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MIDDLE EAST'S EVOLVING MILITANT LANDSCAPE AFTER ISRAEL-IRAN WAR

Editorial Note

Middle East's Evolving Militant Landscape After Israel-Iran War

Recent geopolitical developments in the Middle East, Israel's ongoing conflicts with Palestine and Iran and Syria's takeover by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), will have a far-reaching impact on the regional jihadist landscape. Though the global epicentre of jihadist militancy has moved from Iraq and Syria to Africa's Sahel region, the evolution of jihadism in the Middle East is consequential for the militancy-affected regions around the world, including in Asia.

On the one side, HTS' takeover of Syria after the Taliban's August 2021 return to power in Afghanistan is a monumental development, especially due to the regional and global recognition it has received unlike the latter. On the other, Al Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS) terrorist groups' ideological rivalry points to the potential emergence of a new intra-jihadist fault line in the region. Concurrently, the weakening of Iran-backed militant groups, such as Hezbollah, Hamas and the downfall of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria, along with top leaders' decapitation has created security vacuums to be exploited. At the same time, HTS' inability to manage ethnic and sectarian fissures witnessed in the post-war Syria and continued humanitarian crisis in Palestine will provide enough ideological fuel and resentment to groups like IS and Al Qaeda to recruit, radicalise, fundraise and incite violence.

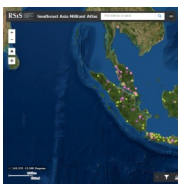
Against this backdrop, the current issue includes three articles looking at the status of the Iranian proxies in the Middle East following the 12-day Iran-Israel war, the impact of HTS' rise to power in Syria on the regional jihadist landscape and IS' recent manoeuvres to resurge.

The first article by **Amin Saikal** examines the various Iranian proxies in the Middle East, amid the region's evolving balance of power dynamics. The first section assesses Israel's strategy to weaken Hamas in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Houthis in Yemen and operations in relation to Syria's new government. Secondly, it details the 12-day Iran-Israel war which has contributed to a highly volatile regional picture. The final section discusses the potential repercussions of the controversial "Greater Israel" plan. According to the author, the prospect of a resolution to the long-running Israel-Palestine conflict remains moot, while the resumption of skirmishes between Tel Aviv and Tehran cannot be ruled out. This could re-energise non-state violent actors backed by the Iranian regime who, while degraded, retains the capacity to defend itself. Al Qaeda, IS and various emerging militant nationalist Palestinian, Arab and Islamist groups opposing Israel could also have fertile ground to widen their activities.

Next, **Umar Farooq** analyses the potential lessons other jihadist groups, notwithstanding the ideological reservations and rivalry between Al Qaeda and IS, will draw from HTS' takeover of Syria. Underscoring this is the manner in which Ahmad al-Sharaa has managed expectations of regional and global stakeholders with pragmatism unlike the Taliban's rigid outlook in Afghanistan. The author notes that for now, major global powers are optimistic that Syria is no longer a security concern that needs to be managed. However, the long-term impact of the HTS takeover on global jihadist movements remains uncertain. Several local armed groups in Syria have welcomed the news, even agreeing to submit to the new government's authority, and some of those outside the region are watching the developments in Syria as a model for their own respective situations. But other groups look at HTS with great distrust due to how quickly it has mended ties with major powers, seeing the success of the new Syrian government as proof of its abandonment of jihadist ideology.

Finally, **Ghada Soliman** assesses the prospects of the IS reemerging in the Syria-Iraq theatre. According to the author, ongoing conflicts including the Gaza war, political instability in Syria, as well as weak border and governance issues and a complex geopolitical climate, have created a conducive environment for the terrorist group to regroup and potentially expand its influence. In Syria, IS' resurgence is widely interpreted as a failure of the al-Sharaa government and deep-seated distrust and illegitimacy that plagues various governing entities in the country. This has created fertile ground for IS to exploit power vacuums, capitalise on local grievances, and re-establish its presence. In addition, IS' own propaganda efforts, which have particularly targeted youth, continue to pose a security concern.

SOUTHEAST ASIA MILITANT ATLAS



Our centre has launched the **Southeast Asia Militant Atlas**, a dynamic and growing interactive map designed to provide researchers with a consolidated visual database of ISIS and Jemaah Islamiyah terrorist-related incidents in Southeast Asia. Please access it via **https://tinyurl.com/ru8mjwbd**

The Impact of Middle East's Geopolitical Tensions on Regional Militancy

Amin Saikal

Against the backdrop of Israel's ongoing conflicts with Palestine, Iran and Lebanon, as well as the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria, this study examines the status of Iranian proxies in the Middle East and the changing balance of power. Spanning three sections, its first part examines Israel's strategy to weaken Hamas in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen, as well as its manoeuvres to influence Syria's new ruler, Ahmed al-Sharaa. Meanwhile, the second section details the 12-day Iran-Israel war and its aftermath for the region's turbulent geopolitics. The final section discusses the potential repercussions of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's controversial announcement of the "Greater Israel" plan, which has been emphatically condemned by Western and Arab powers, and the opportunities it may create for violent extremist groups in the region.

Introduction

The Middle East's political landscape has once again become highly fluid due to the ongoing Israel-Palestine conflict and the 12-day Iran-Israel war in which the United States (US) briefly participated.[1] As a result, the regional balance of power has shifted dramatically. The Iran-led "Axis of Resistance" has weakened considerably, while Israel and its global ally, the US, have secured strategic gains.[2] Nonetheless, the regional situation remains volatile and the prospects for another round of Israel-Iran hostility remain high.[3] The environment continues to allow violent extremist groups to remain active in the region and beyond.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had long sought to strengthen and expand Israel's regional security and supremacy, cultivate conditions for a favourable regional order and secure his own political longevity through a prism of conflict rather than peace.[4] Since the mid-1980s, he has regarded Iran's Shia clerical regime as a formidable threat and a major obstacle to his agenda.

The moment for him to act decisively came with Hamas's militant Islamist attacks on southern Israel on October 7, 2023. The group's actions emerged against the backdrop of Israel's 17-year blockade of the Gaza Strip, the absence of any peace negotiations for an independent Palestinian state and sagging regional and global attention on this issue. In the Hamas offensives, some 1,200 Israeli and foreign nationals, including 379 defence personnel, were killed, though Israel's former Defence Minister Yoav Gallant recently acknowledged that some of the victims were killed by Israeli forces using the Hannibal directive.[5] Hamas militants also took 251 hostages, both soldiers and civilians.[6] Netanyahu, along with hardline ministers – especially Itamar Ben-Gvir and Bezalel Yoel Smotrich – was presented with a rare opportunity to act in legitimate "self-defence" and declare a retaliatory war on Gaza, backed by the US and other allies. The plan of action he unveiled evolved into a three-phase strategy.

