



THE ISLAMIC STATE UNDER A NEW REGIONAL AND SECURITY ORDER IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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Annotation

Despite the territorial defeat of the Islamic State (ISIS), the organization continues to pose a significant security challenge through its decentralized insurgent networks in Iraq and Syria. This policy paper examines how the transformation of the regional security order, including the restructuring of counter-ISIS operations, developments in Syria, the consequences of the US–Israel–Iran conflict, and the growing role of ISIS affiliates in Africa and Afghanistan may shape the group's future trajectory. It argues that while a return to the 2014 territorial model remains unlikely, persistent security vacuums and regional instability continue to provide opportunities for ISIS to adapt and survive.

Introduction

Nearly nine years after the declaration of victory over ISIS in Iraq and approximately seven years since the end of the group's expansive territorial control in Syria, and despite the sharp curtailment of its operational mobility, ISIS persists as a clandestine organization and an extensive underground network. At least in the short term, as various analysesⁱ also indicate, it is virtually impossible for the group to return to territorial control and re-establish a proto-state in Iraq and Syria; nevertheless, it can persist as an underground organization and conduct its operations clandestinely.

Yet, three critical dynamics could alter ISIS's future trajectory: the outcome of the war with Iran, the fate of Ahmed al-Sharaa's transitional government in Syria, and ISIS's operational links to its affiliates across the globe, particularly in Africa and Afghanistan. This article outlines, on the one hand, the structural conditions that constrain a resurgence of the 2014 model, while examining on the other,

the security and geopolitical vacuums that enable ISIS to survive as a clandestine network.

ISIS's Current Operational Activity

According to Armed Conflict Location & Event Dataⁱⁱ (ACLED), ISIS conducted an average of 14 incidents per month in Syria during the first seven months of 2026, translating to an operation roughly every two days. The organization has also attempted to operate within major urban centres. For example, if there were fiveⁱⁱⁱ assassination attempts against Ahmed al-Sharaa in 2025 alone, this is no longer just a symbolic act. Operationally, it raises serious questions regarding the capacity of extremist groups to establish sleeper cells, gather intelligence, and infiltrate state institutions. In the same vein, the attacks on the Palmyra military base and the bombing that coincided with President Macron's visit to Syria are notable. While the United States seeks to rely on the new Syrian government to combat ISIS, the presence of diverse Islamist factions within the new governing architecture, some of whom previously maintained ties to ISIS or al-Qaeda, cuts both ways: it could enhance the government's ability to identify and counter jihadi networks, while simultaneously creating opportunities for extremist elements to infiltrate nascent state institutions; For example, according to United Nations (UN) reports^{iv}, at least 3,500 foreign jihadist fighters have been integrated into Syrian military institutions, notably within the 84th Division, including elements of the East Turkestan Islamic Party (ETIP/TIP). Furthermore, the purported dissolution of Hurras al-Din appears to have remained largely cosmetic. Concurrently, groups such as Ansar al-Sunnah, which has mounted several assassination attempts against Sharaa, maintains ties to ISIS, and played an active role in the coastal violence targeting the Alawite



community, have escalated their operational activities. Previously, the United States designated the Ahrar al-Sharqiya faction on its sanctions list for absorbing individuals affiliated with ISIS; today, these fighters are widely assessed to be integrated predominantly into the army's 86th Division, operating across Deir ez-Zor, Raqqa, and Hasakah. It must also be recalled that HTS itself underwent a comparable trajectory; however, in 2025, the UN Security Council delisted both President Sharaa and Anas Khattab from its sanctions list, and Syria subsequently acceded to the Global Coalition Against Daesh. In practice, however, the decisive litmus test for the Sharaa administration will be the extent to which it can compel or persuade all these disparate factions and cadres to actively wage war against ISIS.

Deir ez-Zor and its surrounding areas remaining the focal point of ISIS activity is significant not only due to its tribal and geographical dynamics within Syria, but also because its proximity to the Iraqi border allows ISIS to maintain operational links between its networks in Iraq and Syria. The gravity of this issue is such that United States Central Command (CENTCOM), alongside the recalibration of its posture in Syria and Iraq, views border security coordination among Syria, the Iraqi Army, Peshmerga forces, and Jordan as vital. In Iraq, ISIS operational activity is significantly more constrained. According to the same data from the first seven months of 2026, an incident was recorded on average roughly every six days. Nonetheless, the organization maintains a low-level operational presence across Nineveh, Anbar, Saladin, Kirkuk, and Diyala.

