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Editorial Note

The Persistence and Evolution of Transnational Terrorism amid Resurgence of Inter-State Conflicts

As inter-state conflicts - the US-Israel-Iran war, the Russia-Ukraine conflict, and Afghanistan-Pakistan tensions - reassert themselves as the defining feature of international security, transnational terrorism persists in the background. Unresolved issues, such as the legal status of the Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs), left in the wake of Islamic State's (IS) expulsion from Iraq and Syria, also remain unresolved. While Al-Qaeda and IS may be past their prime, both have adapted by decentralising operations, empowering regional affiliates, and forging alliances with local jihadist groups across fragile regions in Asia and Africa.

Against this backdrop, the current issue features four articles examining global jihadism's transformation, relevance, and enduring challenges that risk reviving old asymmetric threats in new forms. Al-Qaeda and IS have already positioned themselves at the sidelines of the ongoing interstate conflicts to exploit emerging security and governance vacuums. IS' resurgence in the post-Assad Syria and Al-Qaeda's current strides in Mali through its affiliate Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) highlight the need to balance inter- and intra-state conflict considerations in shaping international security strategies.

In the first article, **Adlini Ilma Ghaisany Sjah** assesses the dynamics of foreign FTFs from Southeast Asia (SEA). She argues that SEA jihadist participation differs from global patterns and varies within the region, noting Afghanistan, Syria, and the southern Philippines as notable conflicts for SEA FTFs. Drawing on Indonesian case studies, the author finds that the impact of returning fighters has weakened over time, with recent attacks and plots more often facilitated by Indonesian FTFs stationed abroad rather than returnees, in addition to domestic terrorists. When evaluating FTF repatriation policy in the present context, more emphasis should be placed on risk assessments around transnational networks and remote facilitation in addition to focusing on returnees. Monitoring mechanisms and tailored rehabilitation strategies should also be strengthened.

Next, **Mekki ULUDAĞ** explores security developments in Syria over 2024–2026. His focus is on the persistence, adaptation, and renewed activity of IS and analogous jihadist movements. The author situates these dynamics within the broader US–Israel–Iran conflict and examines the way local, national, and transnational actors interact within this volatile landscape.

Under Ahmad al-Sharaa's presidency, Syria's transitional government faces a dual crisis of legitimacy: managing internal dissent while addressing the broader risk of renewed radical jihadism. Such concerns are exacerbated by the uneven reach of security forces, and the economic vulnerabilities of war-torn communities. The author maintains that Syria's transitional trajectory is intimately linked to the strategic adaptation of IS, making the management of insurgent networks, detainees, and regional security dynamics central to understanding both national stabilisation and the broader transnational jihadist landscape.

Then, **Farhan Zahid** dissects Al-Qaeda's evolution from a centralised global jihadist group into a decentralised network of regional jihadist affiliates. He maintains that sustained international counter terrorism pressure between 2001 and 2020, leadership decapitations, and competition from IS compelled Al-Qaeda to adopt strategic patience, prioritising local insurgencies over large-scale international attacks. The author highlights the growing significance of Al-Qaeda's regional affiliates such as JNIM in the Sahel, Al-Shabaab in Somalia, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen, and al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) in South Asia. Al-Qaeda's relationship with its regional affiliates demonstrates how it embeds within fragile states to exploit governance vacuums. While no longer the dominant global jihadist force, Al-Qaeda remains a persistent and adaptive threat with long-term implications for regional stability and international security.

Lastly, **Ghada Soliman** argues that the US-Israel -Iran conflict has empowered rather than weakened the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in Tehran. It has adapted by entrenching a decentralised "mosaic defensive" doctrine, allowing regional proxies and affiliated networks greater operational autonomy while maintaining strategic coherence. This evolution is reinforced by a 'global mujahid' narrative that frames Iran's struggle in transnational, sectarian-solidarity terms, helping to mobilise and legitimise Shia militant actors beyond Iran's borders. A deteriorating diplomatic environment and shift toward more sustained confrontation have been accompanied by the activation of covert networks—reportedly including Hezbollah-linked sleeper cells —suggesting an expanded reliance on asymmetric and deniable tactics. The current trajectory suggests a more fragmented but resilient threat landscape, where state and non-state actors interact fluidly, raising the risks of miscalculation, indirect confrontation, and geographically dispersed instability.

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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**

Assessing Dynamics of Foreign Terrorist Fighters from Southeast Asia

Adlini Ilma Ghaisany Sjah

This article assesses the dynamics of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) from Southeast Asian (SEA) countries. It presents a new summary of SEA jihadist participation in overseas conflicts, showing that patterns of participation differ from global trends and vary across the region. Drawing on case studies from Indonesia, the article argues that the security threat posed by returning FTFs has also shifted over time: returnees from more recent conflicts, such as Syria and Yemen, have had less impact than those returning from Afghanistan and the Philippines in the 1980s and 1990s. Many recent attacks by Indonesian terrorist cells have been enabled by Indonesian FTFs based abroad rather than by returnees. These findings should be considered when evaluating FTF repatriation policies in the current context.

Introduction

Recent developments in Syria have renewed global attention on foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs). As camps and prisons previously holding Islamic State (IS)-linked detainees have been closed and their occupants transferred elsewhere, many suspected FTFs have found opportunities to escape detention and attempt to return home.[1] At the same time, new theatres of conflict have emerged in February 2026, following the outbreak of the United States (US)-Israel-Iran war and the escalation of hostilities between Afghanistan and Pakistan.[2] Against this backdrop, it is necessary to reassess the dynamics of FTF mobilisation: which conflicts have historically attracted foreign fighters, what roles they occupy in such conflicts and the impact they have on the threat landscape when they return to their home countries.

The term "foreign terrorist fighters", as defined in the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2178 (2014), refers to individuals who travel to conflict zones to plan, prepare, train for or perpetrate terrorist acts. The literature suggests that FTF mobilisation is often driven by a desire to "defend the *ummah" (*in response to perceived oppression of Muslims), to acquire combat skills and training, to migrate to an Islamically governed territory (*hijrah),* or by a combination of these. These motivations also influence the length of time spent abroad: those seeking training tend to stay for shorter periods, while those motivated by hijrah often have no plans to return.[3] Scholars have also examined the impact of returning foreign fighters; a 2013 study of Western FTFs found that only one in nine foreign fighters returned to conduct attacks in the West.[4]

There have been various attempts to map global patterns of FTF activity. In one study, Thomas Hegghammer identified 70 insurgencies and wars in the "Muslim world" between 1945 and 2010, 22 of which involved foreign fighters.[5] While this dataset is a commendable effort at mapping global foreign fighting linked to Muslim causes, it does not account for instances of jihadist foreign fighting in Southeast Asia (SEA). For example, there is evidence of Malaysians travelling to participate in the 1999-2002 Maluku sectarian conflict in Indonesia;[6] as well as Indonesians, Malaysians and Singaporeans travelling to the southern Philippines in the 1990s; neither case is reflected in the dataset.[7]

Other studies have analysed SEA jihadists' travel to specific conflict zones, such as Afghanistan[8] or Syria.[9] Many others focus on analysing FTF involvement from individual countries.[10] However, these findings are rarely compared, leaving a gap in understanding whether the dynamics of FTF involvement are context specific or generally consistent across different societies.

