

Keeping Down a Diminished Islamic State:

The Prospect of an October Surprise Attack

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Brief Analysis

The relatively low risk underscores the importance of Washington’s continued pressure to curtail the jihadist group’s strike capability outside its areas of operation.

Since at least 2004, U.S. presidential candidates have feared how a terrorist attack could affect their campaigns, particularly in the later stages. With Election Day less than two weeks away, anything could still happen, but it appears that the Islamic State (IS) is far less capable of carrying out an “October surprise” than it was in the run-up to the 2016 election. Then, IS held Manbij and Raqqa in Syria, and also had free use of the Syrian-Turkish border, from which it (1) launched terrorist attacks such as the January 2016 Istanbul bombing and (2) directed attacks in Europe like the March 2016 Brussels bombings.

Islamic State Operations Today

The jihadist group continues to pay lip service to attacking the United States and its allies. Just this month, an IS spokesman called for attacks on Saudi Arabia’s oil pipelines in response to the country’s alleged support for normalizing relations with Israel. In July, the Islamic State’s propaganda wing, al-Hayat Media Center, released a video titled “And Incite the Believers,” which urged followers to set forest fires in the United States and other Western countries. In March, the Islamic State’s *al-Naba* newsletter encouraged IS supporters to exploit reduced security service capacity amid the COVID-19 pandemic to carry out attacks.

IS might wish to attack the United States and Europe for a number of logical reasons:

- **Doing so would make the group look relevant.** As American security officials highlight the threat of domestic white

supremacist violence and election interference by foreign actors such as Russia, an IS operation could stand out as an unguarded flank. IS could use such an operation to (1) demonstrate that the group still represents a serious threat to the United States and (2) expose U.S. vulnerabilities to attack.

- **An attack would embarrass President Trump.** The Trump administration has long claimed that its actions have led to the “defeat” of IS. A significant IS attack could embarrass Trump by challenging this claim.
- **It could disrupt the electoral process.** To delegitimize its government adversaries, IS has historically attacked elections in its areas of operation.

The group has four options for an attack:

- Inspire a terrorist strike on U.S. soil akin to the 2015 shooting at the Inland Regional Center in San Bernardino, California, or the 2016 shooting at Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida.
- Direct an attack through terrorist cells in Europe, as IS did with the 2015 Paris attacks and 2016 Brussels bombings.
- Attack American civilians within the group’s areas of operation, as the Islamic State’s predecessor did in 2002 with the assassination of U.S. diplomat Laurence Foley in Jordan, and years later with the kidnapping and beheading of American journalists James Foley and Steven Sotloff in Syria.
- Execute a conventional strike on U.S. forces in the Middle East, as it has done many times against other actors since 2014.

Alternatively, IS could opt for generally increasing its attacks wherever it can to challenge the notion that it is defeated. This approach would allow the group to maximally leverage its own abilities as well as those of its affiliates. Given the obstacles inherent to all other options, the Islamic State’s choice of a more general approach could be the easiest way to assert its relevance.

Disrupting Islamic State Launchpads

The currently diminished condition of the Islamic State, however, complicates all possible options. Now pushed into the Iraqi and Syrian deserts, the Islamic State is a shadow of what it was in 2016, when it controlled large Iraqi and Syrian cities and plotted high-casualty terrorist attacks in Europe. The prospect of an October surprise now is far less formidable.

What has changed is that IS has lost its large territorial bastions in Iraq, Syria, and Libya. The United States and its allies have conducted an aggressive anti-IS military campaign that has successfully deprived the group of its Middle East territories. With U.S. support, the Iraqi security forces, the Syrian Democratic Forces, and other regional actors have developed the capacity to hold their territories against IS. This capacity has enabled those actors to develop governance structures that could provide a degree of long-term stability and security to their populations, which will, in turn, be less prone to IS recruitment.

This loss of territory has led IS into insurgency, severely limiting its ability to attract foreign fighters, train its members, raise funds, and inspire and direct terrorist attacks in the West, while also eliminating many of its best commanders and experienced fighters. Not only has the loss of IS territory limited the group’s ability to sell itself as fulfilling the duty of reestablishing the Caliphate, but the closing of the Turkish border and increasing counterterrorism measures have crippled the group’s external capabilities. Today’s Islamic State is in recovery mode, focused on touting successful attacks and military operations by IS affiliates to promote its local image and recruitment. In August, an IS-affiliated group in Mozambique took over the port town of Mocimboa da Praia. In February, a pro-IS media group inaugurated a new monthly magazine, *Sawt al-Hind*, which focuses on boosting IS-Hind Province recruitment in India and on inciting Indian IS supporters to attack local security forces.

In parallel to military victories against IS, security services in the United States and Europe have implemented

domestic counterterrorism measures to address the threat of IS. These measures include monitoring, prosecuting, and effectively banning individuals who have traveled abroad to join IS, as well as “target-hardening” efforts such as increasing the presence of security personnel around “soft” civilian targets.

Ensuring that IS remains diminished will require sustained efforts. U.S. Special Forces and airpower have been particularly effective in degrading IS. Withdrawing U.S. forces now from such forward locations as the Euphrates River Valley and the al-Tanf, Harir, and al-Asad military bases could give IS enough breathing room to regroup. Thus, commitment by the United States to remain in the region and support local security forces in operations and training will help prevent an IS comeback. America’s elections seem safer now from an IS attack because of the country’s persistent but thrifty investment in targeted counterterrorism measures. These efforts should be continued to prevent IS from regaining its balance and returning to external operations.

For its part, IS seems to be watching and waiting for the United States to relax. In Iraq and Syria, the group has kept a relatively low profile over the past several months, with its propaganda focusing on external affiliates. This tactic could signal that IS has learned how concentrating its efforts in one high-profile theater makes it more vulnerable to U.S. and international intervention. At the same time, recent IS territorial gains in Mozambique have gone largely unnoticed by the international community. Indeed, continuing to cultivate cells in Africa, India, and elsewhere—while maintaining a low-level presence in former territories and inspiring attacks abroad—could be the Islamic State’s next strategic phase.

Ido Levy is an associate fellow at The Washington Institute who specializes in military and counterterrorism operations, particularly relating to jihadist groups. ❖

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