Phase 1

During the first phase, Israel's aim was to destroy Hamas and free the hostages, disable Iran's other affiliates designated as terrorist groups – especially Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen, who actively backed Hamas – and weaken the Iran-allied and Russia-backed Bashar al-Assad dictatorship in Syria.

Hamas

Netanyahu had long supported Hamas as part of a policy of keeping the Palestinian nationalist movement divided, with Hamas running Gaza and the Palestinian Authority (PA) nominally governing the West Bank since Israel's occupation of these territories in the 1967 Israeli-Arab war. However, while his predecessor Ariel Sharon withdrew from Gaza in 2005, Netanyahu rejected Hamas's victory in the 2006 Palestinian legislative elections and placed Gaza under a strict blockade.[7]

In the Gaza war, the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) used overwhelming force – killing, injuring and repeatedly displacing countless Gazans, as well as reducing the Strip to rubble. It also decapitated Hamas's leadership, assassinating two of its leaders, Ismail Haniyeh and Yahya Sinwar, and killing many of the group's fighters out of an estimated 20,000-30,000. The IDF's campaign has been labelled by some as genocidal, involving the use of starvation as a weapon of war and ethnic cleansing.[8] Yet, it fell short of completely uprooting Hamas. According to former US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, by early 2025, Hamas had managed to recruit as many fighters as it had lost in the war.[9]

Meanwhile, the IDF had freed no more than a dozen hostages through its operations. Most captives were released during three short Israel-Hamas ceasefires, including one which lasted two months in early 2025. By August 2025, despite dropping 100,000 tonnes of bombs on the tiny Strip, 50 hostages, including 26 reportedly still alive, remained in Hamas's captivity. With no appropriate endgame in place, Netanyahu authorised a military reoccupation of the entire Gaza Strip in August 2025, once again forcing a million people from the Strip into a "humanitarian zone" in southern Gaza, which former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert has described as a "concentration camp".[10] The move further outraged the global community, prompting many of Israel's traditional supporters in the Western alliance to break ranks with Israel and the US and announce their intention to recognise the state of Palestine. Netanyahu has denounced their actions as "shameful" and as rewarding Hamas.[11]

Hezbollah

After seriously weakening Hamas, Netanyahu decided to take on Hezbollah as another Iranian proxy, involved in cross-border firing since the start of the Gaza war. Israel invaded Lebanon on October 1, 2024, to disable Hezbollah – something it had failed to achieve in 2006.[12] Hezbollah was reputed to be a formidable political and paramilitary organisation in Lebanon. However, by using unprecedented means such as remote detonation of Hezbollah's pagers and bunker busters, the IDF substantially weakened the group. It first killed Hezbollah's leader Hassan Nasrallah and then his successor Hashem Safieddine. It also claimed to have eliminated 3,800 of its militants in nearly two months of fighting,[13] while hitting hard the group's hideouts and assets, including ammunition depots and infrastructural facilities, especially in Beirut and southern Lebanon. In some cases, it wiped out entire villages, displacing some one million Lebanese. The Lebanese government reported 2,720 of its citizens killed and many more injured.[14]

By the time Israel agreed to a conditional ceasefire, brokered by the US and France, which came into effect in late November 2024, Israel had markedly eroded Hezbollah's resistance capability and pushed its forces back to the Litani River – 29 kilometres north of the Israeli border. It also took over five strategic points along the border inside Lebanon to be able to pound Hezbollah targets whenever deemed necessary – something that it has done regularly since then. It pledged to pull back its forces to the pre-war borders only when the Lebanese army took over positions currently manned by Hezbollah operatives and the latter has been disarmed.[15]

Under US pressure, reformist Lebanese Prime Minister Nawaf Salam, appointed to his position in early February 2025, was keen to implement the ceasefire. His cabinet endorsed a US proposal in early August 2025 for "ensuring that the possession of weapons is restricted solely to the state",[16] with the aim of disarming Hezbollah by the end of 2025.[17] Hezbollah vowed to ignore the government's decision.[18] Its leader Sheikh Naim Qassem warned the government against giving in to Israeli and American demands, declaring that if Israel broadens its post-ceasefire attacks into another war, its "missiles would fall on [Israel]".[19]

Nonetheless, Hezbollah was certainly weakened as one of Tehran's most important pillars of influence in the Middle East. However, the group remains well-manned and equipped as well as popular among the Shias, who form the largest segment of the Lebanese population. The danger of an internal conflict or Israel's escalation of its operations in Lebanon, thus persists.

Houthis

Meanwhile, Israel forcefully confronted the Iran-affiliated Houthis, or Ansar Allah, in Yemen, for their active solidarity with Hamas. Initially, the US and the United Kingdom (UK) deployed airpower against the group for targeting ships bound for Israel through the Red Sea, disrupting international sea transits and firing drones and missiles into Israel. The latter responded only occasionally during the US-UK operations. But the Houthis proved resilient, using a variety of weapons, including Iran-supplied advanced drones and supersonic missiles during their offensives.[20]

On May 6, 2025, President Donald Trump, who had for a while authorised intensified bombing of the Houthis, announced a ceasefire with them, claiming that the group had had enough. The two sides agreed not to target each other, including US vessels in the Red Sea and the Bab al-Mandab Strait.[21] To the dismay of Netanyahu's leadership, the agreement, brokered by the Sultanate of Oman, did not apply to Israel. The conflict between the two continued, with the Houthis firing missiles, targeting mainly Tel Aviv and its airport, while Israel bombed various targets, including Sanaa's airport, the Port of Al Hudaydah and more recently the presidential palace.[22] The Houthis have vowed not to stop until there is a permanent ceasefire in Gaza as a condition for a lasting and just resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.[23] The Houthis still retain an offensive capability, but not to the extent as to pose a serious threat to Israel and its allies.

Syria

Israel's operations, especially against Hezbollah, changed the regional texture of another of Iran's allies, the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria. The regime had survived because of support from Iran, Hezbollah and Russia against popular domestic opposition since 2011, triggered by the so-called Arab Spring. However, with Hezbollah weakening, Iran becoming increasingly concerned about homeland defence in the face of Netanyahu's belligerency and Russia's preoccupation with the Ukraine war, the Assad regime faced a crisis of sustainability.