Southeast Asian Participation as FTFs

This article presents a new summary of SEA participation in jihad-linked conflicts outside their home countries, drawing on a wide range of research articles, reports, court documents and media sources. The table below lists each documented instance of SEA foreign fighting linked to jihad, organised by the date of foreign fighter entry and the conflict period, followed by the location, the local parties to the conflict and details of foreign fighters involved. The dataset includes only participation in active conflict zones and excludes cases involving travel for terrorist training in non-conflict settings.

Table 1. Summary of Southeast Asian (SEA) Jihadists' Involvement as Foreign Fighters

No	FTF Entry Date	Location of Conflict	Conflict Period	Local Conflicting Parties	Participating SEA Nationals	Estimated Number of SEA FTFs
1	1980-1993 [11]	Afghanistan [12]	1978-1992	Mujahideen vs. Soviet Union/Kabul	Indonesia (200) [13] Malaysia (N/A)[14] Philippines (N/A)[15] Singapore (11) [16] Thailand (7)[17]	300[18]
2	1992-1995	Bosnia	1992-1995	Bosnians vs. Serbs/Croats	Indonesia[19] Malaysia[20]	N/A
3	1997-2003	The Philippines (Mindanao)	1968-2019	Moro National Liberation Front/Moro Islamic Liberation Front vs. Manila government	Indonesia (129)[21] Malaysia (1)[22] Singapore (4)[23]	150[24]
4	2000	Indonesia (Maluku and Poso)	1998-2002	Local Muslims vs. Christians	Malaysia (12)[25] Singapore (1)[26]	13
5	2001	Kashmir (Pakistan-administered area)	1989-ongoing	Pakistan vs. India vs. local militants (including Lashkar-e-Taiba [LeT)	Indonesia (7)[27]	7
6	2009-2010	Somalia	1993-ongoing	Local factions (including Al-Shabaab) vs. Mogadishu government	Malaysia (1)[28]	1
7	2012-2019	Syria[29]	2011-2024	Islamist factions/rebels (including the Islamic State, Jabhat al-Nusrah, Free Syrian Army) vs. Damascus	Indonesia (1000-1400)[30] Malaysia (122-160)[31] Philippines (1)[32] Singapore (9)[33]	1500
8	2014-2015	Yemen	2014-ongoing	Houthis vs. Presidential Leadership Council vs. Southern Transitional Council vs. Islamist factions (including Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula)	Indonesia (10)[34]	10
9	2014 [35]	The Philippines (Mindanao, Basilan, Jolo)	2014-ongoing	Pro-IS groups[36] vs. Manila government	Indonesia (9)[37] Malaysia (10)[38] Singapore (1)[39]	20
10	2017-2021	Afghanistan	2016-2021[40]	Taliban vs. Kabul government vs. US forces vs. other Islamist factions (including the Islamic State of Khorasan, Al-Qaeda)	Indonesia (3)[41] Malaysia (2)[42]	5
11	2025	Somalia (Puntland)	2015-ongoing	Islamic State-Somalia vs. Puntland Defence forces vs. Al-Shabaab	Malaysia (1)[43]	1

Source: Compiled by the author

Which Conflicts to Fight in?

As Table 1 shows, FTF participation among SEA jihadists varies considerably, with some conflicts attracting far more foreign fighters than others. Globally, the conflicts that drew the largest numbers of Muslim foreign fighters were Syria (2011), Afghanistan (1978) and Iraq (2003).[44] In the SEA context, however, the most significant theatres were Syria (2011), Afghanistan (1978) and the Mindanao conflict in the Philippines, which began in 1968. Notably, although an estimated 4,000-6,000 foreign fighters travelled to Iraq after the US invasion in 2003, there are no recorded cases of SEA jihadists doing so until the emergence of the Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and al-Sham.[45] Similarly, while both the Bosnia (1992) and Chechnya (1994) conflicts attracted hundreds of foreign fighters globally,[46] there were very few, if any, reported fighters from SEA.

Among SEA jihadists, Syria attracted the highest level of FTF participation. This can be attributed to the strong Islamic narrative associated with Syria, or "Sham", as the final battleground, as well as the narrative of hijrah used by the Islamic State (IS) to attract Muslims to its self-declared caliphate. Former Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) leader Abu Rusydan described Syria as an "area where victory was assured in prophecies".[47] Yet although Yemen also features in end-of-the-world prophecies, only a small number of SEA jihadists became FTFs there. One reason is that local groups in Yemen were stricter with admitting FTFs. While Indonesian jihadists from Jamaah Ansharut Tauhid (JAT) and Jamaah Ansharusy Syariah (JAS) were able to train with Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), JI members struggled to establish contact with the group, despite being in Yemen during the same period as some of the JAT/JAS members.[48] JAT had forged ties with AQAP earlier, with its first contingent arriving in 2012, before deteriorating security conditions made travel from Sana'a to the AQAP camps more difficult.[49] By contrast, JI member Abdurrahman Yurisya[50] only arrived in Yemen in September 2013.[51] In addition, each JAT/JAS contingent to AQAP in Yemen included at least one Indonesian of Hadrami descent, which likely helped with trust-building.[52]

Interestingly, within the region, only Malaysians have been documented fighting in Somalia. At least one Malaysian jihadist was involved at various stages of the conflict, initially alongside the pro-Al-Qaeda (AQ) group Al-Shabaab in 2009-2010, and later with IS-Somalia in 2025. While identifying the motivations for FTF participation in these individual conflicts is beyond the scope of this article, the evidence suggests that FTF mobilisation cannot be explained solely by jihadist narratives or geographical proximity.

One important factor is whether a conflict is driven by ethno-separatist or jihadist objectives, such as defending the ummah, joining a caliphate or global jihad. The Pattani insurgency in southern Thailand and the Myanmar conflict—both rooted in separatist causes—were discussed by jihadists as potential FTF destinations,[53] but did not manifest into active participation from other SEA nationals.[54] In both cases, local insurgent groups rejected FTFs motivated by global jihad.[55] Ultimately, acceptance by the host organisation is a key factor in determining FTF involvement. As in Thailand and Yemen, there have also been cases of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in the Philippines rejecting the recruitment of Singaporean FTFs who travelled to Mindanao in 2000.[56]

Activities as FTFs

All the SEA FTF contingents conducted similar activities in their jihad abroad. In most cases, there is a stronger emphasis on receiving training—often mandated by the host organisation—than on taking up arms against the enemy. This training typically comprises both an ideological programme (*tadrib* or *dauroh syar'iyah*) and a military training course (*tadrib askari* or *dauroh harbiyah*).

