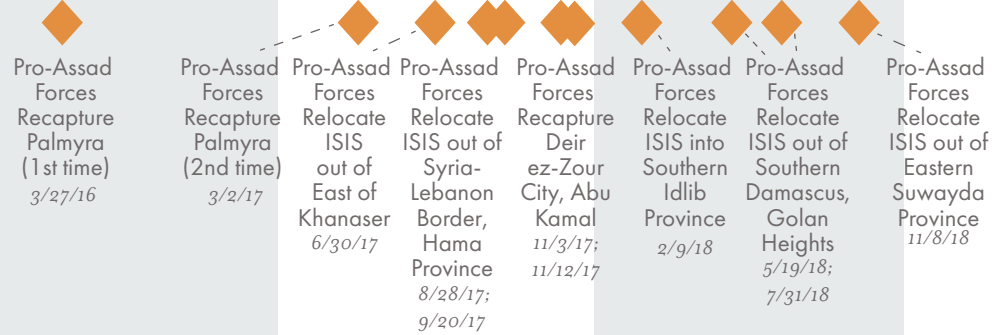
2015

2016

2017

2018

2019



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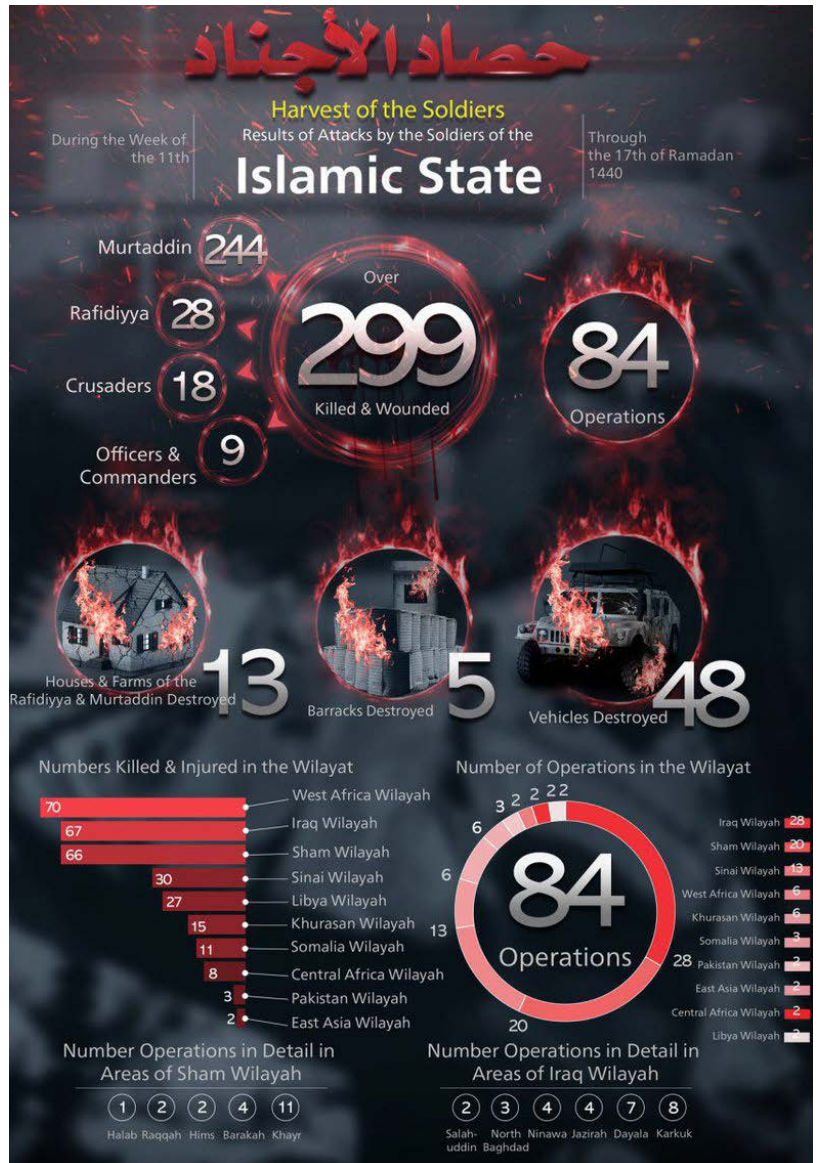
Graphic by Jason Zhou and Jennifer Cafarella

Soldiers Harvest II (A)

Baghdadi's centralization accelerated the ISIS insurgency from July 2018 to May 2019. At the start of that period, ISIS began categorizing all of its global operations as part of a campaign entitled "Soldiers Harvest."²⁴¹ The name is a reference to AQI's Soldiers Harvest campaign in 2013, which followed its Breaking the Walls campaign and set conditions for its seizure of Mosul in 2014.²⁴²

ISIS also resumed coordinated global media operations in July 2018, indicating that it had reconstituted key media capabilities by this time. It covered its Soldiers Harvest campaign extensively in its weekly publication, *Al-Naba*, and published a weekly video report series on the campaign from August 2018-January 2019. Its detailed reporting on Soldiers Harvest, which was similar to its annual reports in 2011-2014, likely reflected an attempt to test its ability to resume tracking and analysis of its military operations.²⁴³ It also highlighted more advanced multimedia capabilities than previous annual reports, which ISIS released as PDFs.

ISIS's inclusion of its global provinces in Soldiers Harvest indicates that it continues to pursue linked campaigns abroad and in Iraq and Syria, and it may be increasingly integrating these campaigns as it reconstitutes itself in its core territory. In Iraq and Syria, Soldiers Harvest included reconstitution of command-and-control networks. ISIS also launched a renewed campaign of VBIEDs across Iraq and Syria. ISIS sustained and increased most of the lines of effort it launched in late 2017. In Iraq, ISIS crossed an important threshold towards control in five historical support zones. In Syria, it sustained its campaign against Al Qaeda while expanding its insurgencies against the Assad regime and the SDF.



ABOVE: ISIS publishes a summary of its operations for Soldiers Harvest II (A) during the week of May 15 - 21, 2019 in *Al-Naba* #183. Pieter van Ostaeyen, Twitter, May 25, 2019, https://twitter.com/p_vanostaeyen/status/1132330837465325569/photo/1.