Backed by Ankara, which had laboured to see a favourable regime change in Damascus, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) launched a blistering campaign from its controlled northwestern Syrian city of Idlib. Syrian forces rapidly disintegrated and Assad fled to Russia, enabling HTS to assume power on December 8, 2024. HTS essentially emerged as a reincarnation of the Al-Qaeda (AQ)-linked Jabhat al-Nusra (Front for the People of Levant), which changed its name to Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (Front for the Conquest of the Levant) to distance itself from AQ in 2016. Its leader, Ahmed al-Sharaa (also known as Ahmed al-Jolani), had previously served as a commander in AQ and the Islamic State (IS) terrorist group. Now in Western attire, he has promised inclusivity and political pluralism to generate national unity in Syria – a country that is made up of a Sunni Muslim majority and many ethno-sectarian minorities.[24]

Under his interim presidency, the HTS-dominant government has the backing of not only Türkiye but also the Arab League, especially Saudi Arabia, with a sense of satisfaction at seeing Syria return to the Arab fold away from Iran and Russia. The Saudi de facto ruler Prince Mohammad bin Salman persuaded President Trump during his June 2024 visit to the Kingdom to meet al-Sharaa, recognise his government and lift sanctions on Syria. This marked a stunning transformation of a formerly designated terrorist figure and organisation into a ruling party with a pro-Western reformist agenda.[25]

Netanyahu claimed credit for causing the fall of the Assad regime but was dismayed by an Islamist takeover of Syria. To try and change the equation, the IDF extensively bombed, during HTS's takeover, Syria's military assets and bases and expanded its footprint on the Syrian side of the

occupied Golan Heights. Netanyahu has backed Syria's Druze minority – an offshoot of Shia Islam – in their quest for autonomy against the Bedouin-armed groups and Damascus forces in the Syrian southern city of Sweida. The Druze form three percent of Syria's estimated 40 million population and have sectarian ties to 150,000 counterparts in Israel.

In mid-July 2025, the Israeli air force bombed the ministry of defence and presidential palace in Damascus in support of the Druze, and Netanyahu demanded demilitarisation of Syria from Damascus to the occupied Golan Heights.[26] Türkiye and the Arab countries condemned Israeli actions. The United Nations (UN) Security Council and, more specifically, the US and its allies, called for a halt to Israeli attacks and withdrawal from Syria. Israeli actions placed the Netanyahu leadership at odds with the Trump administration and at risk of an Israel-Türkiye confrontation. Yet, nothing could divert Netanyahu from pursuing a policy of keeping Syria weak and vulnerable to Israel's influences.

Phase 2

In the wake of these developments, Netanyahu finally found it opportune to move against the head of the "octopus", the Iranian Islamic regime. Joe Biden's administration had previously restrained him from igniting a regional war,[27] but with Trump in the White House, this became less of a constraint. Trump shared a common cause with Netanyahu over Iran's disputed nuclear programme. Yet, contrary to Netanyahu's advocacy of military action as the best means to destroy Iran's nuclear capability and cause a regime change in the country, Trump initially preferred to give diplomacy a chance.

In early March 2025, Trump sent a letter to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei calling for a new nuclear agreement within two months, but with a warning that if diplomacy failed, the use of force would be employed.[28] Khamenei initially rejected Trump's gunboat diplomatic approach, as he deeply distrusted him. During his first presidency, Trump had condemned the Islamic regime as a destabiliser and supporter of terrorism in the region, denounced Barack Obama's landmark multilateral Iran nuclear agreement (known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA) of July 2015 and withdrew from it in May 2018. Under the JCPOA, which Netanyahu opposed as "the worst deal of the century", Tehran had agreed to limit its uranium enrichment to 3.7 percent for civilian use and to allow regular monitoring by the UN nuclear watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), in return for the lifting of US-led sanctions.

The US pull-out rendered the JCPOA defunct to the chagrin of other signatories – Britain, France, Germany, Russia and China – which believed that the deal had worked well and that Iran had fulfilled its end of the bargain. In retaliation, Tehran installed more advanced centrifuges and accelerated uranium enrichment. By the end of 2024, it had enriched uranium up to 60 percent purity, a little below a weapons-grade level and stockpiled 400 kilogrammes of it. Netanyahu now argued that Iran was only weeks away from producing nuclear bombs and demanded the total surrender of the Iranian nuclear programme along the lines of the 2003 Libyan model.[29] This was despite confirmation by the US Director of National Intelligence, Tulsi Gabbard, in March 2025 that Iran did not possess a military nuclear programme, though she later revised her assessment under pressure from Trump.[30]

Khamenei nonetheless pragmatically endorsed indirect nuclear talks with the US, which commenced in mid-April 2025. Five rounds of talks took place in Muscat and Rome, but were inconclusive. The main sticking point was Trump shifting his position from no nuclear weapons to zero-uranium enrichment, which Tehran regarded as a red line. While the negotiators were focused on overcoming the impasse, Netanyahu decided on military action to scuttle the process. On June 13, 2025, Israel launched air assaults on Iranian military and nuclear facilities, starting what turned out to be a 12-day-long war.[31]

Netanyahu acted with the aim of demolishing Iran's nuclear capability altogether.[32] He also wanted to boost his sagging domestic popularity and "to stay in office forever",[33] so as to avoid imminent trial on charges of bribery and fraud. Israel had been accustomed to swift military victories in the

past. Netanyahu and his strategists expected a similar accomplishment this time. Mossad had prepositioned cells of collaborators inside Iran, whose intelligence and frontline operations proved very valuable to the Israeli air force in the opening phase of the war.

In the first 24 hours, Israel decapitated the Iranian military, including killing the Chief of Staff of Armed Forces General Mohammad Bagheri as well as many nuclear scientists, rapidly degrading Iranian defences. Israeli airpower soon gained control over Tehran's skies, hitting many military and related targets. While suffering from a colossal intelligence failure, Tehran announced in the final count a loss of 268 military personnel and 1,000 civilians, in addition to 3,400 wounded.[34]

However, Israel could not destroy the Iranian command and control centres and its retaliatory capability. Tehran was able to hit Israel with a barrage of some 1,000 drones and 550 supersonic and hypersonic missiles during the war. Many of the projectiles were shot down by Israeli, US, British and Jordanian forces, but some successfully hit their targets. The sites struck included the Israeli ministry of defence, Mossad headquarters, the Weizmann Institute of Science, the port of Haifa, related residential areas in Tel Aviv as well as four military bases, which Israel has since closed off. Israel officially listed one military and 28 civilian deaths, and some 3,500 civilians wounded.

Although Iran sustained higher rates of casualties largely due to a lack of safe bunkers in the country,[35] this was the first war in Israel's history in which the country was subjected to an unprecedented proportion of damage. By the second week of the confrontation, it became evident that Israel was unable to end it successfully. Israel required a supply of more arms and America's direct engagement. Caught between his deep commitment to Israel and his election promise not to start a war, Trump authorised a limited US intervention to do what the IDF could not achieve and thus end the war.

On June 22, 2025, the US air force and navy attacked three Iranian nuclear sites – the Fordow Uranium Enrichment Plant, the Natanz Nuclear Facility and the Isfahan Nuclear Technology Centre – the former two with bunker buster bombs and the latter with cruise missiles. Trump claimed to have obliterated these sites, but later reports indicated that those facilities were heavily damaged, setting back Iran's nuclear programme by months.[36] As for the 400 kilogrammes of highly enriched uranium stockpile, the Iranians reportedly had moved it to a safer place prior to the bombings. Tehran's promised retaliation turned out to be light and well telegraphed in advance. It targeted the US base in Qatar, causing damage to a radar station but no casualties, allowing Trump to dismiss it as nothing more than a face-saving measure.[37]

Meanwhile, Trump called for an immediate ceasefire. This was at odds with what Netanyahu wanted – a continuation of the war with direct US participation. His attempt to derail the ceasefire invited a rare public rebuke from Trump. The ceasefire came into effect on June 24, 2025, enabling Trump as well as the Israeli and Iranian leaders to claim victory of a kind.