The ideological component usually covers the host group's doctrinal foundations including *fiqh* (jurisprudence), *tawhid* (oneness of God), loyalty (*al-wala' wal-bara'*) and other aspects of jihadist thought. The military component involves instruction in basic military tactics and weapons handling, including the use of AK-47s, assault rifles, bazookas and grenades. Some FTFs received specialist training in bomb-making, whilst others were assigned less combat-focused roles, such as medical support and *dakwah* (proselytisation).[57] In Afghanistan, hardly any of the SEA FTFs engaged in direct hostilities against Soviet forces.[58] In Syria, although all pro-IS FTFs were asked upon entry

on their preference to be a fighter, suicide bomber, or kamikaze attacker,[59] ultimately some of them only occupied border patrol or aid delivery roles.[60]

A key trend is the shift in FTF travel from being organisation-led to individual-led. While FTF contingents to Afghanistan in the 1980s, the Philippines in the 1990s and Syria were sent systematically by organisations,[61] mostly for training purposes, much of the travel in the past decade has had less organisational support. Instead, FTF travel was often initiated by individuals and facilitated by "horizontal peer-to-peer mobilisation".[62] The lack of strong organisational support led to much lower numbers of FTF travel, as can be seen in the lower numbers of FTFs in the past decade, excluding Syria. Reflecting IS's nature as a decentralised network, travel by SEAs to support pro-IS groups in Mindanao, Khorasan and Puntland were largely initiated by individuals.

Impact of Returning FTFs: Case Studies from Indonesia

When SEA nationals do become FTFs, what impact do they have on terrorist cells in their home countries? This section draws on case studies of Indonesian jihadist returnees to examine their influence on terrorist attacks and cell recruitment in Indonesia.

FTF Impact on Local Attacks and Plots

A primary security concern is the prospect of returning FTFs conducting attacks in their home countries. This was evident in the case of Indonesian returnees from Afghanistan, many of whom participated in violent jihad in the 1999-2002 Ambon/Maluku conflict and the 1998-2001 Poso conflict, as well as at least 12 other terror attacks in Indonesia.[63]

In contrast, FTF returnees from more recent conflicts have so far been linked to only one successful terrorist attack. Syrian returnee Syawaluddin Pakpahan, who trained for five months with the Free Syrian Army in 2013, carried out a stabbing attack against the police in Medan, Indonesia, in June 2017.[64] FTF returnees from Syria also reportedly planned a bombing using Wi-Fi signals—at the time described as the first of its kind in SEA—but the plot was foiled by the police.[65] Similarly, Yudi Lukito Kurniawan, a FTF who travelled to Yemen, planned a terror attack on his return; however, his plot to attack the Singapore Stock Exchange in 2015 was thwarted by the authorities.[66]

Beyond these cases, other Indonesian FTF returnees from Syria and Yemen have not been linked to attack plans. While there are oft-cited examples of attacks involving IS deportees, these were not carried out by individuals who had successfully travelled to conflict zones. For example, Rullie Rian Zeke and Ulfah Handayani Saleh, the duo who committed the 2019 Jolo Cathedral bombing, were deportees who never made it into Syria.[67] Similarly, the 2018 Surabaya church attacks have been linked to a study group led by the pro-IS deportee Khalid Abubakar, who was deported from Turkey before reaching Syria.[68] Another IS-linked plot to bomb multiple government sites was planned by Anggi, a deportee from Hong Kong, not a returnee from the Syrian conflict.[69]

The distinction between successful and unsuccessful entry into conflict zones among FTF returnees is important, as it is often assumed that the primary risk posed by returning FTFs lies in their ability to apply combat skills acquired abroad. Yet, the more sophisticated attacks that have been linked to Syrian "FTFs" were not assisted by combat-experienced FTF returnees. Instead, local cells learnt tactics through digital communication and online bomb-making manuals provided by Syria-based individuals. Prominent examples include Bahrun Naim and Bahrumsyah, who channelled funds and instructions to Indonesia-based cells, including for the 2016 Thamrin attack and other failed bombing plots.[70] This suggests that, for prevention purposes, disrupting links between domestic cells and Syrian-based cells may be more effective than focusing solely on restricting FTFs from returning to Indonesia.

The limited number of attacks linked to more recent returnees may also be influenced by other factors, including fewer combat-experienced returnees, shifts in terrorist organisations' priorities and more effective counterterrorism policing. Most jihadists who became FTFs in Syria have not returned. Wardhana and Putra estimate that 56 FTFs returned from Syria between 2012 and

2017,[71] although other sources estimate a higher number, citing “hundreds”, but many of these were individuals who failed to enter Syria.[72] In 2020, Indonesia introduced a moratorium on repatriation, further reducing the number of returnees from the Syrian conflict. While some returns continue to occur, hundreds of Indonesians still remain in Syria.[73]

The return of FTFs in the past decade also coincided with a shift in priorities among many terrorist organisations in Indonesia, notably moving away from violent attacks on Indonesian soil. JI’s shift away from plotting attacks began in 2009,[74] and none of its cadres sent for training in Syria under the *Sasana* programme have been linked to plots; JI then formally announced its disbandment in June 2024. Similarly, JAS has prioritised preserving its public image and engaging in broader political engagement, and few of its returnees have been involved in planning attacks, despite receiving combat skills and bomb-making training in Syria and Yemen.[75] Finally, effective policing from Indonesia’s counterterrorism unit, Densus 88—strengthened by the 2018 Anti-Terrorism Laws which widened Densus’ mandate to arrest terror suspects—has led to the disruption of many militant operations.

FTF Impact on Recruitment

A more consistent impact throughout different FTF contingents has been the role of some returnees in establishing new cells and recruiting members. This is because FTF experience often enhances an individual’s credibility and connections, enabling the recruitment of more individuals to the jihadist cause. Many Afghan returnees, for instance, became influential figures in Indonesian jihadist circles. Similarly, FTF returnees from the Philippines and Syria have played key roles in sustaining terrorist recruitment efforts. One such individual, a Mindanao returnee known as Abu Umar, established and led numerous cells in Kalimantan, Sulawesi and Maluku in the 2000s until his arrest in 2011. After his release in 2019, he went on to establish more than 14 new cells across West Java, Jakarta and Banten between 2021 and 2023.[76]

In other cases, FTF experience may not have necessarily enhanced an individual’s standing but instead emboldened them to take on a more active role. For example, Syrian returnee Helmi Alamudi facilitated the travel of several groups of Indonesians to Syria after his own return in April 2014.[77] Abdullah Al-Katiri, who trained with AQAP in Yemen between January and July 2014, went on to lead another FTF contingent there in December that year.[78] Some FTFs also move between conflict zones, joining different terrorist groups and further expanding the connections of SEA jihadists in the global terrorist network. Many Indonesian veterans of Afghanistan later travelled to Mindanao, and there are reports of Malaysian FTFs in Syria subsequently joining the Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK) in Afghanistan in 2021.[79]

These examples highlight the role of FTFs in sustaining militant networks, but it should be noted that these effects can occur even without their return. As seen in the cases of Bahrun Naim and Bahrumsyah, overseas operatives can direct cells from afar. Similarly, Malaysian FTF Muhammad Wanndy Mohamed Jedy recruited at least 30 percent of IS-linked individuals from the country between 2013 and 2016—including one who committed the first IS-linked attack in Malaysia—without ever leaving Syria.[80] This suggests that while it is important to monitor possible recidivism in FTF returnees, it is equally important to disrupt the long-distance facilitation of terror cells by FTFs based abroad.

