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SYNOPSIS

Nearly a decade after losing its "caliphate", Daesh remains a resilient global threat. Though it no longer controls territory in Iraq and Syria, it has evolved into a decentralised network of affiliates operating mainly in Africa and Afghanistan. Driven by governance failures, economic hardship, and online radicalisation, Daesh now functions as a dispersed insurgent movement rather than a proto-state. While its ability to launch large transnational attacks has declined, the risks of regional instability, inspired lone-actor violence, and ideological influence persist.

COMMENTARY

Nearly a decade after the collapse of its territorial "caliphate", Daesh remains one of the most adaptive and durable jihadist movements in the world. Although it no longer governs populated territory in Iraq and Syria, the organisation has neither disappeared nor become strategically irrelevant. Instead, Daesh has reinvented itself as a decentralised network with multiple centres of gravity, shifting from a proto-state to a dispersed ecosystem of affiliates embedded in fragile or contested regions.

Its resilience is rooted in structural conditions that continue to favour violent extremism: governance vacuums, economic deprivation, unresolved conflicts, and ideological appeal amplified through the digital domain. Understanding Daesh in 2025, therefore, requires moving beyond the caliphate-era image of a centralised hierarchy and instead examining how the group's globalised insurgency operates across several interconnected theatres.

The Current Status of Daesh: A Hybrid Structure

The current status of Daesh can be summarised as follows: It has lost the ability to control territory at scale in its core zone but retains the capability to destabilise multiple regions through insurgency, terrorism, and online radicalisation. United Nations monitoring teams continue to assess that the threat posed by Daesh and its affiliates remains "undiminished", even as the geographic distribution of violence has shifted markedly.

Iraq and Syria, once the epicentre of the organisation, now host a residual but persistent insurgency made up of dispersed cells estimated at a few thousand fighters. These fighters operate largely in rural, tribal, and disputed areas where state authority is fragmented. The group's tactics of hit-and-run attacks, assassinations, improvised explosive devices, and sabotage are designed to erode security, intimidate local officials, and undermine stabilisation efforts.

One of the most significant enablers of potential resurgence remains the vast network of detention camps and makeshift prisons across northeast Syria and Iraq. Facilities such as al-Hol contain thousands of fighters and family members living in precarious conditions conducive to radicalisation and escape attempts, representing an unresolved security liability.

From Caliphate to Insurgency: Daesh's Organisational Evolution

The organisational evolution of Daesh since 2019 helps explain its continued relevance. With the fall of Baghuz, a town in Syria, the group abandoned the conventional military posture that had defined its territorial phase (2014–2019) and reverted to insurgency. But beginning around 2022, Daesh transitioned further into a decentralised, hybrid movement. Its central leadership, still believed to operate clandestinely in the Levant, provides symbolic cohesion more than operational command.

Decision-making authority has devolved to regional affiliates, known as wilayat, who enjoy significant autonomy. These affiliates have adapted Daesh's ideological framework to local grievances and conflict dynamics. In effect, Daesh has become a global brand whose operational vitality increasingly lies outside its historical heartland. This dispersed structure has allowed the organisation to survive leadership decapitations, financial pressure, and military losses.

Africa and Afghanistan: New Centres of Gravity

Nowhere is this shift more visible than in Africa and Afghanistan. In West Africa and the Sahel, Islamic State affiliates such as ISGS and ISWAP have exploited the near-collapse of state authority, intercommunal conflict, and porous borders to embed themselves deeply in local political economies. These groups have demonstrated not only the ability to conduct high-casualty attacks but also to administer rudimentary governance in certain areas, collect taxes, and engage in complex negotiations with local communities.

In Mozambique's Cabo Delgado province and parts of eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, Daesh-affiliated fighters have demonstrated a similar capacity to survive counterinsurgency operations and displace large populations. These African affiliates now account for a significant proportion of Daesh-related violence globally, to the point where Africa has arguably replaced Iraq and Syria as the organisation's main operational arena.

In Afghanistan, Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISIS-K) has emerged as one of Daesh's most aggressive and externally-oriented branches. Active across Afghanistan, Pakistan, and parts of Central Asia, ISIS-K routinely targets Taliban forces, Shia communities, and international interests. The group has also demonstrated aspirations to engage in external plotting beyond the region.