Netanyahu's two main objectives of total elimination of Iran's nuclear programme and regime change remained unfulfilled, while Tehran promised to proceed with its nuclear programme for civilian use. The war advantaged politically the Islamic regime. Despite being unpopular, many Iranians rallied behind it in the face of foreign aggression, as they had done in the past. Netanyahu vowed to pursue his main goals with a willingness to strike Iran again. Iran's supreme leader stood firm in not yielding to Israeli and American threats, with a resolve to proceed with its right under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to enrich uranium for peaceful purposes.[38]

Phase 3

In this phase, Netanyahu projected a desire to give reality to his vision of a "Greater Israel" from the "River to the Sea", as enshrined in the charter of his Likud Party. In a recent interview, he finally and publicly stated that he was on a mission to achieve this goal.[39] His vision, rooted in the Biblical Kingdom of Israel, involves at least initially incorporating into Israel the Gaza Strip, the West Bank and Israel's recent territorial gains in southern Lebanon and Syria. Regional Arab governments,

along with those of many Western and other countries, have strongly condemned this objective, and the Trump administration has not publicly endorsed it. But Netanyahu feels no threat from any sources of opposition. He has dismissed all criticisms under the guise of anti-Semitism, rather than acknowledging Zionism as the motivating ideological factor.

Netanyahu has shown a steely resolve not only to completely crush Hamas and reoccupy the entire Gaza Strip at all costs, but also to tighten Israel's hold on the West Bank through continued settlement expansion and security operations. The hardline settlers are provided immunity for their offensives against the Palestinians and are defended by the IDF. Furthermore, he has given no indication that the IDF will withdraw from southern Lebanon and Syria anytime soon.

Meanwhile, he has made it clear that he is not finished with the Iranian regime. The IDF is reportedly preparing for another war with Iran, for which Trump appears to have given a green light. Since the 12-day war, Trump has repeatedly expressed a willingness to bomb Iran again, if it does not meet his three main demands: the surrender of all nuclear materials, zero uranium enrichment and full inspection access.[40] This means that another round of Israel-Iran confrontation, with or without US involvement, cannot be ruled out. If it occurs, it would be at Israel's initiative and is most likely to be more severe and regionally risky than previously, given the parties' preparedness for it.

Conclusion

The regional situation is highly precarious and explosive. If there were an expectation that, after the Israel-Iran war, the Middle East would be less violent and more stable, that has now been dashed by Netanyahu's ambitions. The region currently has more fault lines for further conflict and bloodshed. The prospect for the realisation of a two-state solution to resolve the long-running Israel-Palestine conflict has never been dimmer, and yet more conducive to the resurgence of non-state violent actors. Hamas is devastated, but the other Iranian-backed groups – Hezbollah and the Houthis as well as the Iraqi Shia militias in particular – are not entirely defeated. Nor is the Iranian regime's capability to defend itself. Wider space and fertile ground have become available not only for the existing violent extremist groups such as AQ and IS to widen their activities, but for new militant, nationalist Palestinian, Arab and Islamist groups to emerge in opposition to Israel and those states that have supported it or have done nothing to prevent it from committing genocidal acts. The Middle East's strategic contours have changed indeed, but not necessarily for the better.

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Syria: Lessons for Returning to the Fold

Umar Farooq

In December 2024, the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria was a watershed moment for jihadist movements globally, marking the end of a bloody civil war that drew fighters from all over the world and, in turn, the intervention of global powers like the United States (US), Russia, Israel and Iran. Since taking power, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a former branch of Al-Qaeda (AQ), has taken steps to assure those stakeholders it is making a clean break from its radical past. For the time being, major world powers are optimistic that Syria is no longer a security concern that needs to be managed. However, the long-term impact of the HTS takeover on global jihadist movements is yet to be worked out. Several local armed groups have welcomed the news, even agreeing to submit to the new government's authority. while some of those outside the region are watching the developments in Syria as a model for their own respective situations. But other groups look at HTS with great distrust on how quickly it has mended ties with major powers, seeing the success of the new Syrian government as proof of its abandonment of jihadist ideology.

A Historic Rise and Fall

Ten years ago, Syria was home to perhaps the largest and best equipped global jihadist group seen in modern times. The Islamic State (IS) terrorist group ruled over some 12 million people in Syria and Iraq[1] It drew to its ranks at least 40,000 foreign fighters from more than 110 countries.[2] It had police and courts that kept meticulous records. It taxed its subjects and sold oil from vast reserves in northeast Syria and northwest Iraq, operating on a US$2 billion annual budget.[3]

At the height of its power, IS perhaps surpassed previous successes seen by militant groups like the Afghan Taliban or Al-Shabaab, and, certainly unlike those groups, its impact went well beyond its base in Iraq and Syria. Its extensive propaganda efforts drew not only revulsion and condemnation from governments, but also jihadist admirers who founded new affiliate groups from West Africa to East Asia.

IS's own operatives carried out attacks both at the regional and global level, sparking an international security crisis. Governments put in place strict border controls and increased counter terrorism cooperation to thwart attacks at home. In this process, Syria became the battleground for a global war, one that pitted proxy groups as well as actual forces from the United States (US), Turkey, Russia, Iran and Israel against one another.

However, the lesson other jihadist groups will draw from IS is not just in its short-lived success, but in what led to its decline in Syria and Iraq.

It took the anti-IS coalition, which not only involved conventional state forces, but other jihadist groups like HTS, which toppled Assad's regime in December 2024, more than five years to significantly diminish IS's presence. The prospect of Syria again becoming a launching pad for global jihadist movements is shaping global policy towards the new government in Damascus,[4] and the HTS government, notwithstanding its jihadist past, is reassuring the world that it is ready to rejoin the ranks of responsible states.

The public relations campaign by HTS reached a peak this May, when US President Donald Trump extended his support to Ahmad al-Sharaa, the new head of the HTS-led Syrian government. al-

Sharaa, after having split with Al-Qaeda (AQ) in 2016,[5] had shed as much of that past as he could, transforming his public persona into a suit-and-tie-wearing pragmatic leader.