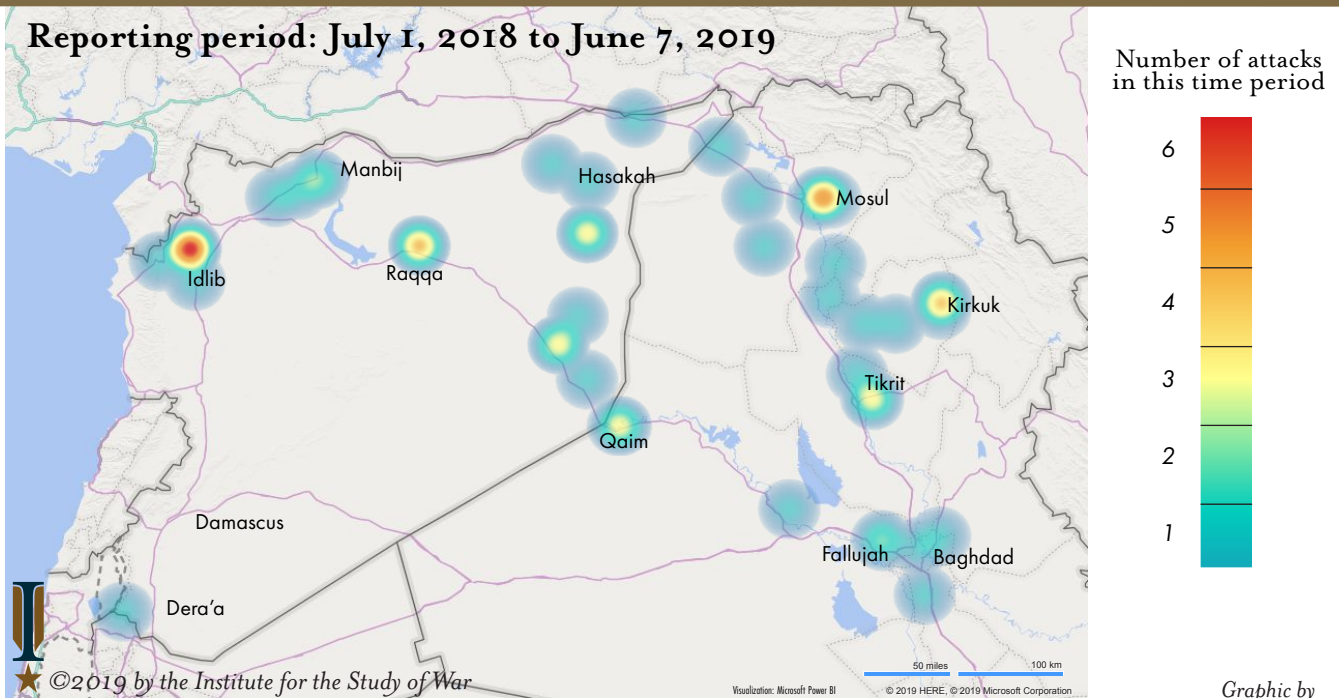
Renewed VBIED Campaign

ISIS began reconstituting and repurposing its capacity to generate VBIEDs in mid-2018. Since 2015, it had only sporadically deployed them in terrorist attacks and precision strikes against its opponents in liberated areas in Iraq and Syria. In the first two weeks of July 2018, it deployed or detonated VBIEDs in six different cities across the two countries.²⁴⁴ These VBIEDs were used to target people in popular restaurants and markets in liberated cities including Raqqa and Mosul, as well as military checkpoints and convoys in more rural areas of Iraq and Syria. ISIS used these attacks, which likely marked a phase change in its campaign and capabilities, to degrade public confidence in local security forces and destabilize rural areas to expand its freedom of operation. The group continued to steadily increase the scope and scale of VBIED use into 2019.

ISIS likely detonated at least forty-two additional VBIEDs from August 2018 to June 2019 and attempted at least eleven others. It did not claim responsibility for fifteen of the attacks, probably to avoid local backlash from Iraqi and Syrian Sunnis (though it is possible that another insurgent group, such as Ba’athists or a new Al Qaeda cell, conducted some of them).²⁴⁵ These attacks are detailed in the graphic below and in Appendix I. This data does not include VBIEDs that ISIS detonated as part of a combined arms attack or tactical defense.

Since July 2018, ISIS has most frequently targeted Mosul, Kirkuk City, Tikrit, Raqqa City, and Idlib City with VBIEDs. Its repeated targeting of these areas probably indicates that it has reconstituted VBIED networks nearby. In Mosul, its VBIED attacks have most often occurred in the northeast quadrant near the Gogjali District, which was the main ISIS hub for VBIEDs during the Battle for Mosul.²⁴⁶ In

ISW Successful & Attempted Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Device (VBIED) Attacks Likely Attributable to ISIS*



* Pro-Assad regime forces may have conducted or facilitated some of the VBIED attacks in Idlib Province depicted here. This graphic does not include VBIED attacks that ISW assesses were conducted by the YPG.

Graphic by Brandon Wallace and Jason Zhou

Kirkuk City, its VBIED attacks likely originate in its support zone in Southern Kirkuk Province, where it has conducted frequent VBIED attacks against security forces. As noted above, those attacks are not included in this data set because they are part of combined arms attacks. ISIS may have a VBIED factory in Kirkuk City, and it is likely also generating these weapons in the Makhoul Mountains north of Tikrit, where it reportedly retains an entrenched presence, including training camps.²⁴⁷ ISIS also retains the capability to build VBIEDS in or around Raqqa City and likely has multiple VBIED factories in Idlib Province.

The ISIS VBIED campaign is not yet on the scale of AQI's Breaking the Walls campaign in 2012-2013, when AQI repeatedly conducted single-day "waves" ranging from six to several dozen VBIEDs. The current campaign is likely similar to AQI's initial testing phase in July-September 2012, a period AQI used to test the depth and breadth of its VBIED network reconstitution by attacking over a wide geographic area and scaling up its acquisition of explosives, technical experts, and command-and-control networks. ISIS is reconstituting its latest network over a broader area but at a slower pace.

Restoration of Social Control in Northern Iraq

In August 2018, Baghdadi began to signal growing confidence. He released an audio recording on August 22 framing the new phase of ISIS's campaign in Iraq and Syria and asserting that the U.S. "boasted of its so-called victory in expelling the State from the cities and countryside in Iraq and Syria, but the land of Allah is wide and the tides of war change."²⁴⁸ He identified Iraq as a priority theater: "Soldiers of Iraq, you will be the ignition of the fire, you will wage attack after attack ... don't ever rest ... unite and organize your army." Baghdadi likely aimed to provide his local forces sufficient operational freedom to maximize their efforts, even as he reasserted centralized control over ISIS. CJTF-OIR stated in March 2019 that ISIS is "seeking to remove some of its bureaucratic structures that hampered its efforts to gain local legitimacy and to grant

local units greater control over their activities." It noted that ISIS was in the "early stages of coordinating a more centralized command-and-control structure."²⁴⁹

ISIS crossed an important threshold towards reestablishing control over five historical support zones in Iraq between May 2018 and May 2019. ISIS's intimidation campaign and imposition of *zakat* tax began in May 2018 to drive civilian flight from the Zaab Triangle and later from the Diyala River Valley, and two areas in Ninewa Province. ISW warned in September 2013 that "population displacement will serve as the principal indicator that AQI has reestablished conditions that reflect the state of play in Iraq before the Surge."²⁵⁰ ISIS insurgent operations in Iraq during Soldiers Harvest involved additional attacks in liberated areas and Baghdad, including the VBIED attacks listed in the Appendix. The group's success reestablishing de facto control in historical support zones is perhaps the most dangerous sign of its successful reconstitution.

Zaab Triangle. In May 2018, Iraqi media began reporting that ISIS was extorting local populations and targeting agricultural fields near Hawija in Southern Kirkuk Province.²⁵¹ ISIS had likely begun to impose *zakat* on civilians, a longstanding tactic to assert control and extract resources. By June 2018, the ISIS campaign began to drive civilians out of Southern Kirkuk Province.²⁵² The group has sustained this extortion campaign through 2019 and continues to set fire to fields owned by people who refuse to pay *zakat*. For example, on May 25, 2019, ISIS killed five farmers and firefighters with an IED near Hawija as they attempted to extinguish a fire ISIS had set.²⁵³

Diyala Province. ISIS is knitting its disparate historical support zones in Diyala Province into an insurgent network that links the Zaab Triangle to Baghdad. From July through December 2018, civilians fled at least thirty villages in Northern Diyala Province due to repeated ISIS attacks and extortion.²⁵⁴ In November 2018, ISIS successfully deterred a mobilization of tribes against ISIS near Khanaqin in Northern Diyala Province through an assassination campaign that killed more than thirty local leaders in Diyala Province in the first ten

months of the year.²⁵⁵ ISIS later expanded its campaign south of Lake Hamrin. As of January 2019, it reportedly held safe havens in several villages west of Muqdadiyah.²⁵⁶ Farther south, an unnamed security source claimed that Buhriz, which is south of Baqubah, was “almost under the control of ISIS” as of February 2019.²⁵⁷ In May 2019 in Buhriz, ISIS burned crop fields whose owners did not pay *zakat*.²⁵⁸ In the second half of 2019, ISIS will likely implement further social control over the rural areas around Lake Hamrin if it has not done so already.