Why ISIS Cannot Replicate the 2014 Model in the Short Term

The structural conditions that enabled the rise and rapid expansion of ISIS in 2014 no longer exist in the same form. ISIS, while the product of an ideology, was equally the byproduct of a specific politico-security order, an order shaped by US military intervention, the political marginalization

of Sunnis in the post-2003 settlement, and the voluntary disengagement of large segments of the Sunni population from that system. Subsequently, the 2011 US withdrawal from Iraq, the Syrian civil war, and the Arab Spring produced a severe security vacuum across a regional theatre where Iran and its aligned groups had achieved overwhelming primacy, stretching from Lebanon to Syria and Iraq.

Today's regional dynamics run largely counter to those conditions. At the regional level, a form of Sunni political resurgence is underway. Regime changes in Syria and Afghanistan, along with broader shifts in the balance of power, have facilitated the emergence of a loose Sunni corridor stretching from Afghanistan to Syria and Turkey, largely composed of Hanafi Sunni elements. While this does not constitute a unified political bloc, it represents a structural realignment in which Sunni communities and actors have attained greater standing and influence. This transformation diminishes the ability of a group like ISIS to exploit grievances of Sunni disenfranchisement.

Concurrently, Shia politics across the region is engulfed in armed conflict and severe crisis. In Syria, the role of Iran and Hezbollah has fundamentally transformed and, for the time being, largely ceased to exist. In Iraq, in contrast to the post-2003 era and the sectarian civil war, Sunni politics is assuming a more active role within the state's broader political arena. Unlike the pre-2014 era, they now actively participate in elections, compelling all other Iraqi factions, including both Kurds and Shiites, to factor Sunni parties into government formation, budgetary deliberations, and foreign policy decisions. Under mounting pressure on Iran, efforts are underway to restructure Shia political dynamics, particularly its armed wing, mirroring developments visible in Lebanon. This shift deprives ISIS of one of its most potent historical mobilization tools: framing itself as the vanguard against Shia political and military dominance.



Another critical factor is the profound war weariness among Sunni communities following decades of relentless conflict. War, displacement, and physical devastation have inflicted deep social and humanitarian scars across Sunni areas in Iraq and Syria. Displaced populations are gradually returning to their homes after years of uprooting. When people return to areas devastated by war, their foremost priority becomes reconstruction and establishing the conditions for a normal life; in other words, priorities shift away from ideology toward the basic necessities of daily existence. Under such conditions, the social ecosystem necessary for ISIS to mobilize mass support and recruit thousands of fighters, as it did in 2014, simply does not exist. Furthermore, past military defeats and the harrowing memory of its rule have socially isolated and marginalized the group more than ever.

An additional factor is the evolution of US policy. Washington now views certain former jihadists as viable counterterrorism partners. This increasingly renders the fight against ISIS an intra-jihadi contest between current and former militants. Such a dynamic constrains ISIS's capacity for mass mobilization and severely restricts the sociopolitical space required to stage a 2014-style resurgence, even though this fluid environment may concurrently afford underground networks opportunities to survive and infiltrate.

ISIS's Operational Opportunities Amid a Shifting Geopolitical Landscape

One of the primary opportunities for an ISIS resurgence stems from the restructuring of the counter-ISIS architecture. The US-led Global Coalition against Daesh is concluding its mission in Iraq this year and transitioning its operational framework, following the handover of the last US base in Syria. Concurrently, the indigenous ground forces tasked with confronting ISIS have undergone a massive transformation. The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) has come to an end, and Washington has pivoted from partnering with them

toward cooperating with Syria's new government to counter ISIS. In Iraq, US forces are in the process of drawing down. At the same time, the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), who also played a role in combating ISIS, are under intense American pressure to undergo structural reforms under a new legal framework designed to ensure closer compliance with prime ministerial directives and impose tighter institutional oversight. In this emerging reality, even if the United States continues to provide assistance and advisory support to local forces, it remains uncertain how effectively these domestic actors can perform against ISIS without the direct presence of the coalition and relying solely on airstrikes. As history has demonstrated, ground forces alone are insufficient to counter ISIS. Syria lacks an effective air force, and while Iraq possesses F-16s and recently secured approval^v to acquire US helicopters that could prove useful against ISIS, robust intelligence and logistical capabilities remain essential. The coming phase will therefore serve as a critical test of whether regional forces can effectively combat ISIS and other extremist groups in the absence of a substantial US and international coalition footprint.