Trump had said that Syria deserved “a chance at greatness” when he met al-Sharaa in Riyadh and discussed the handful of demands Washington was looking for from the new Syrian leader: the departure of “foreign terrorists” from Syria, including Palestinian militants, and cooperation in the US’s efforts to prevent the resurgence of IS. al-Sharaa, according to Trump, even agreed to consider joining the Abraham Accords, a controversial and tenuous truce between several Arab nations and Israel.[6]

In the case of AQ, there are indications that at least some of the group is not happy with the pragmatic stance HTS has taken. One publication by Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) called the capture of Damascus by HTS a product of a “Zionist-Crusader arrangement”.[7] In the case of IS, its publication *al-Naba* called al-Sharaa and his group “jihadists turned politicians”, and said they had been “tested, contained and domesticated” by global powers.[8]

For Iran-backed militant groups like Hezbollah, the fall of Assad was a major setback. Palestinian groups operating in Gaza and the West Bank had relied for years on the land corridor from Iran via Iraq, Syria and Lebanon to supply them with weapons and fighters.[9] The most lasting impact of the HTS takeover in Damascus is the loss of this route to Palestinian groups.

For years, rebels in Syria had fought against a regime backed by Iran, not just through weapons and fighters, but also through a Shiite ideology that drummed up support for their side using religious themes. Hezbollah, which is not only a Lebanese group but also an openly Shiite group aligned with Iran, as a result has not fared well, dealing with the loss of Syria as an operating ground and major losses from Israel’s campaign against it in recent years.

Hezbollah officials have called the fall of the regime a "major, dangerous and new transformation.”[10] This will have a similar impact on a host of Iran-backed militias and jihadist groups in the region, like the Fatemiyoun and Zainabiyoun brigades, groups of mostly Afghan and Pakistani Shia recruits who participated in the Syrian civil war under the belief they were engaged in a religiously obligated war to safeguard sacred sites there. Since the fall of Assad, these groups, composed of thousands of fighters, have been relocated to Iraq.[11]

No doubt many other jihadist groups who see the Palestinian struggle as of paramount importance will also be sceptical of the HTS example, deeming it a betrayal of a core cause for their movements. Despite decades of brutal authoritarian rule in Syria, the Assad family had continued to enjoy the support of some jihadists, including Sunni groups in the region, simply because they refused to normalise relations with Israel and provided a degree of tacit support for Palestinian armed factions.[12]

But other groups which do not see the Palestine issue as paramount, have taken the opportunity to acknowledge the model HTS may be developing for their own struggles. The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, for instance, issued a statement saying it “congratulates the leadership of the movement and the people of Syria on the recent developments, which have resulted in the removal of key factors contributing to conflict & instability.”[13]

The statement echoed congratulations HTS had issued in 2021, when the Taliban took over Afghanistan. Back then, HTS said it “drew inspiration” from the long jihad waged in that country.[14]

These reactions underscore two opposing jihadist views on the HTS victory in Syria: some see it as proof that an Islamically-inspired violent struggle can lead to success, while others are sceptical of the concessions and compromises needed to reach such a point on the world stage. One group has effectively overlooked the geopolitical forces that may have played a role in the success of HTS to embrace the situation as a sign that their own aspirations for waging and winning a long jihad could

also bear fruit one day. The other group instead is wary of the long-term implications of what al-Sharaa and HTS have done. To them, it is a sign that victory will mean having to give up long-held aspirations like enforcing strict Islamic law, imposing sectarian supremacy, or building a base for transnational jihad against Israel and other Western powers.

A Long Battle to Consolidate Control

Jihadist groups often do not operate on their own: in several ongoing conflicts in the Middle East and further afield, there are competing groups with competing ideologies. Thus, another lesson jihadist groups will take from Syria is the way HTS consolidated power in recent years and built a stable base in Idlib that allowed it to practise governance and prepare for taking the rest of the country.

For more than a decade Ahmad al-Sharaa has been known by another name, Abu Muhammad al Julani. The son of a Syrian economist, al-Sharaa went to Iraq after the US invasion and joined other AQ insurgents there. He was imprisoned by US-led forces from 2006 to 2011, and, upon his release, he left for Syria to take part in the expanding rebel uprising there. In 2012, he led a new AQ-backed group, Jabhat al-Nusra, which made significant gains in the northwest of the country and fought with IS. In 2016, al-Nusra publicly split with AQ, then rebranded itself as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham. It went on to establish HTS as an umbrella group for several factions,[15] and through alliances and violence, it not only sidelined IS, but also other rival groups like Ahrar al-Sham.[16]

In 2020, HTS was given breathing room in Idlib after Turkey brokered a ceasefire with Russia and regime forces, effectively acting as a buffer force between the rebel-held stronghold and the rest of the country.[17] Under HTS and its umbrella authority, dubbed the “Salvation Government”, Idlib emerged as a relatively safe part of what was otherwise a war-torn Syria. Millions of people moved there from other parts of the country. They took advantage of a relatively stable life under HTS, one that was free of regime and Russian airstrikes, and one that provided reliable electricity, functioning hospitals, ambulances and emergency services, and even universities.[18]

Meanwhile, HTS continued to take measures against AQ, including its local affiliate Hurras al-Din, and IS in its sphere of influence.[19] In 2019, US forces killed IS leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi in Idlib. In 2022, his successor was also killed by US forces in Idlib, on the heels of years-long raids by HTS against the group’s operatives in the area.

Yet, there were other jihadist groups that HTS sought out for alliances. One of the largest is the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), a Uyghur group that includes up to 5,000 fighters as well as around 15,000 civilians. In Idlib, the Uyghurs opened restaurants and bakeries, ran schools and sent their children to universities. Many came directly from China, but some, including the group’s leadership, had spent years in places like Afghanistan, outlasting the war on terror there to escape to Syria, where they fought alongside groups like HTS and lost at least 1,100 people during the civil war.[20]

After the fall of Assad, TIP leaders were among the rare foreign commanders to be handed leadership roles in the new HTS military structure. Abdulaziz Davud Hudaberdi, the TIP’s former head, dispatched more than a decade ago from Afghanistan by the movement’s AQ-affiliated head there, was made a brigadier general in the new Syrian military.[21] Two other Uyghurs were made colonels, among a half dozen or so foreign fighters given such official ranks in the new Syrian military. While other foreign groups still operate in Syria, the Uyghurs stand out as the largest contingent and perhaps the most likely to remain loyal to HTS and al-Sharaa, simply because they have few other places in the world left to build the kind of life they seek.[22]

The TIP’s own trajectory in Syria could also be a model for other jihadist groups: staying loyal to a more powerful organisation can be rewarded with some measure of legitimacy. The TIP has notably

not reneged on its promise to take its fight to China one day, but, for now, its presence only seems to be a problem for Beijing and not for Syria's new Western backers.[23]

Reassuring Global Powers

Another important lesson for other jihadist groups to take from Syria is how to reassure global powers that they are in fact in charge of the country.