Ninewa Province. ISIS is asserting control over the civilian population in the countryside southeast of Mosul and Makhmour from a stronghold in Mount Qarachogh to the northeast. Civilians in the area started to flee their homes after ISIS began imposing a *zakat* tax in early April 2019.²⁵⁹ The next month, ISIS began to burn crop fields in Qaraqosh and Ali Rash, southeast of Mosul, whose owners refused to pay *zakat*.²⁶⁰ The group is reportedly imposing a similar tax for harvest season in Makhmour. The KRG has thus far provided inadequate support, deploying only firefighters and a parliamentary delegation in response to a request for aid from local farmers in May 2019.²⁶¹

ISIS is driving similar civilian flight from remote villages south of Tel Afar in Ninewa Province. In late April 2019, residents of at least thirty villages on the outskirts of Tel Afar abandoned their villages due to an increasing number of ISIS raids.²⁶² ISIS is likely also imposing a *zakat* tax in the region. On May 9, 2019, Gen. Najm al-Jubouri, commander of Ninewa Operations Command, stated that the ISF would begin arming residents of fifty remote villages in Western Ninewa Province.²⁶³ The statement is a de facto admission that the ISF cannot guarantee reliable security in Western Ninewa Province.

The ISF is failing to disrupt the new ISIS insurgency. The U.S. scaled back its original plan for strategic security-sector reform in Iraq in January 2019 to focus on the more-limited goal of improving the ISF’s tactical capabilities.²⁶⁴ The change reflects a recognition that the ISF has once again begun to lose ground to ISIS in Iraq. CJTF-OIR reported that in the second quarter of 2019, the ISF

conducted approximately four hundred operations that only “marginally diminished ISIS’s ability to operate.”²⁶⁵ The ISF’s alleged abuses against Sunnis and reluctance to prioritize continued operations against ISIS demonstrate that it continues to act as a sectarian force in Iraq. Without additional support from the West, the ISF will fail to prevent ISIS’s next breakout success.

Expansion of the ISIS Syrian Insurgency

In Syria, ISIS has sustained its insurgency against Al Qaeda while expanding its operations against pro-Assad regime forces and the SDF in order to destabilize these opponents and create additional freedom of movement for its own forces across the Levant.

Sustained Campaign against Al Qaeda in Idlib Province

In July 2018, ISIS launched a new wave of attacks against HTS and opposition forces in Greater Idlib Province after a series of HTS raids against ISIS in June 2018.²⁶⁶ On July 6, ISIS claimed responsibility for an attack against an HTS checkpoint near Saraqib and for an IED attack against unidentified opposition fighters west of Aleppo City, its first official attack claims in Idlib Province since May 2017.²⁶⁷ ISIS claimed responsibility for three other attacks against HTS and opposition forces from July 6–9.²⁶⁸ ISIS was likely also responsible for an unclaimed VBIED attack near the Al-Ahrar Mosque in the Muhandisin District of Idlib City on July 6.²⁶⁹ The group may not have wanted to alienate the foreign fighters it seeks to attract in Idlib Province by admitting that it targeted a mosque (although it is also possible that the attack was conducted by cells affiliated with Assad).

ISIS attacks in Greater Idlib Province largely stopped from July 2018 through February 2019. HTS and opposition forces shifted their attention and military resources to front lines with pro-Assad regime forces, which had massed and threatened to attack Northern Hama Province.²⁷⁰ This distraction likely provided increased freedom of movement to ISIS

ISW Assessed ISIS Objectives in the Iraq-Syria Theater

	Loss of Tikrit	Loss of Mosul and Raqqa	Baghdadi Centralizes	
	Caliphate <i>July 2014 - March 2015</i>	Evade Defeat <i>April 2015 - March 2019</i>	Transition to Insurgency <i>Staggered, roughly June 2017 - June 2018</i>	Soldiers Harvest II (A) <i>July 2018 - May 2019</i>
Strategic Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expand the Caliphate Govern Attract foreign fighters & civilians to live in Caliphate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Deny a political victory to the anti-ISIS coalition Set political and military conditions to enable a new offensive phase Fix coalition forces in Syria while transitioning to insurgency (May 2018 – March 2019) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Disperse forces for new insurgencies Preserve & expand freedom of movement Begin insurgencies against Iraqi state, SDF, pro-Assad regime forces, & al Qaeda Deny rehabilitation of liberated areas Deny rival jihadist groups an opportunity to unseat ISIS 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reconstitute key capabilities Expand insurgencies against Iraqi state, SDF, pro-Assad regime forces, & al Qaeda Generate new revenue streams Expand support zones Deny rival jihadist groups an opportunity to unseat ISIS
Operational Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consolidate by connecting Iraqi & Syrian control zones Seize most of the Syrian-Turkish Border Establish governance structures Integrate foreign fighter flow into military, governance operations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Destroy Ramadi, Fallujah, Mosul, and Raqqa Impose high costs on counter-ISIS forces Retain psychological control over civilian populations as long as possible Delay SDF forces along the MERV 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reconstitute media capabilities Establish networks in IDP flows <p>Iraq</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regroup in historical support zones Degrade local resistance Degrade service provision Disrupt Iraqi elections <p>Syria</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rebuild networks in SDF-held areas Disrupt pro-regime forces in eastern Syria Infiltrate & destabilize Idlib Evacuate forces in besieged pockets 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reconstitute VBIED capability, revenue streams, & command and control Liberate imprisoned fighters and families <p>Iraq</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expand support zones and exert social control <p>Syria</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Destabilize Idlib Disrupt & degrade pro-regime forces Destabilize SDF held areas Fracture the SDF

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in Idlib Province and incentivized it to engage in its own operational pause against HTS. Russia and Turkey reached a new de-escalation agreement on September 16 after Turkey deployed military reinforcements to Idlib Province.²⁷¹

ISIS resumed its spectacular attacks in Greater Idlib Province in February 2019, likely in response to new consolidation of governance by HTS. HTS and the SSG gained de jure control over all of Idlib Province after the rival National Liberation Front surrendered in January 2019 and began to consolidate their effective control and institute reforms.²⁷² Two VBIEDs were detonated in Idlib City on February 18, and HTS found and dismantled two others on March 11 (see the Appendix). On March 1, an SVEST was used to target HTS leaders at a restaurant in Idlib City.²⁷³ At least eleven additional explosive attacks targeted HTS and the SSG from March 1 through June 7. ISIS did not publicly claim responsibility for these attacks but is likely responsible.

ISIS may have begun to secure defections from Al Qaeda-affiliated groups in Greater Idlib Province. The Khalid ibn al-Walid Brigade, a minor Salafijihadist group in Idlib Province, pledged allegiance to ISIS on April 22, 2019. Its leader released a statement urging all Muslims to do the same. The group does not appear to have engaged in any significant action since the pledge, and it is unclear if it was accepted.²⁷⁴ Nonetheless, it provides further momentum for ISIS in Idlib Province.

Expanded Campaign against Pro-Assad Regime Forces

ISIS also expanded a three-front campaign against forces aligned with Syrian president Bashar al-Assad. Its attacks against pro-Assad regime forces grew increasingly sophisticated and provided access to new sources of weapons and ammunition to fuel its insurgency.

