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The Islamic State's Resurgence in the COVID Era? From Defeat to Renewal in Iraq and Syria

by [Aaron Y. Zelin](#), [Michael Knights](#)

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Brief Analysis

Two experts assess the recent attack patterns and future prospects of a group that once seemed on the cusp of defeat in both countries.

On May 26, Aaron Zelin and Michael Knights addressed a virtual Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Zelin is the Institute's Richard Borow Fellow, a visiting research scholar at Brandeis University, and author of the book [Your Sons Are at Your Service: Tunisia's Missionaries of Jihad](#). Knights, a senior fellow with the Institute, has conducted extensive on-the-ground research in Iraq alongside security forces and government ministries. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

AARON ZELIN

A lot has happened for the Islamic State (IS) since March 2019, when it lost its last territorial bastion in Baghuz, Syria. Today, the group continues to operate as an insurgency in many parts of the country while also dealing

with a leadership transition. Several provinces have seen numerous IS attacks over the past fourteen months: 638 in Deir al-Zour, 168 in Raqqa, 153 in Hasaka, 52 in Homs, 51 in Deraa, 17 in Aleppo, 4 in Damascus, and 1 in Quneitra.

Most of these attacks—particularly in 2020—have occurred in Deir al-Zour, so it is important to understand why the group is so strong there. One key reason is that the heartland of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)—the Kurdish-led entity that has proven to be a potent IS adversary over the years—lies in Hasaka well north of the area where attacks are most common. The SDF is therefore playing as the “away team” in Deir al-Zour, without the degree of local control and support that IS has taken advantage of there. Turkey’s military incursion in parts of north Syria last October exacerbated this problem, providing more space for IS to operate as the SDF diverted forces to protect its communities closer to the border. The partial U.S. withdrawal from Syria has had repercussions as well.

IS forces are enjoying the resultant opportunities to conduct revenge strikes against local leaders, attack oil/gas supply lines, raid convoys, and kidnap people for ransom. The latter tactic has enabled the group to demand prisoner swaps and gather intelligence by interrogating hostages.

Southwest Syria is likewise facing a renewed insurgency. Amid [renewed violence](#) between local opposition factions and the army, IS has exploited the unrest in an effort to recruit new individuals who might have grievances against the Assad regime, Iranian-backed militias, or the Russian military. Several attacks have been reported in south Quneitra, northeast Deraa, and northwest Suwayda. These areas were home to active IS cells in the past, and the group has maintained the ability to operate there even after seemingly being defeated in each locale. Deraa in particular bears watching because it has suffered a large uptick in attacks over the past couple months

Another lingering issue is what to do with IS personnel imprisoned in SDF jails, not to mention the thousands of displaced women and children who remain in camps under SDF control. Many foreign countries have yet to take back their citizens in these facilities, creating the potential for a repeat of what happened in Iraq in 2012-2014: mass breakouts of IS prisoners. The past Iraqi breakouts at Taji and Abu Ghraib came after several failed attempts, so authorities should not derive a false sense of security from the lack of successful attempts in Syria thus far.

As for the camps, their population has decreased somewhat but not nearly enough—for example, al-Hawl camp is still home to around 65,000 people. Many of the children there have spent their entire lives either under IS control or in camp conditions, increasing the potential for radicalization.

Regarding the effects of COVID-19, it is unclear whether the pandemic is exacerbating the IS resurgence or not, especially since accurate infection statistics are so difficult to obtain in Syria. Thus far, the number of reported local cases is not as high as in other regional countries, in part because the SDF has locked down much of its territory and implemented curfews. Diverting resources to the pandemic response does not appear to be impeding the SDF from operating against IS; and in any event, the terrorist group began laying its insurgency plans long ago, even before losing Baghuz.

MICHAEL KNIGHTS

IS likely sees Iraq as a bigger prize than Syria because of its larger economy and seemingly deeper pool of potential fighters. So far, the group has not reached the same levels of strength in Iraq that it boasted in 2014, when it controlled large swaths of territory, nor in 2013, when it was building up to its big breakout (e.g., it carried out 6,216 attacks in Iraq in 2013, compared to just 1,669 in 2019). A new [in-depth study of incidents](#) over the past year indicates that the group’s strength is just under that seen in 2012, when it was trying to build momentum in the early stages of an eventual recovery from the defeat of its predecessor group years before.

This comparison gives little cause for comfort. The increase in IS attacks has been steady since the second quarter of 2019, rising to 566 in the first quarter of 2020 alone. This is largely a result of IS planning and execution, the framework for which was laid long ago. First, the group established the physical infrastructure for insurgency, using

caves to store hundreds—if not thousands—of caches containing weapons, ammunition, explosives, and other gear. IS also brought some key cadres from Syria back to Iraq, and the reinsertion of these operatives (mainly Iraqis) is affecting tactical leadership at the local level—including the manufacture and use of roadside bombs.

Interesting variations in IS activity have become evident across Iraq’s provinces. Diyala is the most consistent producer of attacks since 2003—no surprise given its complex human and physical terrain, its heavy presence of Iran-backed militias, and the fact that coalition forces cannot embed with local forces there. Provinces where coalition and local forces work together have seen reduced violence, particularly Kirkuk. Yet Diyala, southern Salah al-Din, and some parts of the Baghdad belt are beginning to experience more attacks. The [new Iraqi commander-in-chief](#) will need to find a way of addressing this correlation between increased attacks and lack of coalition/government access.

Indeed, IS has been employing a “rural overmatch strategy” in several parts of the country, attempting to create bastions and no-go zones in rural areas that are too difficult for the central government to access. The group is going to the least populated areas of the country, depopulating them further, and essentially daring Iraqi and coalition forces to move in. Further complicating the picture, Shia militias [continue to interfere](#) with coalition support to the regular military. The challenge going forward is that IS can always wait for better conditions to emerge before attempting a full resurgence—and it knows exactly where to hide out in the meantime.

In terms of reconstruction and stabilization, little has been done in former IS strongholds such as Mosul and Ramadi. To be sure, very little IS militant activity has been seen in these cities either, making a jihadist comeback there unlikely in the short term. Yet the lack of progress could drive up recruitment in heavily damaged urban environments in the longer term. Reconstruction is even more urgently needed in rural areas given the dual imperatives of resettling displaced people and depriving IS of its favored operational environment. The group likes empty places with few outsiders, informers, or security forces, and many depopulated portions of Iraq fit that description all too well at the moment.

Given this rural preference and other factors, the coronavirus pandemic will likely affect Iraq’s security forces more than it does IS. Unfortunately, such a scenario could weaken the international community’s resolve to help professionalize the armed forces. If training relationships are not rebuilt quickly during or after the pandemic, then Iraq will be far worse off, and its counterinsurgency effort will be greatly diluted.

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