Conclusion

SEA jihadists have participated in a range of conflicts involving Muslim populations worldwide, but their involvement has varied by nationality, with certain conflicts attracting FTFs from some countries more than others. The impact of FTF returnees on the domestic threat landscape has also evolved. Early returnees from Afghanistan significantly reshaped Indonesia’s terrorism dynamics, using their connections and skills to strengthen organisation, fund advanced plots and proliferate terrorist cells across the country. By contrast, the influence of more recent returnees has been more limited, reflecting more effective policing and shifts in the strategies adopted by local jihadist organisations.

While concerns about returning FTFs bringing security threats may be warranted, they should be considered within the broader historical context of FTF mobilisation and returns, so that policy responses can effectively target vulnerabilities. Indonesia halted the repatriation of IS-affiliated individuals from Syria in 2020, largely due to concerns that FTF returnees would carry out attacks.[81] However, evidence from the past decade suggests that, with the exception of one, Indonesian FTF returnees from Syria have not used their overseas experience to enhance domestic attack capabilities. In fact, greater support was provided to local Indonesian cells by Syria-based FTFs who did not return.

A policy of careful repatriation—one which enables authorities to monitor, intervene, sentence and rehabilitate FTFs—may therefore contribute more effectively to preventing transnational terrorist coordination and future terror attacks. There have been some indications of a shift in this direction. In 2024, the Indonesian National Counter Terrorism Agency (BNPT) stated that it is ready to receive returnees.[82] In November 2025, the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced that the FTF repatriation policy will be "selective and gradual".[83] However, despite confirmation that 182 Indonesian nationals had escaped from al-Hol camp in February 2026,[84] no formal announcements have been made to reinstate the repatriation of IS-linked individuals from Syria. The issue remains politically sensitive, and as the Prabowo administration focuses on navigating the US-Israel-Iran conflict,[85] FTF repatriation will likely remain a lower priority.

About the Author

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[21] I Made Wisnu Wardhana and Bimoseno Pratama Putra, “The Impact of the Indonesian Jihadist Returnee: Case Study of Three Waves of Jihadist Returnees from 1985 to 2018,” preprint, September 2024: 5, https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.23856.98564.
[22] Raul Dancel, “Eight Militants Killed in Philippine Assault on Mindanao Lair of Singaporean Terrorist,” *The Straits Times*, February 4, 2019, https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/eight-militants-killed-in-philippine-assault-on-mindanao-lair-of-singaporean-terrorist.
[23] Singapore Ministry of Home Affairs, “White Paper on the Jemaah Islamiyah Arrests and the Threat of Terrorism,” January 1, 2003: 9, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/government_records/docs/98800442-39b1-11e7-98bd-0050568939ad/Cmd.2of2003.pdf; Dancel, “Eight Militants Killed.”
[24] Fealy and Funston, *Indonesian and Malaysian Support,* 9.
[25] Mohd Mizan Mohammad Aslam, *A Critical Study of Kumpulan Militant Malaysia, Its Wider Connections in the Region and the Implications of Radical Islam for the Stability of Southeast Asia* (PhD diss., Victoria University of Wellington, 2009), 130.
[26] Halim bin Hussein, a Singaporean, reportedly joined jihad in Maluku in 2000. See International Crisis Group, “Jemaah Islamiyah,” 9.
[27] Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, “Weak, Therefore Violent: The Mujahidin of Western Indonesia,” *IPAC Report* no. 5 (2013): 9.
[28] Rueben Ananthan Santhana Dass, “Malaysia,” *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 17, no. 1 (2025), https://rsis.edu.sg/ctta-newsarticle/malaysia-3/.
[29] As IS’s scope of operations encompassed both Syrian and Iraqi territory, it is likely that many of those who went to join IS in Syria also went to Iraq; see Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, “The Evolution of ISIS in Indonesia,” *IPAC Report*, no. 13 (2014): 12–3.
[30] Estimates of IS fighters from Indonesia range widely. Of this figure, it is not clear how many were active fighters, as there is evidence that some Indonesian men who travelled to Syria refused to fight for IS and were subsequently detained; see Wahyudi Soeriaatmadja, “Indonesian Group that Escaped ISIS Now in Iraq, but Cannot Fly Home Yet,” *The Straits Times*, August 11, 2017, https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/indonesian-family-that-escaped-isis-now-in-iraq-but-cannot-fly-home-yet; and Chaula Rininta Anindya, “The Deradicalisation Programme for Indonesian Deportees: A Vacuum in Coordination,” *Journal for Deradicalization*, no. 18 (2019): 217.
[31] Rueben Dass and Jasminder Singh, “The Challenges of Repatriating Malaysian IS Fighters from Syria,” *The Diplomat,* February 24, 2022, https://thediplomat.com/2022/02/the-challenges-of-repatriating-malaysian-is-fighters-from-syria/; El-Muhammady, “Managing the Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters,” 5.
[32] Muhammad Reza Lahaman Kiram is the only confirmed Filipino FTF in Syria. Kiram travelled to join IS Syria with his wife, though it is unclear if she also took on a combat role; see “Muhammad Reza Lahaman Kiram,” United Nations Security Council, accessed April 27, 2026, https://main.un.org/securitycouncil/en/content/muhammed-reza-lahaman-kiram.
[33] Zachary Abuza, “Joining the New Caravan: ISIS and the Regeneration of Terrorism in Southeast Asia,” Strategic Studies Institute, June 25, 2015, https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/SSI-Media/Recent-Publications/Article/3964534/joining-the-new-caravan-isis-and-the-regeneration-of-terrorism-in-southeast-asia/.
[34] Supreme Court of Indonesia, “Putusan Endri Sunaryo alias Endri alias Sunaryo alias Yusuf alias Luthfi Bin Ghojali,” Court Decision no. 121/Pid.Sus/2024/PN Jkt.Utr (2024); Supreme Court of Indonesia, “Putusan Muhammad Taqiyuddin alias Abu Ayub bin Ahmad,” Court Decision no. 123/Pid.Sus/2024/PN Jkt.Utr (2024).
[35] In July 2014, Isnilon Hapilon and 30 other fighters pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi. It is not clear whether the FTFs who later became part of these pro-IS cells in Basilan had already been in the Philippines prior