Since coming to power, HTS has taken steps to assure outside powers that it has a plan for dealing with foreign jihadists in the country. First, it has sought to integrate groups directly under its control into a unified chain of command. By January 2025, not only had the TIP announced it was disbanding, but several other major jihadist groups had announced they would submit to a new unified command as well.[24] This includes the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army, a coalition of rebel groups that made up the largest faction besides HTS in the country.

This strategy seems to have won the approval of the US as well, with Washington's envoy Thomas Barrack saying it is better for Syria to include these fighters in a command structure than to abandon them.[25]

Though some other militant groups did not join HTS, they announced a closure to their activities. For instance, AQ's fledgling affiliate in Syria, Hurras al-Din, announced its dissolution in January.[26]

That same month, HTS arrested a former fighter among its own ranks, the Egyptian Ahmed al-Mansour, after he began calling for a Syria-like overthrow of Egyptian ruler Abdel Fattah el-Sissi. al-Mansour, who had come to Syria after witnessing the Egyptian military coup that overthrew a Muslim Brotherhood government there in 2013, had begun posting messages through his large social media presence that openly threatened the Egyptian military ruler. In one video, he announced the formation of the "25 January Revolutionaries Movement", seated at a table with two masked fighters and Egypt's monarchy-era flag.[27]

al-Sharaa's government has also taken steps to crack down on a decades-old presence of Palestinian militants in Syria, groups that were backed by Assad as well as Iran. In April, authorities arrested Khaled Khaled and Yasser Al Zufri, two leaders of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, a group that has worked alongside Hamas in places like Gaza.[28]

The mere presence of HTS in Syria has cut off the land route between Iran, Iraq and Lebanon, making it very difficult for Iran to continue supplying groups like Hezbollah in the region. While this role should be drawing some praise from Israel, so far it has not, with Israeli ground forces occupying parts of Syria south of Damascus, and its air force regularly bombing HTS positions in the area.

Intransigent Challenges to Consolidation of HTS's Power

The most pressing issue for HTS in consolidating power, though, is dealing with Kurdish forces in northeastern Syria. Backed by the US, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) there had spent years on the frontline against IS; it expected to retain some form of the autonomy they had gained in that region. The SDF is is paid to look after the al-Hol and al-Roj prisoner camps, where some 36,000 people, many of them fighters but mostly women and children, are being held for their affiliation with IS.[29]

The future of the SDF may well be dictated by Turkey and the US. After decades of conflict, Turkey has convinced the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) to finally give up its armed struggle. While the PKK may be a different group in principle from the SDF, the two share many rank-and-file fighters, and Turkey has insisted the Kurds in Syria either disarm or integrate themselves into the new government

based in Damascus. The failure of any deal between the SDF, Damascus and Turkey has the potential to once again spark a civil war in Syria.

It is also unclear how secure Syria under HTS will be in the short term from attacks by groups like IS. In June, a suicide attack on a church in Damascus killed 25 people. The Syrian government claimed the attackers were linked to IS prisoners held in Kurdish-run camps, but the Kurdish authorities in that region disputed the claim. Nevertheless, the threat from IS in Syria persists: the new government has claimed it has foiled several attempts by the group to attack churches and one attempt to bomb the Sayyidah Zaynab shrine, a major pilgrimage point for Shia Muslims. Furthermore, on June 10, the US carried out an airstrike in northwestern Syria, reportedly killing Rakhim Boev, an IS leader whom Washington claims oversaw the group's external operations.

The new Syrian government has serious sectarian tensions to deal with as well, which could easily escalate into a larger conflict involving the Sunni hardliners it has come to rely on. In recent months, largely Sunni tribal fighters have clashed with Druze militias in places like Suweida, and Alawite forces reportedly still loyal to Assad have attacked HTS and other groups in coastal areas like Latakia. In both cases, Damascus has struggled to control the response of the mélange of jihadist groups it wields power over: at least 1,500 Alawite civilians were killed, for instance, in the effort to reassert control over Latakia in March.[30] The HTS government's own initial assessment indicated some 200,000 armed individuals had participated in the violence in Latakia, underscoring just how many fighters in the country may not be under its full control.[31]

A Model for Legitimacy?

al-Sharaa and his government's efforts have been remarkably successful at convincing global powers of their intentions so far. A slew of Western governments, including the US, the European Union (EU) and the United Kingdom (UK), have removed the Syrian government from sanctions lists and reopened embassies in the country.[32] Damascus has secured international funding and agreements with foreign investors to build its electricity generation capacity.[33] This August, it announced some US$14 billion in foreign investments on projects like expanded international airports, housing and even a subway system for Damascus.[34]

Undoubtedly, jihadist groups across the world will look at Syria today and compare it to Afghanistan.

There, the Taliban similarly won power after a long and costly war but have since struggled to be seen as a legitimate power on the world stage given their insistence on extreme policies like banning girls' education. The Taliban have not been able to secure anywhere near the level of foreign investment as HTS and have relied on cooperation with China for the most part to pursue development projects.[35]

HTS certainly includes hardliners among its ranks: Shadi al-Waisi, for instance, who served as justice minister in the months following the removal of Assad. He was formerly a judge under Jabhat al-Nusra and oversaw the public executions of several women accused of adultery.[36]

But, so far, the new leadership in Damascus has not been over obsessed with the usual jihadist goals of establishing *shariah* law. There are not, or at least not yet, restrictions on what women wear, the sale of alcohol or the practices of the country's sizeable Christian, Alawite, Shia and other religious minorities, and an interim constitution has pledged to preserve minority rights.[37]

There is a question mark whether the global acceptance HTS has secured could be a model for other groups looking for an off-ramp from long jihadist wars. Jihadist groups will look to weigh the benefits of softening their stance in ways the new Syrian government has done.

In Afghanistan, for instance, there are prevailing mainstream narratives that make the situation quite different from Syria. HTS was seen as fighting a war against a regime that was globally ostracised and portrayed itself as a power seeking to return normalcy to a legitimate country. In Afghanistan, however, the Taliban were seen by global powers as doing the opposite – of overthrowing a democratic government to impose their own will on an unwilling population. Nevertheless, global powers have shown some flexibility when it comes to dealing with the Taliban, if the group makes important compromises on their style of governance.

In the weeks following the overthrow of Assad, then US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken openly called for the Taliban to learn from the HTS example. “The Taliban projected a more moderate face, or at least tried to, in taking over Afghanistan, and then its true colors came out,” he said in late 2024. “The result is it remains terribly isolated around the world.”[38]

Syria is certainly not the only conflict in the world where rivalries between jihadist groups have created the possibility of potentially acceptable jihadist forces to emerge. In West Africa, for instance, one particular AQ affiliate could undergo the same kind of restructuring that HTS did in Syria. Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimeen (JNIM) has for years fought against several states in the region, but it has also worked to forge alliances with some groups.