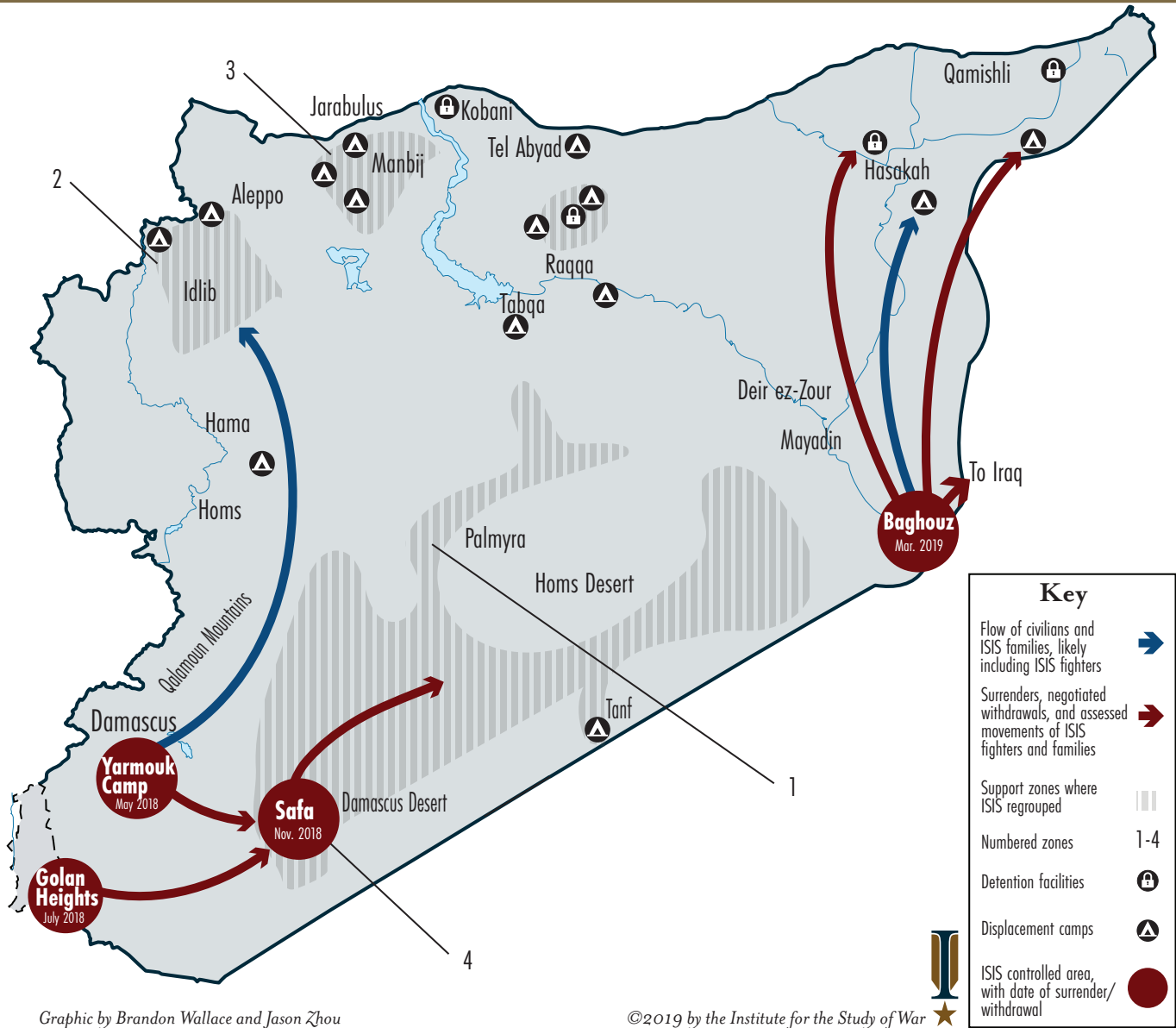
Euphrates River Valley. ISIS has conducted sporadic attacks against pro-Assad regime forces on the western bank of the Euphrates River in Eastern Syria. A sizeable ISIS force conducted a combined

arms attack against a pro-Assad regime artillery battalion near Mayadin on May 23, 2018.²⁷⁵ The Russian Defense Ministry reported that the attack killed four Russian military advisors and wounded five others.²⁷⁶ On June 8, ISIS launched an even more complex attack against regime-held Abu Kamal, near the Syrian-Iraqi border, temporarily seizing parts of the city in an offensive that included several SVBIED attacks and required pro-Assad regime forces to send reinforcements from Deir ez-Zour City.²⁷⁷ These operations were much more sophisticated and effective than previous attacks by ISIS along the Euphrates River Valley, demonstrating its successful reconstitution of capable tactical units and operational leadership. ISIS also mounted a cross-river attack on pro-Assad regime forces near Mayadin from the eastern bank of the Euphrates River on October 11.²⁷⁸

Southern Syria. ISIS negotiated additional evacuation deals with pro-Assad regime forces in Damascus and Dera'a Province in Southern Syria between May and July 2018. It evacuated as many as 1,500 fighters from the Yarmouk camp and Hajar al-Aswad District of Southern Damascus on May 19 in an agreement with the Assad regime.²⁷⁹ These withdrawals reinforced ISIS's support zone in the Syrian desert southeast of Damascus and completed the reset it began in the region in mid-2017. ISIS also likely infiltrated the relocation of civilians from southern Damascus to Idlib Province.²⁸⁰ In addition, some of its fighters may have gone to ground to prepare future insurgent operations inside Damascus.

ISIS conducted a major assault on the majority-Druze city of Suwayda on July 25, 2018, from its base in the Syrian desert. In a pre-dawn raid, it attacked several villages along a twenty-kilometer front in order to overwhelm local security forces and seize at least thirty civilian hostages.²⁸¹ The group conducted a simultaneous attack in Suwayda City, firing on civilians and detonating at least two SVESTs. The attacks killed over two hundred Druze and triggered a substantial backlash against Assad and Russia.²⁸² ISIS likely intended to use its operation to deepen this wedge within the Assad regime.

ISW ISIS Forces Disperse in Syria - May 2018 to April 2019



Graphic by Brandon Wallace and Jason Zhou

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- 1. Central Syria Desert
- 2. Idlib Province
- 3. Northern Aleppo and Raqqa Provinces
- 4. Southeastern Damascus

* This map does not account for the movement of all individuals in Syria and only shows major displacement camps and detention facilities relevant to campaigns by or against ISIS undertaken during the addressed time period. This map also does not display the full extent of ISIS's support zones during the addressed time period.

On July 31, 2018, ISIS evacuated another isolated pocket of as many as 1,200 fighters and their families from Dera'a Province to the Syrian desert south-east of Damascus through an agreement with the Assad regime.²⁸³ It threatened to execute the Druze it seized in Suwayda Province in order to pressure

pro-Assad regime forces to accept this withdrawal.²⁸⁴ The deal indicated a high level of coordination and communication between geographically disparate ISIS elements in Southern Syria.

ISIS likely decided to withdraw from Dera'a Province as a part of its reorganization in July 2018. By July 8,

opposition forces and Al Qaeda elements had ceded Southern Syria to the Assad regime.²⁸⁵ ISIS likely perceived both a heightened risk of further clearing operations and an opportunity to reset, tap local discontent, and wage a new insurgency in former opposition-held regions of Dera'a and Quneitra Provinces in Southern Syria.

In August 2018, Assad and Russia launched operations to clear ISIS from its foothold in the Syrian desert near Suwayda Province.²⁸⁶ Pro-Assad regime forces encircled the ISIS forces by August 23 but could not expel ISIS from its network of caverns and tunnels in the Al-Safa region.²⁸⁷ ISIS agreed to withdraw to the central Syria desert in exchange for the release of its hostage Druze,²⁸⁸ but nonetheless left some residual capacity in Al-Safa. In March 2019, pro-Assad regime forces engaged in new clashes with ISIS in Al-Safa.²⁸⁹

Central Syria. ISIS conducted sporadic, complex attacks against pro-Assad regime forces in central Syria. One was a complex attack on May 22, 2018, involving an SVBIED and several armored vehicles at the regime-held T3 pumping station near Palmyra.²⁹⁰ ISIS went relatively dormant in this area until April 2019. Between April 17 and 19, it ambushed a pro-Assad regime convoy along the main ground line of communication (GLOC) between Palmyra and Raqqa City.²⁹¹ On April 18, another ISIS attack killed eight pro-Assad regime soldiers in Mayadin, likely disrupting the regime's deployment of reinforcements to central Syria.²⁹² The attacks demonstrated that ISIS could coordinate increasingly sophisticated attacks on multiple fronts simultaneously in the central Syrian desert.