to the pledge. At least one individual, Wahyudin (aka Iron), travelled to the Philippines specifically for pro-IS purposes, unrelated to the earlier conflict in Mindanao; see Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, "Pro-ISIS Groups in Mindanao and Their Links to Indonesia and Malaysia," *IPAC Report*, no. 33 (2016): 6–13.
[36] The Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), Ansarul Khilafah Philippines (AKP), the Maute Group aka IS-Ranao and the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) supported IS.
[37] Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, "Pro-ISIS Groups," 11; Noor Huda Ismail, *Narasi Mematikan* (PT Kreasi Prasasti Perdamaian, 2022), 122; Asia Pacific Group on Money Laundering and Global Center on Cooperative Security, *Financing and Facilitation of Foreign Terrorist Fighters and Returnees in Southeast Asia* (2021), 21.
[38] Asia Pacific Group on Money Laundering (APG) and Global Center on Cooperative Security, *Financing and Facilitation*, 21–2.
[39] A Singaporean, Muhamad Ali Abdul Rahman (aka Muawiyah), was fighting in a Mindanao camp that served as a base for the pro-IS Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), though it is unclear whether he entered the Philippines after IS was established or had remained in the country since first arriving in Mindanao in the 1990s as a missionary. Muawiyah has also been associated with the MILF and the ASG; see Dancel, "Eight Militants Killed"; Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, "Killing Marwan in Mindanao," *IPAC Report*, no. 17 (2015).
[40] This part of the Afghanistan conflict is dated from 2016, when the US government reauthorised strikes in Afghanistan to target IS; see Charlie Savage, "Obama Relaxes Rules for Striking ISIS in Afghanistan," *The New York Times*, January 20, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/21/world/asia/obama-relaxes-rules-for-striking-isis-in-afghanistan.html.
[41] The three known individuals who successfully joined ISKP in Afghanistan are Saifullah Chaniago, Bagiyo Saleh and Nadhiroh Nuraini. Azzam al Faruq (a five-year-old child of Bagiyo Saleh and Nadhiroh Nuraini) also travelled, but is not considered an FTF due to the unlikelihood that he took part in combat. At least 16 other Indonesians attempted to travel to Afghanistan between January and June 2019 but were arrested en route; see Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, "Learning from Extremists in West Sumatra," *IPAC Report*, no. 62 (2020): 10–2.
[42] "Taleban Claims to Have Caught Two Malaysians Fighting for ISIS-Linked Militants in Kabul," *The Straits Times*, August 28, 2021, https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/taleban-claims-to-have-caught-two-malaysians-fighting-for-is-k-in-kabul.
[43] Dass, "Malaysia."
[44] Isabelle Duyvesteyn and Bram Peeters, "Fickle Foreign Fighters? A Cross-Case Analysis of Seven Muslim Foreign Fighter Mobilisations (1980–2015)," *ICCT Research Paper*, October 2015: 5–6, https://icct.nl/sites/default/files/import/multimedia_in_the_media/ICCT-Duyvesteyn-Peeters-Fickle-Foreign-Fighters-October2015.pdf.
[45] As IS's scope of operations encompassed both Syrian and Iraqi territory, it is probable that those who went to join IS in Syria also went to Iraq. However, there is only one documented case of an Indonesian travelling specifically to Iraq; see Muh Taufiqurrohman, "The Road to ISIS: How Indonesian Jihadists Travel to Iraq and Syria," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 7, no. 4 (2015): 21.
[46] Duyvesteyn and Peeters, "Fickle Foreign Fighters?"
[47] Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, "Indonesians and the Syrian Conflict."
[48] Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, "Indonesians with Al-Qaeda in Yemen," *IPAC Report*, no. 95 (2024): 10–11.
[49] JAT/JAS members trained with AQAP in Jawf Governorate in northern Yemen, and in Wadi bin Ali Valley in southern Yemen, near Seyoun Airport; see Supreme Court of Indonesia, "Putusan Endri Sunaryo"; Supreme Court of Indonesia, "Putusan Muhammad Taqiyuddin."
[50] Also known as Abd Rahman (alias Deni).
[51] Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, "Indonesians with Al-Qaeda in Yemen."
[52] Salim Mubarok Attamimi, of Hadrami descent, was in the first JAT contingent to AQAP, and Abdullah al-Katiri, also of Hadrami descent, travelled with the second and third JAT/JAS contingents to AQAP; see Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, "Indonesians with Al-Qaeda in Yemen"; Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, "The Evolution of ISIS in Indonesia."
[53] For calls to fight in Myanmar, see Mohd Nawab bin Mohd Osman and Aida Arosoaie, "Rohingya Radicalisation in Malaysia: Where's the Evidence?" *New Mandala,* February 9, 2018, https://www.newmandala.org/rohingya-radicalisation-malaysia-wheres-evidence/.
[54] There are reports of JI members travelling to Narathiwat between 2000 and 2003 to procure arms and to go into hiding, but these individuals had "no active involvement in the violence"; see International Crisis Group, "Southern Thailand: Insurgency, Not Jihad"; Jasminder Singh and Muhammad Haziq Jani, "Myanmar's Rohingya Conflict: Foreign Jihadi Brewing," *RSIS Commentary*, no. 259 (2016), https://rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/CO16259.pdf.
[55] In September 2017, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) issued a statement denying any links to global terrorist groups, including IS, AQ and LeT; see Osman and Arosoaie, "Rohingya Radicalisation"; and, for Thailand, Joseph Chinyong Liow, "Muslim Identity, Local Networks, and Transnational Islam in Thailand's Southern Border Provinces," *Modern Asian Studies* 45, no. 6 (2011): 1419.
[56] Singapore Government, "Government Press Statement: Update on Counter-Terrorism Investigations in Singapore," January 14, 2004, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/data/pdfdoc/2004011404.htm.
[57] With AQAP in Yemen, Fatkhi Umar (alias Abu Ahmad al Indunisy) and Heru Siswanto were both placed in AQAP's Medical Division, while Taqiyudin was assigned to the Dauroh Syari (Islamic training programme) division; see Supreme Court of Indonesia, "Putusan Endri Sunaryo"; Supreme Court of Indonesia, "Putusan Muhammad Taqiyuddin."