Like the war in Syria, the conflict in the Sahel region has been precipitated by a series of jihadist groups for more than a decade and has prompted the intervention of regional and global powers. Thousands of French troops were based in the region until 2024, and the mercenary Russian Wagner Group is still present there.[39] In recent months, Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger have asked Moscow to be more directly involved.[40] Like Syria, the war in West Africa could easily turn into a proxy conflict pitting global powers against one another.

Like HTS, JNIM, now the largest jihadist group in the region, was formed in 2017 out of alliances between organisations like Ansar al-Din, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Al-Mourabitoun and Katibat Macina.[41] The group has carried out major attacks in Mali and also operates in neighbouring Burkina Faso and Niger.[42] Since 2020, the group has also been engaged in a war with the Islammic State Sahel Province (IS-Sahel), the regional IS affiliate.[43]

Since the fall of Assad in Syria, there have been indications[44] JNIM could seek to shed its AQ affiliation in the same way as HTS. In recent months, for instance, the group has no longer issued joint statements with AQIM, its sister organisation operating in North Africa.[45]

Could other jihadist groups see the benefit of taking a more pragmatic approach as HTS has done in Syria? Ground realities in their respective areas will dictate what might work, but already the story of the Syrian civil war is having practical and ideological impacts on the global jihadist movement.

About the Author

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Islamic State Resurgence in a Beleaguered Middle East

Ghada Soliman

Since losing its last territorial holdings in Iraq and Syria in 2019,[1] the Islamic State (IS) has demonstrated a remarkable ability to adapt and evolve. In the present context, the group is once again resurgent[2] in the Middle East, particularly in Syria and Iraq. Ongoing conflicts, including the Gaza war and political instability in Syria, have created a conducive environment for the terrorist group to regroup and potentially expand its influence. This article will assess the state of IS, its operational strengths and its continued threat in the Middle East.

Introduction

Various Islamic State (IS) branches around the world have become more active over the past year. The group continues to inspire lone-actor violence, such as the New Orleans attack in January 2025. In the Middle East, ongoing Israeli military actions in Gaza, coupled with rising regional tensions which have diverted resources from counter-IS operations, have created a more advantageous operational environment for IS. The group has sought to leverage the widespread anger in the Arab world over the Gaza conflict to its benefit. It is actively calling for terrorist operations within Arab nations – a strategy that is likely to escalate crises and security challenges. This is particularly significant given the dismantling of IS-linked cells in countries such as Libya,[3] Morocco,[4] Algeria,[5] Lebanon,[6] Tunisia[7] and others in the region, following the October 7, 2023 attacks[8] by Hamas.

It is worth mentioning that IS's initial reaction to the Hamas attacks in Israel was notably delayed by several days. The first mention came on October 12, 2023, in Issue No. 412 of *al-Naba*, the group's key propaganda platform. In an article titled "Supporting Muslims",[9] IS did not express solidarity with Hamas or other Palestinian factions.[10] Instead, it called for a global jihad that transcends the conflict. Almost a week later, on October 19, IS released another issue titled "Practical Steps to Fight the Jews",[11] this time framing the conflict as an opportunity to recruit new members.

Besides the conflict in Gaza, IS has also capitalised on governance failures in countries such as Syria, particularly following the collapse of the former Bashar al-Assad regime in December 2024 and the subsequent rise[12] of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) under the leadership of Ahmed al-Sharaa. IS has rejected al-Sharaa's transformation from a jihadist leader to a political figure, viewing his rebranding of Jabhat al-Nusra into HTS and his current role as president as deceptive tactics. In Issue No. 488 of *al-Naba*, published on March 27, 2025, and titled "Al-Julani Between Two Walls",[13] IS described al-Sharaa as a "deceptive tyrant" and an agent of the United States (US). Conversely, its own fighters, the "mujahideen", are depicted as the sole proponents of true Islamic law, thereby legitimising their actions and ideology. IS also described Arab leaders as "tyrants" protecting Israel and thus deserving of condemnation and opposition.

IS Re-Establishing Itself in a Fragmented Syrian Landscape

While HTS has rebranded and sought to present itself as a more civilian-oriented administration, its members still face critical challenges in consolidating power amid rebel group infighting, legitimacy issues and the country's dire economic conditions.[14] The internal situation in Syria remains highly fragmented, with different areas controlled by various factions,[15] each pursuing their own goals with the support of different international powers.[16] This division has been a key feature of the Syrian conflict since it began in 2011 and fragmentation has become even more pronounced under the interim government.

Against this backdrop, the resurgence of IS activities is increasingly evident in northern and eastern Syria, particularly in the rural areas spanning Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor and Al-Hasakah Governorates. This escalation has occurred amid a complex security and political landscape and has coincided with the repositioning of international coalition forces led by the US, as well as intensified efforts to repatriate displaced persons and refugees from the al-Hol camp to their home regions.

An IS attack[17] on June 1, 2025, involving a guided explosive missile, targeted a vehicle belonging to the Internal Security Forces of North and East Syria, briefly known as Asayish, along the Raqqa-Hasakah Road in northeastern Syria. The attack resulted in the deaths of three members and seriously injured a fourth. Hours later, IS released a video recording of the operation, explicitly claiming responsibility. This act was interpreted as a direct response to security campaigns[18] conducted last April by Asayish within the al-Hol camp, aimed at dismantling active IS cells there.

This type of operation suggests that IS frequently employs tactics using explosive devices and light weapons in open areas, a strategy it has effectively used for many years. IS's threats are not limited to a single incident; it has been reported that the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) thwarted another two attacks[19] in May 2025 in the eastern countryside of Deir ez-Zor. In one instance, the group targeted an SDF military outpost in Al-Shuhail, employing RPG shells and machine guns. This led to prolonged clashes between the two factions, though no confirmed casualties were reported.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) reported a significant increase in IS operations in the Syrian desert in 2024,[20] resulting in 646 fatalities from more than 227 attacks. Since early 2025,[21] another 114 attacks have been recorded in Deir ez-Zor alone, involving ambushes, detonations and armed assaults against SDF posts, checkpoints and vehicles. This marks a significant escalation compared to IS's previous resurgence in the territory in 2023. Recent reports[22] indicate that 2,500 IS fighters[23] remain active in the Syrian desert,[24] primarily operating in sleeper cells.[25]

The increase in IS attacks, primarily involving lone-wolf attacks, has raised concerns for the Syrian interim government. On August 7, 2025, security forces dismantled[26] a suspected IS cell in Idlib province in northwestern Syria which was accused of assassinating five Iraqi nationals. An earlier concerning development was the suicide attack[27] inside St. Elias Church near Damascus on June 22, 2025, which killed at least 25 people. The attack was reportedly linked[28] to IS following the discovery of the terrorist group's hideouts, which contained weapons and explosives. Saraya Ansar al-Sunna (SAA),[29] a Salafi-jihadist group ideologically linked to IS, claimed[30] responsibility for the attack.