The ISIS VBIED campaign did not focus on territory held by the Assad regime in this phase. ISIS detonated one SVBIED in the town of Zayzun in Dera'a Province on July 10, 2018 but did not conduct additional VBIED attacks in areas held by pro-Assad regime forces.²⁹³

Expanded Campaign against the SDF

In early 2019, ISIS began conducting increasingly successful attacks in SDF-held Northern Syria. It detonated an SVEST against a U.S.-SDF patrol in Manbij in January 2019, killing four Americans.²⁹⁴

ISIS also detonated three VBIEDs in Manbij city — in October 2018, April 2019, and May 2019—and targeted an SDF convoy near Manbij in March 2019 with a VBIED. In addition, ISIS targeted a key urban center farther south along the Euphrates River Valley. It detonated two VBIEDs in Shuhayl, one in October 2018 and the other in February 2019. ISIS is likely responsible for a third attempted VBIED attack in Shuhayl in March 2019. The Appendix details these attacks.

ISIS is also disrupting U.S. and SDF freedom of movement along the primary GLOCs between Deir ez-Zour and Hasaka Provinces in Eastern Syria. It has conducted repeated ambushes along the Khabur River Valley, including two failed assassination attempts targeting SDF spokesperson Laila al-Abdullah and SDF Deir ez-Zour Military Council head Abu Khawla on February 14 and 15, 2019.²⁹⁵ ISIS also detonated SVBIEDs targeting joint U.S.-SDF convoys near Shaddadi in January and April 2019.²⁹⁶ It likely intends to force the SDF to overstretch and commit additional forces along isolated GLOCs in Eastern Syria and to undermine the SDF's security and governance structures.

ISIS also launched a campaign of assassinations against the SDF in order to fracture it over time. ISIS increased the rate of its attacks of leaders of the SDF's Syrian Arab Coalition (SAC) to inflame ethnic tensions and cause a split between Kurds and Arabs in the SDF. It assassinated prominent SDF Raqqa Civil Council member Sheikh Bashir Faisal al-Huwaydi in Raqqa City on November 1, 2018²⁹⁷ and attacked a vehicle carrying several members of the Deir ez-Zour Civil Council on December 7.²⁹⁸ On December 29 it assassinated the Deir ez-Zour Civil Council legislative co-chair on the Hasaka-Deir ez-Zour highway.²⁹⁹

The SDF is losing local support from Sunni Arabs under the pressure of the ISIS resurgence in Northern Syria. Local residents organized dozens of street protests against the SDF in Deir ez-Zour Province in April and May 2019 after numerous SDF raids against alleged ISIS cells.³⁰⁰ In mid-May 2019, the SDF reached an agreement with prominent tribal leaders in order to de-escalate the protests.³⁰¹ On June 1, the SDF began restructuring

to provide increased authority to local councils in Deir ez-Zour Province.³⁰² It also began to release hundreds of women and children from the overcrowded Al-Hawl IDP camp in Northern Syria.³⁰³ ISIS will likely attempt to disrupt this temporary rapprochement. It has begun to burn crops across SDF-held Deir ez-Zour, Raqqa, and Hasaka Provinces as of May 2019.³⁰⁴ It may also have begun to impose a *zakat* tax on vulnerable populations in Deir ez-Zour Province.³⁰⁵

Prison Breaks

ISIS fighters began conducting limited prison breaks in late 2018. At least ten ISIS fighters escaped an opposition detention facility in Al-Bab in Northern Syria on September 29, 2018.³⁰⁶ Twenty-one ISIS detainees escaped the Fort Suse prison in Iraqi Kurdistan on December 11.³⁰⁷ Nearly eighty prisoners, including some ISIS fighters, escaped from the

HTS-run Idlib City prison on March 12, 2019, following Russian airstrikes.³⁰⁸ Detained ISIS militants later attempted to break out of a detention facility in Malikiyah in northern Hasaka Province that holds around 400 foreign fighters.³⁰⁹ It is unclear from available evidence whether these prison breaks were coordinated events or the initiative of cadres of detained fighters. Many of the escaped fighters were later recaptured. ISIS is nonetheless likely to conduct further attacks on prisons in the coming months.

ISIS will likely also attack displacement camps in order to free sympathetic civilians held in de facto detention. It already conducted one such attack against an IDP camp along the Middle Euphrates River Valley on October 11-12, 2018, releasing 130 families.³¹⁰ ISIS likely intends to repatriate the former population of its caliphate and thus will likely attack other displacement camps in Iraq and Syria.

Soldiers Harvest II (B)

ISIS's successful reconstitution as an insurgency is an inflection as significant as its declaration of the caliphate. Baghdadi marked this occasion by releasing his second-ever video message on April 29, 2019.³¹¹ He deliberately recreated an iconic video of AQI emir Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, reinforcing his role as the military commander of ISIS. Baghdadi also reinforced his image as a global religious leader, dying his beard with henna in a tradition believed to date to the Prophet Mohammad.³¹² He focused predominantly on ISIS operations outside Iraq and Syria, galvanizing ISIS's global community of fighters and supporters.

Baghdadi's video kicked off a new phase of ISIS operations. His organization surged globally during Ramadan 2019, conducting the devastating attack on Easter Sunday in Sri Lanka and creating three new global provinces—in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, India, and Pakistan.³¹³ The video also

contained the first overt reference to a (likely preexisting) province in Turkey.³¹⁴ The continued global expansion of ISIS will enable it to further accelerate its resurgence in Iraq and Syria through financial and material support as well as renewed momentum and global resonance.

ISIS is also transitioning to a more aggressive offensive campaign in Iraq and Syria as of June 2019 in order to set conditions for future operations to seize territory. ISIS announced a new global campaign, the Battle of Attrition, on May 31. Within the Battle of Attrition, ISIS claimed responsibility for operations in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, West Africa, Libya, Somalia, Central Africa, Pakistan, and the Sinai Peninsula.³¹⁵

ISIS will conduct further sophisticated attacks in this next phase across Iraq and Syria. *Al-Naba's* lead editorial on April 18, 2019, instructed ISIS forces



ABOVE: *ISIS Leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi appears in his second-ever video release on April 29, 2019 after ISIS's loss of its last territorial control zone in Eastern Syria. (Credit: SITE) "IS Leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi Appears in Video, Acknowledges End of Baghuz Battle and Sri Lanka Attack," SITE Intelligence Group, April 29, 2019, http://sitemultimedia.org/video/SITE_IS_Baghdad_Hospitality_Emir_Believers.mp4.*

to focus on degrading opposing forces in order to seize territory. It stated:

The mujahideen in Iraq didn't seize cities and realize tamkin [territorial control] overnight, as some imagine, nor did they form the organized army of the Caliphate and immediately enter a frontal war with the polytheists. Rather, they persisted in an exhausting war of attrition for years ... The soldiers of the Caliphate's guerrilla units spread in various countries are capable, God permitting, of repeating the lesson of the "conquest of Mosul" once more, and planting that blessed experience in any land.³¹⁶

Other ISIS publications indicate that the group will likely begin the temporary seizure of territory to test its renewed combat capabilities in Iraq and Syria and to overstretch counter-ISIS forces. In April-May 2019, *Al-Naba* published a four-part series titled

"The Temporary Fall of Cities as a Working Method for the Mujahideen."³¹⁷ The articles provided operational guidance on seizing small cities temporarily to demonstrate capability, attrit rival forces, gain access to supplies, and generate battlefield momentum. It used the example of a raid in rural Libya in April 2018, in which ISIS seized a town for several hours before retreating.³¹⁸

ISIS's focus on attrition is a dangerous sign of the sophistication of its campaign, rather than its weakness. As of June 2019, ISIS likely has the capability to seize another major urban center in Iraq or Syria. It has chosen instead to pursue political and security conditions that will enable it to seize and hold larger and potentially more enduring pieces of territory in the future.