[58] Jayakumar and Sumpter, “Southeast Asian Fighters,” 59.
[59] Jayakumar and Sumpter, “Southeast Asian Fighters,” 64.
[60] Supreme Court of Indonesia, “Putusan Endri Sunaryo”; Supreme Court of Indonesia, “Putusan Muhammad Taqiyuddin.”
[61] From Indonesia, the main organisations/networks sending members to foreign conflicts were Darul Islam (to Afghanistan), JI (to Afghanistan, Philippines, Syria) and the Aman Abdurrahman network/Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (to Syria). Several smaller Indonesian organisations also facilitated FTF travel to Syria, including JAT, Forum Aktivis Syariah Islam (FAKSI) and Firqah Abu Hamzah (FAH).
[62] Jayakumar and Sumpter, “Southeast Asian Fighters,” 67.
[63] The 12 attacks involving Afghan returnees are the 2000 Philippine Ambassador Residence bombing in Jakarta; the 2000 Christmas Eve bombings in various locations; the 2001 Atrium Mall bombing in Jakarta; the 2002 Bali bombing I and the 2005 Bali bombing II; the 2002 McDonald’s bombing in Makassar; the 2003 Soekarno–Hatta Airport bombing; the 2003 Marriott Hotel bombing in Jakarta; the 2004 Australian Embassy bombing in Jakarta; and the 2009 Marriott Hotel and Ritz-Carlton bombings in Jakarta; see Wardhana and Putra, “The Impact of the Indonesian Jihadist Returnee”; International Crisis Group, “Jemaah Islamiyah,” 33–5.
[64] Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, “The Ongoing Problem of Pro-ISIS Cells in Indonesia,” *IPAC Report* no. 56 (2019): 7.
[65] Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, Colin P. Clarke and Samuel Hodgson, “Foreign Terrorist Fighters from Southeast Asia: What Happens Next?” *ICCT Perspective*, February 17, 2020, https://icct.nl/publication/foreign-terrorist-fighters-southeast-asia-what-happens-next.
[66] “Indonesia Arrests Citizen Who Plotted Terror Attack on Singapore Exchange Building in 2014,” *Channel NewsAsia*, September 3, 2024, https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/indonesia-arrest-terrorist-plot-attack-singapore-exchange-4583521.
[67] Richard C. Paddock and Jason Gutierrez, “Indonesian Couple Carried Out Philippines Cathedral Bombing, Police Say,” *The New York Times*, July 23, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/23/world/asia/philippines-bombing-deportees-isis.html.
[68] Quinton Temby, “Terrorism in Indonesia After ‘Islamic State’,” *Trends in Southeast Asia,* no. 3 (2020): 12.
[69] Wahyudi Soeriaatmadja, “Husband and Wife Face Death Penalty on Terror Charges in Indonesia,” *The Straits Times*, March 12, 2018, https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/husband-and-wife-face-death-penalty-on-terror-charges-in-indonesia.
[70] Muhammad Ikhsan Mahar, “Menjamurnya Sel-sel Kecil NIIS,” *Kompas,* February 18, 2016, https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2016/02/18/17035591/Menjamurnya.Sel-sel.Kecil.NIIS?page=all; Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, “Disunity Among Indonesian ISIS Supporters and the Risk of More Violence,” *IPAC Report* no. 25 (2016): 1.
[71] Wardhana and Putra, “The Impact of the Indonesian Jihadist Returnee,” 8.
[72] Anindya, “The Deradicalisation Programme,” 218.
[73] Leebarty Taskarina, “Bring Them Back Home: Indonesia’s Policy Dilemma in Repatriating Ex-ISIS Sympathisers,” *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter-Terrorism* 20, no. 4 (2025): 518–26, https://doi.org/10.1080/18335330.2025.2518548.
[74] Sidney Jones and Solahudin, “JI’s Decision to Disband Is for Real,” *Indonesia at Melbourne*, July 31, 2024, https://indonesiaatmelbourne.unimelb.edu.au/jis-decision-to-disband-is-for-real/.
[75] Supreme Court of Indonesia, “Putusan Endri Sunaryo,” 14.
[76] Supreme Court of Indonesia, “Putusan Abdullah Indra Kusuma alias Muhammad Ichwan alias Abang alias Abu Umar bin Abdul Azis,” Court Decision no. 401/Pid.Sus/2024/PN JKT.TIM (2024): 9–11, 18–20, https://putusan3.mahkamahagung.go.id/direktori/putusan/zaef9028120c9.2f08f7c313034353234.html.
[77] Schulze and Liow, “Making Jihadis, Waging Jihad.”
[78] Supreme Court of Indonesia, “Putusan Yudo Ratmiko,” Court Decision no. 127/Pid.Sus/2024/PN Jkt.Utr (2024).
[79] “Taleban Claims to Have Caught Two Malaysians Fighting for ISIS-Linked Militants in Kabul,” *The Straits Times*, August 8, 2021, https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/taleban-claims-to-have-caught-two-malaysians-fighting-for-is-k-in-kabul.
[80] Gartenstein-Ross, Clarke and Hodgson, “Foreign Terrorist Fighters.”
[81] Dete Aliah, “Bahaya Pemulangan Eks NIIS,” *Kompas,* February 15, 2020, https://www.kompas.id/artikel/bahaya-pemulangan-eks-niis.
[82] Adlini Ilma Ghaisany Sjah, “Indonesia Prepares to Bring Ex-ISIS Families Home,” *East Asia Forum,* December 26, 2024, https://eastasiaforum.org/2024/12/28/indonesia-prepares-to-bring-ex-isis-families-home/.
[83] “Kemlu Beber 359 WNI Masih Berada di Kamp Pengungsi Suriah,” *CNN Indonesia,* November 3, 2025, https://www.cnnindonesia.com/internasional/20251103203148-106-1291454/kemlu-beber-359-wni-masih-berada-di-kamp-pengungsi-suriah.
[84] “182 WNI Eks ISIS Kabur dari Kamp Suriah,” *CNN Indonesia,* February 19, 2026, https://www.cnnindonesia.com/internasional/20260219175447-120-1329743/182-wni-eks-isis-kabur-dari-kamp-suriah/amp.
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Syria After Assad: Fragile Stability and the Transnational Realignment of the Islamic State (IS)

Mekki ULUDAĞ

This article examines developments in Syria from 2024–2026, focusing on the persistence, adaptation and renewed activity of the Islamic State (IS) and analogous jihadist movements. It situates these dynamics within the broader United States (US)–Israel–Iran regional conflict, and analyses how local, national and transnational actors interact within this volatile landscape. Under the presidency of Ahmed al-Sharaa,[1] the transitional government faces a dual crisis of legitimacy: managing internal dissent among ruling elites while addressing the broader risk of renewed radical jihadism. Following the collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime in December 2024,[2] Syria entered a highly unstable transitional phase. Since the integration agreement between the Damascus government and Kurdish-led forces in early 2026,[3] Syria has experienced a flimsy state of stability. Former opposition armed groups have sought to transform into governing actors while, concurrently, jihadist organisations, such as IS, have adapted their strategies to exploit residual governance gaps, the uneven reach of security forces and the economic vulnerabilities of war-torn communities. This article argues that Syria's transitional trajectory is intimately linked to the strategic adaptation of IS, making the management of insurgent networks, detainees and regional security dynamics, central to understanding both national stabilisation and the broader transnational jihadist landscape.

Introduction

The collapse of the Bashar al-Assad regime in late 2024 inaugurated a new chapter in Syrian political history, characterised by uncertainty, fragmentation and the rise of new power brokers. Ahmed al-Sharaa[4] has emerged as the central figure in this transitional order. Sharaa's trajectory—from leadership in Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)[5] to the presidency of a nascent governing authority—encapsulates the paradoxes of Syria's post-insurgent state-building project. His administration represents both continuity with Syria's insurgent past and a deliberate attempt to transform the former militant network into a technocratic, centralised apparatus of governance.[6]

Sharaa's rebranding effort emphasises civil order, institutional consolidation and pragmatic engagement with domestic and external actors. Ideologically, it signals a decisive pivot from transnational jihadist ambitions towards a distinctly Syrian variant of Salafi nationalism, emphasising sovereignty, territorial governance and localised authority.[7] This ideological recalibration has practical implications: it frames state-building not as a simple replication of previous jihadist governance models, but as a complex balancing act between ideological loyalty, pragmatic administration and international legitimacy.[8]

Central to this transformation is a systematic effort to dissolve autonomous militias and integrate disparate armed factions into a unified national defence structure under civilian oversight. Public discourse from Sharaa's administration emphasises commitments to protecting religious minorities, rejecting transnational jihadist ambitions and reasserting Syrian sovereignty on the international stage. Nevertheless, this project of moderation and

institutionalisation is deeply contested. Hardline cadres within the former HTS accuse the leadership of ideological betrayal, while pragmatic elites argue that moderation is indispensable for securing international legitimacy, attracting reconstruction aid and stabilising the war-torn economy.[9]

The domestic struggle unfolds alongside the enduring presence of the Islamic State (IS). While Sharaa seeks to consolidate a localised nationalist project, IS exploits the structural vulnerabilities created by the collapse of Assad's intelligence apparatus, the uneven territorial reach of transitional military institutions and the widespread civilian distrust of governmental authorities. From the Syrian Badia and Middle Euphrates River Valley, to urban pockets in Hasakah and Raqqa, IS maintains semi-autonomous cells capable of coordinated attacks, assassinations and extortion operations.[10] The juxtaposition of Sharaa's nationalist experiment and IS's transnational insurgency underscores the fragility of Syria's post-conflict order: internal consolidation and external containment are deeply interdependent, and progress in one domain often hinges upon success in the other.