SAA was formed in February 2025 after a split from HTS. Its military structure is characterised by decentralised lone-wolf teams operating in independent cells, which lack central command and knowledge of one another's identities and locations.[31] SAA seeks to establish a presence in rural areas outside HTS's control, potentially in preparation for a military confrontation. During the 34th Arab Summit in Baghdad held last May, Syrian Foreign Minister Asaad al-Shaibani warned[32] of the continued threat posed by the terrorist group, stating that it is attempting to foster instability.

IS Maintains Presence in Iraq

IS's recent operations have also extended to Iraq. While IS no longer controls territory there, it has transitioned into a resilient insurgency. On June 26, 2025, two IS members were killed during a clash [33] in Kirkuk Governorate in northern Iraq. This incident occurred shortly after the aforementioned IS suicide bombing inside St. Elias Church. Later, on August 10, 2025, Iraqi intelligence dismantled[34] a network linked to IS which had sought to carry out terrorist operations against participants in religious events. The operation resulted in the arrests of 23 suspects. These incidents suggest the ongoing presence and operational capacity of IS cells in both countries since their shared borders reopened[35] on June 14, 2025.

Despite the military setbacks suffered by IS in late 2017 at the hands of Iraqi forces and the international coalition, the group has continued to persist in its activities, both ideologically and through covert operations and sporadic attacks. Although it has lost its formal structure, estimates suggest that between 1,000 and 2,000 IS members remain active in Iraq,[36] operating in sleeper cells and small groups, particularly in provinces such as Diyala, Kirkuk, Salah al-Din and Nineveh, as well as along the border with Syria.

The security vacuums in Syria and Iraq have provided opportunities for IS to establish its presence, recruit fighters and expand its influence. The group has also taken advantage of the confrontations[37] between the SDF and the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA). This situation has also allowed IS to seek opportunities to liberate detainees[38] from SDF-run prisons and camps, where approximately 9,000 IS fighters and over 40,000 of their family members are being held.[39] In addition, there are 17,700 Iraqi nationals and 8,600 individuals from other countries who have alleged connections to IS.[40]

Youth Radicalisation

The al-Hol camp in Syria, where IS members and their families, including children, are detained, continues to pose a complex challenge. The potential release of these individuals could trigger a new cycle of violence and enhance the group's recruitment efforts, particularly among the young people[41] being held there. Following the collapse of the Assad regime, IS reportedly smuggled weapons[42] into the camp and facilitated the exfiltration of individuals,[43] using methods such as transport trucks with hollowed-out seats and waterways to move children.[44] These children, many of whom were born in the camp and have known no other life, are reportedly being recruited by IS to become the "cubs of the caliphate". Camp directors have consistently highlighted the critical lack of rehabilitation facilities and psychological support necessary to deradicalise these youths.[45] Over 60 percent of al-Hol camp residents – approximately 22,000 children – exhibit distrust towards outsiders, throwing stones at personnel and attempting to damage equipment such as cameras.[46]

Foreign Fighters Remain Potential Asset for IS

The terrorist group has significantly leveraged the recruitment of foreign fighters,[47] integrating them deeply into its military framework. These individuals were drawn to IS by its ideology and the promise of establishing a global Islamic caliphate and became a cornerstone of its operational capabilities. The group continues to employ sophisticated propaganda and social media strategies to attract individuals globally, who often contribute diverse skills, financial resources and a readiness for extreme violence, thereby enhancing its operational capabilities.

The interim government under al-Sharaa is reportedly working to integrate thousands of foreign fighters into the SNA, a move that has been approved by Washington. However, these fighters – particularly those with Salafi-jihadist ideologies – present a persistent threat to Syrian security due to their potential disagreements with the more pragmatic stance of HTS and their susceptibility to recruitment by IS.

It has been reported that on April 27, 2024, the Iraqi government[48] arranged for the return[49] of approximately 700 Iraqi citizens, predominantly women and children, from the al-Hol camp in northeastern Syria. These individuals, some of whom are relatives of suspected IS fighters, arrived at the al-Jadaa camp near Mosul, Iraq.

IS Taking Advantage of Weak Border Controls

Through displaced and radicalised individuals and weak border controls, IS continues to raise financial resources in Iraq and Syria in 2025, even after losing control of the territories it once held. Its primary sources of funding in Iraq include extortion, collection of local royalties, smuggling and illicit trafficking. In addition, the group utilises digital platforms and cryptocurrencies, such as Bitcoin, for financial operations. This digital approach, combined with traditional sources of funding, allow the group to conceal the sources and destinations of its funds.

The group is also believed to possess financial reserves estimated between US$10 and US$20 million, primarily held in cash and other liquid assets.[50] The group takes advantage of weak border controls and remote desert areas to facilitate these activities. The border regions between Iraq and Syria remain particularly vulnerable, as they provide opportunities for IS fighters to move between the two countries, resupply and regroup. Despite its territorial losses in Iraq, IS remains a significant threat due to its adoption of a "decentralised networks" model. This model grants individual members greater autonomy in planning and executing terrorist operations, adapting to local conditions.

Conclusion

IS continues to present a complex challenge that is likely to intensify in 2025. These threats are exacerbated by geopolitical developments, regional conflicts, weak borders and governance, as well as IS's own propaganda efforts, particularly those aimed at recruiting youth.

The resurgence of IS in Syria is widely interpreted as a failure of al-Sharaa's government. This is largely due to the deep-seated distrust and illegitimacy affecting various governing entities in Syria, stemming from the group's extremist past and the resulting fragmentation of control. This environment creates fertile ground for IS to exploit power vacuums, capitalise on local grievances and re-establish its presence.

By recruiting displaced refugees from places such as al-Hol and leveraging its decentralised networks, IS continues its aggression. Its adoption of low-cost terrorism, particularly lone-actor attacks, which minimise its operational footprint as well as the need for complex planning, allows IS to evade security and intelligence agencies that attempt to infiltrate it and prevent its attacks.

The international operations against IS have indeed achieved significant successes over the past decade. However, these efforts are undermined by a lack of international cooperation and investment in solutions which address both the immediate humanitarian crisis faced by the many displaced in Syria and the underlying security threats. In the meantime, IS continues to engage in a new, cross-border phase of terrorism that exploits Syria's fragmented communities, which remain deeply divided along religious, ethnic and tribal lines, amid ongoing socio-political challenges.

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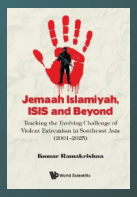

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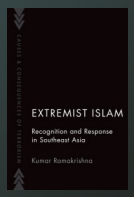

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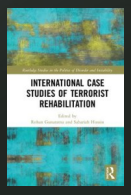

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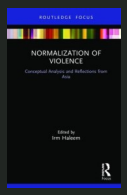

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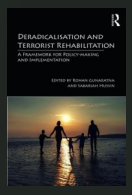

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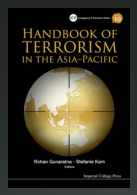

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