In Iraq and Syria, ISIS will likely use this tactic first against forces not directly partnered with the U.S., such as Iraq's PMF, the Assad regime, and Al Qaeda. ISIS may use its reconstituted VBIED networks to support this campaign. The group could use VBIED "waves" either to degrade security within urban

centers it intends to seize temporarily in the future, or create exploitable security gaps by its opponents to redeploy to the cities. ISIS detonated a wave of six IEDs in Kirkuk City on May 30, 2019.³¹⁹ The inflection suggests that ISIS could conduct its first reconstituted “wave” of VBIEDs in Kirkuk City.

In Iraq, ISIS will also continue to expand its extortion schemes and de facto control over rural Sunnis.³²⁰ It may begin liberating detained fighters and sympathizers from prisons and displacement camps. It will likely invigorate its campaign in Anbar Province, where it has been steadily eroding sources of local resistance. ISIS’s Wilayat Iraq released a video on June 2 showing footage from a nighttime raid conducted on November 12, 2018, which targeted nine tribal militia leaders near the Karma District, northeast of Fallujah.³²¹ The release marked the group’s first video from Fallujah since April 2017.

In Syria, ISIS will continue to scale up its campaign against the SDF in order to drive wedges between Kurds and Arabs in Northern Syria. If successful, ISIS could once again stand a viable chance to seize terrain in the Euphrates River Valley. ISIS will likely continue to attack deep into SDF-held terrain in

Northern Syria and could attempt to inflict enough damage to force the YPG to withdraw from the Middle Euphrates River Valley of Deir ez-Zour Province.

ISIS will also continue to scale up its campaign against the Assad regime in Syria. It will conduct complex attacks in Central Syria in order to disrupt transit through the central Syrian desert and create additional freedom of maneuver into Western Syria. ISIS may resume complex attacks against pro-Assad regime forces along the Euphrates River Valley in order to set conditions for the seizure of territory in Eastern Syria. ISIS is also expanding its insurgency farther west. It claimed an attack on pro-Assad regime forces in Dera’a Province on June 4, 2019. The attack is its first claimed operation in Dera’a Province since it withdrew from its control zone along the Golan Heights in November 2018.³²² ISIS will likely conduct additional attacks in coming months to exploit and drive renewed instability in Southern Syria.

The U.S. must develop a long-term strategy to defeat ISIS and end the conditions of state collapse that enable its regeneration in Iraq and Syria.

Conclusion

The U.S. is repeating the mistake of deprioritizing an enemy at a pivotal moment when its gains are at their most fragile, an error that helped enable ISIS to rise from 2012-2014. ISIS is already more capable than AQI was after the surge. The ISIS campaign in Iraq and Syria has demonstrated to ostensibly liberated communities that they are not safe, perpetuating conditions of fear and distrust that will make it increasingly difficult to establish durable and legitimate security and political structures across Iraq and Syria. ISIS's next resurgence could be faster and even more devastating than 2014.

Another limited intervention will not be sufficient. The U.S. must develop a long-term strategy to defeat ISIS and end the conditions of state collapse that enable its regeneration in Iraq and Syria. CENTCOM warned in February 2019 that if Sunni Arab “socio-economic, political, and sectarian grievances are not adequately addressed by the national and local governments ... it is very likely that ISIS will have the opportunity to set conditions for future resurgence and territorial control.”³²³ The U.S. must acknowledge that its local partners are not going to address these grievances without substantial outside help, while other factions—such as Assad, Russia, and, Iran—will exacerbate them.

The U.S. must halt its ongoing withdrawal from Syria, which President Trump announced in December 2018.³²⁴ CJTF-OIR assessed in February 2019 that the SDF would be “unable to conduct meaningful offensive operations” without continued air support, while the affiliated SAC is “probably unable to conduct offensive operations against ISIS” without the Syrian Kurdish YPG.³²⁵ U.S. support currently unites the SDF, which could begin to fracture under the combined pressures of ISIS, Turkey, and a potential drawdown by the Trump Administration. An ISIS return to territorial control is nearly certain if the U.S. withdraws from Eastern Syria.

Turkey will oppose increased American support to the SDF. The U.S. should focus its efforts on increasing the strength and capability of Arab SDF elements, which do not threaten Turkey as much as the Kurdish elements. Supporting these Arab groups will enable the U.S. to better combat ISIS's insurgency, which is strongest in Arab areas, and will also decrease the SDF's overall reliance on the Kurdish forces that Turkey opposes. The U.S. should condition increased support to the SDF on reforms of its behavior to ensure that it represents both Arabs and Kurds regardless of whether or not they support the political ideology of the SDF. These steps alone will not appease Turkey but they can reduce the likelihood that continued American efforts to find a durable resolution to the problem of ISIS in Iraq and Syria lead to increased tensions and the risk of conflict.

The U.S. must also aggressively prioritize the devastating humanitarian crisis across Iraq and Syria. This effort should include work with local partners to address the terrible living conditions in displacement camps in both countries; diplomatic pressure to investigate and hold accountable security forces for violations of international humanitarian law; increased financial assistance to rebuild destroyed urban centers; and additional aid to organizations that provide life-saving supplies to traumatized populations. American partners and allies should contribute to this effort, but the U.S. must recognize that it is the only country with both the ability and moral clarity to lead this campaign in Iraq and Syria.

APPENDIX I: VBIED and MBIED Attacks

Note: This methodology counts vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs) and motorcycle-borne improvised explosive devices (MBIEDs) in which the vehicle is wired with explosives to create an outward-focused blast, not improvised explosive devices (IEDs) targeting vehicles or their occupants. Attacks using a suicide driver are indicated with an "S" (e.g., SVBIED).

KEY

Red = Thwarted Attack

Blue = Attack Not Claimed by ISIS

Data from January 1, 2018-June 7, 2018, corresponding to the latter half of ISIS's initial insurgent phase

JANUARY 2018

07 JAN 2018: VBIED detonated against the headquarters of a Russian Caucasus Salafi-jihadist group, Ajnad Kavkaz, in Idlib City, Idlib Province, Syria.³²⁶

25 JAN 2018: MBIED detonated next to the Shrine of Khidr Elias in Daquq District, Kirkuk Province, Iraq. The attack did not cause any casualties.³²⁷

FEBRUARY 2018

08 FEB 2018: SMBIED detonated against a tribal PMF unit on 40th Street, Ramadi, Anbar Province, Iraq.³²⁸

10 FEB 2018: VBIED detonated against civilians in a plaza in Idlib City, Idlib Province, Syria.³²⁹

12 FEB 2018: VBIED detonated against a police station in Ma'arat Misreen, Idlib Province, Syria.³³⁰

18 FEB 2018: VBIED detonated against a civilian neighborhood in Qamishli, Hasaka Province, Syria.³³¹

MARCH 2018

24 MAR 2018: VBIED detonated against an SSG building in Idlib City, Idlib Province, Syria.³³²

APRIL 2018

07 APR 2018: VBIED detonated against the Grand Mosque in Al-Bab, Aleppo Province, Syria.³³³

17 APR 2018: VBIED near Fourth Bridge, Mosul, Ninewa Province, Iraq, dismantled by Iraqi Counter-Terrorism Service (CTS).³³⁴