The post-Assad administration faces two interrelated challenges. First, it must maintain internal cohesion by reconciling competing visions of Islamist identity, governance and military authority. Second, it must neutralise IS's persistent insurgency, the latter of whose attacks and propaganda portray Sharaa's nationalist turn as ideological apostasy and betrayal. The management of IS detainees, the securitisation of porous borders and the dismantling of sleeper cells, constitute not merely tactical counter terrorism measures, but existential tests of Syria's ability to achieve the minimum stability required to prevent its territory from remaining a perpetual incubator of global jihad.[11]

This article examines these dynamics in depth. The analysis is organised into four main sections: 1) the post-Assad transition and internal consolidation under Sharaa; 2) the position of IS within the broader United States (US)–Israel–Iran regional struggle; 3) the operational, organisational and transnational dynamics of IS in Syria; and 4) the management of detainees and implications for regional security. By integrating these perspectives, the study provides a comprehensive framework for understanding Syria's fragile security and political trajectory in the post-Assad era.[12]

Navigating the Post-Assad Transition: Consolidation under Ahmed al-Sharaa and the Risk of Internal Fragmentation

Disagreements within the ruling coalition represent one of the most serious risks to Syria's fragile stability.[13] These divisions are primarily ideological rather than tribal or regional, reflecting competing conceptions of Islamist governance, pragmatism and nationalist loyalty. On one side are pragmatic Islamists and technocratic administrators, who advocate normalisation, reconstruction and institutional consolidation. On the other are hardline factions, many of whom regard compromise as betrayal and remain committed to a transnational ideological agenda.

The transitional government employs a "phased inclusion" strategy to mitigate these tensions, appointing minority representatives to symbolic positions:[14] for instance, an Alawite minister of transportation, a Druze minister of agriculture[15] and a Kurd assistant defence minister.[16] While this approach signals inclusivity, these positions often lack real authority, reinforcing perceptions of hierarchical or superficial participation.

When co-optation fails, the state has resorted to violent repression, often framed as counterinsurgency operations. In March 2025, an arrest operation targeting "regime remnants" in coastal heartlands escalated into widespread massacres, resulting in over 1,400 civilian

fatalities, predominantly Alawites, and displacing tens of thousands.[17] Similarly, the July 2025 Suwayda clashes began as tribal friction between Bedouin and Druze communities, but escalated into a government-led military intervention, which was condemned as sectarian by Druze leaders. The ensuing violence left more than 1,100 dead—including 828 in extrajudicial executions—and forced the internal migration of roughly 192,000 civilians.[18]

Crucial to this “fragile stability” is the state’s relationship with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Following the failure of the March 2025 integration talks, the government launched a major offensive in January 2026 targeting Kurdish-majority neighbourhoods in Aleppo, resulting in 1,000 combatant fatalities and the displacement of 148,000 people.[19] An 18-point ceasefire in late January 2026 compelled the SDF to cede Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor to government control, yet the absence of a clear administrative framework leaves disillusioned militants at risk of defection or collaboration with extremist organisations, such as IS. These patterns illustrate the dual challenge of consolidating a transitional state while containing insurgent threats.[20]

Fragmented Sovereignties and the Third Pole: IS within the Contemporary US–Israel–Iran Struggle in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon

The contemporary US–Israel–Iran conflict in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon reflects a multi-layered struggle over influence, ideology and strategic positioning. The US and Israel seek to constrain Iranian regional influence, while Iran’s so-called Axis of Resistance—comprising state actors and proxy militias—is under strain in the post-Assad order.[21] Across these theatres, centralised authority has increasingly given way to fragmented sovereignties, shifting alliances and localised communal politics.[22]

In Syria, Sunni Arab leadership remains ideologically anti-Iranian but operationally cautious, wary of provoking renewed conflict with Tehran-backed militias. Alawite communities, previously dominant under the Baʿathist state, have largely receded into defensive postures. Kurdish forces maintain pragmatic alignment with the US,[23] particularly regarding security guarantees, while Druze communities pursue localised neutrality and prioritise the protection of their own populations.[24] In Iraq, fragmented sovereignty persists, balancing Iran-aligned militias, such as Kataib Hezbollah, with Sunni and Kurdish groups cooperating with US security frameworks. Lebanon exhibits dual power structures: Hezbollah dominates Iranian-aligned networks, while a fragmented political field limits the authority of the state.[25]

Jihadist movements, particularly IS, constitute a distinct “third pole”.[26] Unlike state actors, IS operates with a fundamentally anti-systemic orientation, rejecting the legitimacy of existing regional and international authorities. Its ideology frames conflict not as a binary struggle between states, but as a confrontation among equally illegitimate entities. The organisation prioritises both the “far enemy”—principally the US—and the “near enemy”, including regional governments and Iran-aligned militias.[27] Anti-Shia violence remains a central strategic priority,[28] enabling IS to exploit sectarian fissures while pursuing its autonomous operational agenda.[29]

IS strategically positions itself in zones of limited state control, leveraging territorial gaps to sustain recruitment, logistics and media operations.[30] While its territorial caliphate no longer exists, IS retains ideological, financial and operational influence across multiple theatres, including Syria, Iraq and parts of Lebanon.[31] Its ability to maintain a decentralised yet coherent insurgent framework allows it to operate semi-independently, avoiding direct confrontation with stronger regional forces, while still shaping conflict dynamics in a manner disproportionate to its size.[32]

Assessing the Terrorist Threat and the Current Position of IS in Syria

Despite losing territorial control years ago, IS remains a persistent and adaptive threat across Syria. Since the collapse of the Assad regime, IS activity has increased in central and eastern Syria. The organisation operates through decentralised cells capable of assassinations, bombings and ambushes against government forces, Kurdish units and civilians.[33] By exploiting the security vacuum left by disintegrated regime intelligence networks and the ongoing reorganisation of the Syrian armed forces, IS has maintained operational relevance.

A closer examination of IS ground activity reveals a geographically differentiated but strategically coherent insurgency. Its operational centre of gravity lies in the Syrian Badia—a vast desert triangle spanning eastern Homs, southern Raqqa and western Deir ez-Zor governorates. These sparsely governed regions provide ideal conditions for guerrilla warfare, allowing IS cells to leverage mobility, concealment and local tribal networks to sustain attacks. In Deir ez-Zor, particularly along the western bank of the Euphrates River, IS intensifies operations through assassinations and improvised explosive device (IED) attacks targeting tribal leaders, local administrators and perceived collaborators. In SDF-controlled areas, including Raqqa and Hasakah, IS maintains clandestine urban networks responsible for targeted killings, recruitment and logistical coordination. Its strategy emphasises attrition over territorial conquest, aiming to erode confidence in emerging authorities, while positioning itself as a radical alternative for vulnerable populations.[34]

Recent attack patterns suggest a deliberate campaign of sustained low-intensity violence, including ambushes against military convoys, night-time assassinations and coordinated bombings of civilian infrastructure. While attack levels remain below those observed during the territorial “caliphate” period, the organisation maintains a steady operational tempo, with dozens of incidents recorded monthly and consistent casualties among both combatants and civilians.