Another crucial factor is that the outcome of the war with Iran represents a primary variable shaping ISIS's future. If the fallout of the conflict spills over into Iraq, compromising detention facility security, diverting security forces toward other fronts, or weakening state authority across peripheral areas, the space for ISIS, or a successor entity, to reconstitute itself will expand. The continued detention of thousands of ISIS-linked prisoners, coupled with persistent gaps along the Iraq-Syria border, exacerbates these vulnerabilities.

Current US assessments suggest that ISIS will be unable to capitalize on the opportunities presented by the 2026 Iran war to revitalize its strength. Strong indicators currently corroborate this perspective, as ISIS operational activity in Iraq and Syria is at historic lows. However, it is premature to render a definitive verdict. The emergence of al-Qaeda in Iraq following the 2003 war and the



resurgence of ISIS following the 2011 US withdrawal both unfolded over several years. The consequences of security order shifts frequently manifest with a temporal lag. Thus, the fact that ISIS has not yet capitalized on this conflict does not preclude it from doing so in the future.

The fate of Ahmed al-Sharaa's transitional government constitutes another decisive variable. Sharaa is a pragmatic figure, but should he be assassinated, should the political transition in Syria unravel, or should more hardline elements gain ascendancy within the new governing architecture, the likelihood of unpredictable and volatile fallout will rise sharply.

ISIS and other extremist factions continue to pose a persistent threat to Syria. The demonstrated capacity of some of these elements to breach the perimeter of the Syrian president and attempt his assassination, as noted by the UN Secretary-General^{vi}, raises grave questions regarding the operational cells and logistics networks at their disposal.

ISIS currently retains at least 3,000^{vii} fighters in Syria. Approximately 150 individuals have escaped from detention centres, including 20 high-ranking commanders; meanwhile, around 3,000 others remain incarcerated in Al-Roj camp, and large populations in camps such as al-Hol face an uncertain future, although the vast majority of camp residents are women and children rather than active combatants.

The integration of former jihadists into state power could serve as an obstacle to ISIS, as these actors are intimately familiar with the operational networks, rhetoric, and methodologies of jihadi groups. Paradoxically, however, this very condition could present opportunities for ISIS if institutional boundaries between disparate factions and formal organs remain blurred, or if legacy clandestine networks succeed in infiltrating the new establishment. Recent ISIS activity in urban centres suggests that the organization is actively adapting to

this transformed operating environment and reinforcing its underground cells.

The ascendance of ISIS affiliates across Africa^{viii} and Afghanistan could likewise reverberate across the organization in Iraq and Syria. Should ISIS establish entrenched footholds in Africa or Afghanistan, it could in the coming years re-export personnel, resources, and organizational expertise back into the Middle East, much like al-Qaeda originally expanded from Afghanistan into Iraq.

Conclusion

ISIS has been substantially degraded and stripped of territorial control, but this does not imply that the organization has been eradicated. ISIS continues to adapt to altered geopolitical realities and could surge its operational activities given new opportunities, even if a reconstitution along the lines of the 2014 model remains virtually impossible in the short term.

The structural prerequisites for mass mobilization and expansive territorial governance no longer exist as they once did. However, the reconfiguration of the counter-ISIS security architecture, the US military drawdown, Syria's uncertain trajectory, the cascading fallout from the Iran war, and ISIS's transregional connectivity all generate potential avenues for survival and heightened operational activity. ISIS retains ideological vitality and operational networks, capable of manoeuvring across the porous Iraq-Syria border.

Ultimately, as non-state armed actors fundamentally differ in power capabilities from states (Cunningham et al. 2009, pp. 574–575), these groups possess, on the one hand, the capacity for defence and organizational survival, and on the other, the ability to strike targets and shift the balance of power. While ISIS has lost much of its offensive striking capacity, territorial control, its resilience, survival capability, and tactical adaptability remain intact. Therefore, the trajectory of the organization will not be decided solely in the



arid Badlands of Iraq and Syria; it remains inextricably linked to developments in Damascus, Tehran, Africa, and Afghanistan.

References

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