MAY 2018

03 MAY 2018: VBIED detonated against an aid organization in Al-Dana, Idlib Province, Syria.³³⁵

09 MAY 2018: VBIED detonated against Maysat Square, Damascus, Syria.³³⁶

12 MAY 2018: VBIED detonated against an HTS tribunal for captured ISIS fighters in Idlib City, Idlib Province, Syria.³³⁷

26 MAY 2018: VBIED detonated against a school and refugee center on 30th Street, Idlib City, Idlib Province, Syria.³³⁸

JUNE 2018

13 JUN 2018: VBIED dismantled on the Baghdad-Kirkuk highway in Bab al-Sham District, Baghdad, Iraq by Iraqi Interior Ministry.³³⁹

21 JUN 2018: VBIED and MBIED detonated against an HTS military headquarters in Idlib City, Idlib Province, Syria.³⁴⁰

Data from ISIS's Soldiers Harvest II (A) Campaign from July 2018-May 2019

JULY 2018

01 JUL 2018: SVBIED detonated against a ballot box storage facility in Kirkuk City, Kirkuk Province, Iraq. ISIS claimed responsibility in an official communique.³⁴¹

01 JUL 2018: SMBIED detonated against a checkpoint in Hasaka City, Hasaka Province, Syria. ISIS claimed responsibility in an official communique.³⁴²

03 JUL 2018: VBIED in the Industrial District, Qamishli, Hasaka Province, Syria dismantled by Kurdish Asayish Internal Security Forces.³⁴³

06 JUL 2018: VBIED detonated against the al-Ah-rar Mosque in Muhandisin District, Idlib City, Idlib Province, Syria.³⁴⁴

10 JUL 2018: SVBIED detonated against pro-As-sad regime forces in Zayzun, Dera'a Province, Syria. ISIS claimed responsibility in an official communique.³⁴⁵

16 JUL 2018: VBIED detonated near Tikrit, Salah ad-Din Province, Iraq while being disarmed by Iraqi Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD).³⁴⁶

AUGUST 2018

02 AUG 2018: VBIED detonated against a military court affiliated with HTS in Idlib City, Idlib Province, Syria.³⁴⁷

29 AUG 2018: SVBIED detonated against a checkpoint south of Al-Qaim, Anbar Province, Iraq.

30 AUG 2018: SVBIED detonated against checkpoint run by Iraqi federal police in Abbasi, Hawija District, Kirkuk Province, Iraq.³⁴⁸

SEPTEMBER 2018

06 SEP 2018: VBIEDs seized as part of a raid on a cell north of Baghdad, Iraq by Iraqi Interior Ministry. The cell reportedly planned to conduct attacks in Baghdad.³⁴⁹

12 SEP 2018: VBIED detonated against a restaurant near Tikrit, Salah ad-Din Province, Iraq.³⁵⁰

19 SEP 2018: VBIED detonated against a Shi'a shrine and the Iraqi Shi'a Dawa Party headquarters in Tiseen District, Kirkuk City, Kirkuk Province, Iraq.³⁵¹

OCTOBER 2018

03 OCT 2018: VBIED detonated against a school in Dumiz District, Kirkuk Province, Iraq.³⁵²

03 OCT 2018: VBIED detonated against a checkpoint run by the SDF in Gharanij, Deir ez-Zour Province, Syria.³⁵³

03 OCT 2018: VBIED detonated against civilians on the highway outside Manbij City, Aleppo Province, Syria.³⁵⁴

06 OCT 2018: VBIED detonated against a market in Fallujah, Anbar Province, Iraq.³⁵⁵

09 OCT 2018: MBIED detonated against an SDF office on Nour Street, Raqqa City, Raqqa Province, Syria.³⁵⁶

13 OCT 2018: VBIED detonated against civilians in the Hai Tanak District, Kirkuk City, Kirkuk Province, Iraq.³⁵⁷

21 OCT 2018: VBIED detonated against a mosque and HTS security building in Qusour District, Idlib City, Idlib Province, Syria.³⁵⁸

23 OCT 2018: VBIED detonated against a restaurant in Qayyarah, Ninewa Province, Iraq.³⁵⁹

24 OCT 2018: VBIED detonated against an SDF convoy near Shuhayl, Deir ez-Zour Province, Syria.³⁶⁰

NOVEMBER 2018

04 NOV 2018: VBIED detonated against an SDF checkpoint on Nour Street, Raqqa City, Raqqa Province, Syria. ISIS claimed responsibility in an official communique.³⁶¹

04 NOV 2018: VBIED detonated against a school on Atba Street, Shirqat, Salah ad-Din Province, Iraq.³⁶²

08 NOV 2018: VBIED detonated against a restaurant in Western Mosul, Ninewa Province, Iraq.³⁶³

18 NOV 2018: VBIED detonated against a restaurant on Tabah Street, Tikrit, Salah ad-Din Province, Iraq.³⁶⁴ ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack.

25 NOV 2018: MBIED detonated in Ma'arat al-Numan, Idlib Province, Syria. Specific target remains unclear.³⁶⁵

DECEMBER 2018

06 DEC 2018: SVBIED in Fallujah, Anbar Province, Iraq intercepted by Iraqi PMF 2nd Brigade. The fourteen-year-old bomber also wore an SVEST.³⁶⁶

25 DEC 2018: VBIED detonated against a cafe in Ras al-Jadah District, Tel Afar, Ninewa Province. ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack.³⁶⁷

JANUARY 2019

05 JAN 2019: VBIED attempting to enter Hit, Anbar Province, Iraq intercepted by 7th Iraqi Army Division, 29th Infantry Brigade.³⁶⁸

08 JAN 2019: SVBIED detonated against a checkpoint in Tikrit, Salah ad-Din Province, Iraq.³⁶⁹

08 JAN 2019: MBIED detonated against civilians in a neighborhood near Nour Street, Raqqa City, Raqqa Province, Syria.³⁷⁰

11 JAN 2019: VBIED detonated against a market in Qaim, Anbar Province, Iraq.³⁷¹

18 JAN 2019: VBIED detonated against a checkpoint and headquarters for HTS in Idlib City, Idlib Province, Syria.³⁷²

21 JAN 2019: SVBIED detonated against a convoy of U.S. and SDF Forces on the Hasaka-Shaddadi highway, Hasaka Province, Syria.³⁷³

23 JAN 2019: SVBIED detonated against an Iraqi federal police checkpoint in Riyadh, Kirkuk Province, Iraq.³⁷⁴

30 JAN 2019: SVBIED intercepted at a checkpoint in Jurf al-Sakhar, Babil Province, Iraq by Iraqi PMF 46th Brigade.³⁷⁵

FEBRUARY 2019

18 FEB 2019: Two VBIEDs detonated against civilians and first responders on Qusour Street, Idlib City, Idlib Province, Syria. The SSG Ministry of Interior blamed the attack on Syrian president Bashar al-Assad.³⁷⁶

28 FEB 2019: VBIED detonated against a cafe near Mosul University, Mosul, Ninewa Province, Iraq.³⁷⁷

MARCH 2019

08 MAR 2019: VBIED detonated in Muthanna District, Mosul, Ninewa Province, Iraq. The VBIED targeted Col. Hisham al-Najm, Iraqi National Security Service director of Mosul Security.³⁷⁸

08 MAR 2019: SVBIED detonated against a SDF convoy on the Manbij-Al-Bab highway near the Tomb of Sheikh Aqeel, Aleppo Province, Syria.³⁷⁹

