

The Islamic State in Southern Syria

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Compared to where it was a year ago, the group is far stronger in the south and is gaining steam even as it faces large-scale military campaigns against its forces in the north.

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Over the past two and a half years, the Islamic State has had its ups and downs in the southern front of the Syrian war. Currently, it is in a good position to make further advances in the southern Damascus and al-Lajat regions. There are still questions about its position in al-Qaryatayn due to the ongoing fighting with the regime, and in the al-Qalamoun region due to the large deployment by Lebanese Hezbollah and issues it has had there with Jaysh al-Fatah, an umbrella force dominated by Jabhat al-Nusra and HASI. The Islamic State now appears to have three main priorities in southern Syria: cut the M5 highway between Damascus and Homs to separate the regime from the majority Alawite coastal regions; occupy al-Lajat region in order to cut rebels off from their supply routes into northern Syria; and encircle the capital.

None of this is preordained. Time will tell what the Islamic State can bring to bear and whether its enemies can stand up against it. But compared to where it was in December 2013 or December 2014, the group is far stronger and is gaining more steam. The most pressing question regarding the Islamic State's near-term operations is whether the LSY -- a group that pledged bay'a to the Islamic State a year ago and whose forces have been active in recent fighting -- will announce that it is in fact openly part of the Islamic State, as had been rumored. If that were to occur, it would boost Islamic State efforts to encircle Damascus from the southwest as well as in Dar'a governorate, where LSY forces operate. Another wild card would be if the Islamic State used its southern base as strategic depth if it became more degraded in the north and east due to the large-scale military campaign against it by various foes. Whatever happens, the Islamic State currently has a base in the south and is looking to build on what it has already accomplished since it restarted its southern push a year ago...