The deteriorating economic situation in Afghanistan, coupled with weak border enforcement and the presence of foreign fighters, has created fertile ground for ISIS-K to entrench itself. Its rise illustrates Daesh's capacity to exploit geopolitical transitions, in this case, the Taliban's return to power and the withdrawal of Western forces.

Iraq and Syria: Persistent but Contained Insurgency

Although the Levant is no longer the geographic core of global jihadism, Iraq and Syria continue to matter. Daesh remains deeply embedded in certain rural and desert areas where security forces struggle to maintain an enduring presence. Local political tensions, particularly in post-war Syria, create opportunities for the group to rebuild networks and manipulate grievances.

Daesh's ability to mount large-scale conventional operations or re-establish territorial control in the Levant remains limited due to sustained counterterrorism pressure from local and international actors.

The Digital Battlespace: Maintaining Global Relevance

Beyond the physical battlespace, Daesh's presence in the virtual domain remains a critical part of its global strategy. The organisation continues to disseminate multilingual propaganda, create and circulate tactical guides, and encourage lone-actor attacks against Western and regional targets.

The group's digital ecosystem, a mix of official media outlets, supporter networks, and encrypted channels, provides a low-cost means of maintaining ideological momentum and global reach. As counterterrorism operations degrade physical networks, the digital sphere becomes even more central to recruitment and mobilisation.

Assessing the Threat: Local, Transnational, and Ideological Dimensions

The overall threat landscape posed by Daesh today can be divided into local/regional insurgency, transnational ambitions, and ideological influence. At the local level, Daesh remains capable of attritional attacks in Iraq and Syria and expansion in African theatres. Transnationally, the organisation's ability to plan complex attacks from its core has diminished, but affiliates like ISIS-K may still attempt external operations.

The most plausible threat to Western states, however, comes from individuals inspired online rather than from operational direction. Ideologically, Daesh retains significant appeal among certain constituencies, particularly in contexts marked by political repression, identity crises, and socio-economic hardship.

Resilience and Constraints: What Enables or Limits a Comeback?

Forecasting Daesh's future trajectory over the next three to five years requires weighing the drivers of resilience against the constraints on resurgence. Several structural factors favour Daesh's continued relevance: governance collapse in regions such as the Sahel and eastern Syria, the persistence of economic grievance and intercommunal conflict, the international community's shifting focus towards great-power competition and the unresolved question of what to do with thousands of detained fighters and family members. Moreover, Daesh's willingness to embed itself in criminal economies, from smuggling networks to extortion rackets, provides it with flexible and diversified revenue sources.

However, other factors limit Daesh's capacity to regain its former strength. The Global Coalition's sustained military and intelligence pressure continues to disrupt leadership structures and financial flows. The group's loss of territorial sanctuary reduces its ability to train large numbers of recruits or extract resources at scale. Leadership decapitation efforts have created organisational instability, while competition from al-Qaida-affiliated groups in several theatres has eroded Daesh's monopolistic claim over the global jihadist narrative.

Three Scenarios for the Next 3-5 Years

Three scenarios capture how Daesh's threat might evolve.

The first and most likely is a persistent, fragmented insurgency: Daesh maintains relevance across multiple regions without regaining territorial control. Africa and

Afghanistan remain high-activity zones, while Iraq and Syria face periodic spikes linked to political crises.

A second scenario involves regional surges: major prison breaks, state collapse, or weakened counterterrorism pressure could allow affiliates to establish temporary quasi-territorial footholds and escalate violence. This is more plausible in Africa than in the Levant.

The third scenario is gradual degradation, in which sustained counterterrorism pressure and improved governance erode Daesh's appeal and operational capacity.

A Dispersed but Dangerous Movement

Daesh today is best characterised as a dispersed, opportunistic, and adaptive insurgent movement rather than a cohesive proto-state. The organisation has survived the loss of its caliphate by embedding itself in multiple conflict zones, leveraging local grievances, and maintaining ideological momentum online.

For policymakers in Southeast Asia and beyond, the key implication is that Daesh's threat persists even in the absence of territorial control. Preventing resurgence will require a combination of kinetic pressure, community-level stabilisation, improved governance in fragile states, and stronger international coordination to address the transnational dimensions of the movement.

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