11 MAR 2019: Two VBIEDs in Idlib City, Idlib Province, Syria dismantled by HTS. HTS blamed the VBIEDs as well as a “number” of additional VBIEDs in Greater Idlib Province on intelligence cells affiliated with Syrian president Bashar al-Assad.³⁸⁰

20 MAR 2019: VBIED in Shuhayl, Deir ez-Zour Province, Syria dismantled by Kurdish Asayish Internal Security Forces.³⁸¹

APRIL 2019

09 APR 2019: SVBIED detonated against a joint U.S.-SDF convoy on the Hasaka-Shaddadi highway, Hasaka Province, Syria.³⁸²

09 APR 2019: VBIED detonated against an SDF vehicle on Nour Street, Raqqa City, Raqqa Province, Syria.³⁸³

10 APR 2019: MBIED targeting a funeral procession in Manbij, Aleppo Province, Syria dismantled by Manbij Military Council.³⁸⁴

24 APR 2019: VBIED detonated against a market in Jisr al-Shughour, Idlib Province, Syria.³⁸⁵

MAY 2019

01 MAY 2019: VBIED in Tal Abtah, Sinjar District, Ninewa Province, Iraq destroyed by Ninewa provincial police and Iraqi PMF 40th Brigade.³⁸⁶

16 MAY 2019: SVBIED detonated against a Manbij Military Council building in Manbij, Aleppo Province, Syria.³⁸⁷

18 MAY 2019: MBIED detonated against civilians in Dawassah District, Western Mosul, Ninewa Province, Iraq.³⁸⁸

20 MAY 2019: SVBIED detonated against a SDF convoy on the Shaddadi-Deir ez-Zour Highway, Hasaka Province, Syria.³⁸⁹

23 MAY 2019: MBIED detonated against a joint SDF-U.S. convoy outside of Tel Tamer, Hasaka Province, Syria.³⁹⁰

26 MAY 2019: VBIED detonated against a market in Rabia District, Ninewa Province, Iraq.³⁹¹

27 MAY 2019: 6th Iraqi Army Division, engineering units dismantled a VBIED at a checkpoint outside of Abu Ghraib, Fallujah District, Anbar Province, Iraq.³⁹²

Soldiers Harvest II (B) Campaign: June 2019-[ongoing]

JUNE 2019

01 JUN 2019: SVBIED detonated against an SDF position near al-Naim Square, Raqqa City, Raqqa Province, Syria.³⁹³

03 JUN 2019: 30th PMF Brigade dismantled a VBIED in the Gogjali neighborhood, eastern Mosul City, Ninewa Province, Iraq.³⁹⁴

04 JUN 2019: Anbar Provincial Police, 24th Regiment killed an ISIS militant operating an MBIED and also wearing an SVEST in al-Rumana, al-Qaim District, Anbar Province, Iraq.³⁹⁵






06 JUN 2019: VBIED detonated against civilian homes in Jab Mazkhzoum, Aleppo Province, Syria.³⁹⁶

Iraq Locator Map



Syria Locator Map



Syria Map Key	
River	
Road	
Capital	
Provincial Capital	
Other City	

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List of Acronyms

AFCENT: U.S. Air Forces Central Command | Air Force service component of CENTCOM.

AQ: Al Qaeda.

AQI: Al Qaeda in Iraq.

AQIM: Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb | Al Qaeda's premier affiliate in northern and western Africa.

CENTCOM: U.S. Central Command | Combatant command of the U.S. Department of Defense, responsible for 20 countries across the Middle East, Central Asia, and South Asia.

CJTF-OIR: Combined Joint Task Force - Operation Inherent Resolve | U.S.-led coalition of forces organized to defeat ISIS in designated areas of Iraq and Syria.

CTS: Counter-Terrorism Service (Iraq) | Iraqi counterterrorism forces independent of the Iraqi Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Interior.

DIA: Defense Intelligence Agency.

DIBS: Disputed Internal Boundaries (Iraq) | Areas claimed by both the semi-autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government and the Iraqi government.

DOD: U.S. Department of Defense.

DRV: Diyala River Valley | Lush geographic terrain near the Diyala River, a tributary river in Diyala Province which connects to the Tigris.

ERV: Euphrates River Valley | Lush geographic terrain near the Euphrates River.

FP: Federal Police (Iraq) | Paramilitary police force subordinate to the Iraqi Ministry of Interior.

GLOC: Ground Line of Communication | Route which connects a military unit to a supply base.

HIMARS: High Mobility Artillery Rocket System.

HQ: Headquarters.

HTS: Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (Syria) | The Syrian Al-Qaeda affiliate.

IDP: Internally Displaced Person.

IED: Improvised Explosive Device.

ISF: Iraqi Security Forces (Iraq) | Law enforcement and military forces subordinate to the government of Iraq.

ISIS: Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham.

ISOFF: Iraqi Special Operations Forces (Iraq) | Iraqi special forces subordinate to the Counter-Terrorism Service.

KIA: Killed in Action.

KRG: Kurdistan Regional Government (Iraq) | Semi-autonomous region of Northern Iraq.

PKK: Kurdistan Workers' Party.

LAF: Lebanese Armed Forces.

MBIED: Motorcycle-Borne Improvised Explosive Device | An explosive concealed within a motorcycle designed to direct an explosive blast outward to maximize casualties or structural damage.

MERV: Middle Euphrates River Valley | An area within the Euphrates River Valley comprising the terrain between approximately Mayadin, Deir ez-Zour Province, Syria, and Ana, Anbar Province, Iraq.

MMC: Manbij Military Council (Syria) | One of four military councils within the Syrian Democratic Forces, the U.S.-partnered force in Syria.

NCTC: National Counterterrorism Center | Mission center within the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, responsible for analyzing and integrating intelligence pertaining to counterterrorism.

NGO: Non-Governmental Organization.

OIG: Office of the Inspector General | U.S. agency which provides oversight of Department of Defense operations and programs.

PMF: Popular Mobilization Forces (Iraq) | Umbrella organization composed mainly of Shia Iraqi militias, serving as a component of the Iraqi Security Forces.

SAC: Syrian Arab Coalition (SAC) | Arab components of the SDF.

SAFI: Syrian Air Force Intelligence (Syria) | One of the most influential intelligence directorates within the Syrian regime's security apparatus.

SDF: Syrian Democratic Forces | U.S.-backed partner force in Syria.

SOCOM: U.S. Special Operations Command | Combatant command of the Department of Defense responsible for the Special Operations Component Commands.

SSG: Syrian Salvation Government (Syria) | An Islamist governance structure which operates in Greater Idlib Province, Syria, and is backed by al Qaeda affiliate HTS.

SVBIED: Suicide Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Device | An explosive concealed within a vehicle, delivered to the target by a suicide bomber and designed to direct an explosive blast outwards to maximize casualties or structural damage.

SVEST: Suicide Vest.

USAID: U.S. Agency for International Development.

VBIED: Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Device | An explosive concealed within a vehicle, designed to direct an explosive blast outwards to maximize casualties or structural damage.

WHO: World Health Organization.

WIA: Wounded in Action.

YPG: People's Protection Units (Syrian Kurdish) | Kurdish militia that is the dominant faction of the SDF and the Syrian affiliate of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

Endnotes

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ISIS was able to retain support zones despite its loss of territory and even built robust subterranean infrastructure in which it reportedly conducted training. **Combined Arms Capability:** AQI did not fight with the same scale of combined-arms maneuver capability as ISIS but did conduct similar operations. AQI essentially lost this capability during the Surge. **Media Apparatus:** ISIS media operations declined precipitously in late 2017, indicating that much of its media capability depended on its urban control zones. The organization continued to release propaganda, however, indicating that this capability was damaged rather than destroyed. AQI's media apparatus was also degraded but not destroyed as evidenced by the group's media operations in early 2012. 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