Organisational Adaptation, Leadership and Transnational Relevance of IS in Syria

Since the collapse of its territorial caliphate, IS in Syria has undergone a profound organisational transformation. It now operates as a decentralised network of semi-autonomous cells under provincial (*wilayat*) frameworks. This hybrid model—strategic centralisation paired with tactical decentralisation—allows local commanders significant autonomy while adhering to strategic guidance transmitted via covert channels.[35] This structure ensures operational flexibility and complicates counter terrorism efforts, sustaining insurgent activity even under significant pressure.

Leadership attrition has further reinforced decentralisation. Despite repeated targeted killings of senior figures, IS maintains institutional continuity through well-established succession mechanisms, preserving cohesion after leadership decapitation. Current leadership emphasises secrecy, internal consolidation and long-term resilience over public propaganda, complicating intelligence and disruption efforts.

Intelligence reports suggest that IS employs a “delegated committee” model. Under this organisational framework, the Shura Council provides strategic guidance and ideological oversight, while local *emirs* retain autonomy in targeting and operations. Syria also functions as the ideological and financial hub for the global IS network. Coordination with affiliates in Africa (the Islamic State West Africa Province, or ISWAP) and Central Asia (the Islamic State of Khorasan, or ISK) allows the Syrian leadership to maintain influence despite reduced territorial holdings, ensuring the Syrian “brand” remains central to global jihadist recruitment.[36]

The transnational dimension of IS's resurgence is particularly evident in the "Syrian crucible" of global jihadism. Syria's instability has decoupled ideological influence from territorial control, producing high-quality media portraying the collapse of the Assad regime not as a democratic victory, but as a validation of a long-term war of attrition. Syria continues to attract foreign fighters from Central Asia, the North Caucasus and other regions, exporting the "Syrian model"—resistance through state collapse—to affiliates in the Sahel and Afghanistan. Collectively, these adaptations allow IS to remain a potent insurgent force and maintain centrality in regional and global jihadist dynamics.

Detainees, Camps and the Risk of Insurgent Regeneration

One of the most critical unresolved issues in post-Assad Syria concerns IS detainees and their families. Thousands of suspected fighters remain in detention facilities, while tens of thousands of women and children reside in camps such as al-Hol and al-Roj under deplorable conditions. These sites suffer from weak security, severe humanitarian conditions and ambiguous legal frameworks, creating long-term incubators for radicalisation and instability.[37] Security complications have been exacerbated by the transfer of some IS detainees from northeastern Syria to Iraq. The Iraqi authorities acknowledge receiving both Iraqi nationals and foreign fighters, while calling on countries of origin to repatriate their citizens home. These measures reflect Baghdad's attempt to share the burden of detention while asserting judicial authority.[38]

Reports of escape incidents, including breakouts from dozens of detention centres, have further highlighted vulnerabilities.[39] Any large-scale release of experienced militants could significantly enhance IS operational capacity, enabling network reconstitution and renewed attacks across Syria and Iraq. Historical experience underscores that prison breaks are recurring features of jihadist insurgencies, particularly during periods of state weakness.[40]

Fragmented International Response and the Global Trajectory of IS

The international response to IS detainees and insurgency has been uneven. Some countries—France, Germany, Russia, Kazakhstan, Türkiye and Uzbekistan—have repatriated their nationals, often prioritising women and children.[41] Others, including the United Kingdom, Belgium and several Middle Eastern states, have resisted or delayed repatriation due to legal and political constraints.[42]

This differentiated approach undermines efforts to establish a coherent framework for managing detainees and mitigating long-term risks.[43] IS's threat in Syria can thus be characterised as high but fragmented: while smaller extremist groups contribute to localised instability, IS remains the most dangerous actor due to its organisational resilience, ideological cohesion and strategic capacity to exploit gaps in governance.[44]

Crucially, IS's resilience in Syria must be understood within its broader global trajectory.[45] In early 2026, IS claimed responsibility for over 45 coordinated operations across central Syria, including a mid-March ambush near Al-Sukhnah, resulting in double-digit fatalities among local security forces. These attacks were strategically sequenced to exploit "security vacuums" left by the withdrawal or reorganisation of former regime remnants. Syria now functions as a strategic reservoir of experience, manpower and ideological legitimacy, with operational practices diffused to affiliates in Africa and Asia. The likelihood of a renewed, large-scale jihadist insurgency depends on the success of state-building efforts, the management of intra-elite rivalries, economic recovery and sustained international engagement. Failure across these areas risks reinforcing jihadist resilience.[46]

Conclusion

The post-Assad landscape in Syria is characterised less by a transition to peace than by the institutionalisation of instability. Under the presidency of Ahmed al-Sharaa, the emergent political order confronts a dual—and deeply interrelated—challenge: the reconstruction of a fragmented state alongside the containment of a resilient and adaptive insurgency. The analysis presented in this study demonstrates that IS has not merely survived its territorial defeat, but undergone a strategic transformation into a decentralised, clandestine and geographically embedded insurgent actor.

This transformation is most evident in the group's operational geography and tactical evolution. From the Syrian Badia to the Middle Euphrates River Valley to northeastern urban centres, IS has entrenched itself within zones of limited governance, systematically exploiting terrain, tribal dynamics and institutional fragmentation. Its emphasis on attritional warfare—manifested through assassinations, ambushes and IEDs—reflects a deliberate strategy aimed not at immediate territorial control, but at the gradual erosion of state authority and public confidence. In this context, IS no longer competes as a proto-state, but instead operates as a persistent "shadow insurgency", capable of regeneration under conditions of prolonged instability.

At the organisational level, the group's shift towards decentralised command structures and a deliberately "invisible" leadership model has significantly enhanced its resilience. The diffusion of operational authority to local emirs, combined with strategic coordination from a low-profile central leadership, complicates counter terrorism efforts and reduces vulnerability to decapitation strategies. At the same time, Syria's continued function as an ideological and operational hub underscores the enduring global relevance of IS. The Syrian theatre now serves not only as a site of insurgency, but also as a laboratory for tactical innovation and a critical node within a broader transnational jihadist network.

The unresolved issue of detainees and displacement camps further amplifies these risks. Facilities such as al-Hol and al-Roj represent not only humanitarian challenges, but also structural vulnerabilities within the post-conflict order. As demonstrated by recurring patterns of prison breaks and insurgent regeneration, any large-scale failure in detention management could rapidly translate into a resurgence of militant capacity. In this regard, the governance of detainees constitutes a critical test of both domestic institutional authority and international coordination.

These challenges are compounded by the fragmentation of the international response. Divergent policies on repatriation, prosecution and reintegration have produced an uneven and often contradictory framework, undermining collective efforts to address the long-term threat posed by IS. This lack of coherence not only prolongs the detainee crisis, but also reinforces the structural conditions under which extremist networks can persist, adapt and expand.

At the domestic level, the position of the Sharaa administration remains inherently precarious. While the coalition of actors that facilitated its rise has thus far maintained a degree of outward cohesion, the absence of a clearly articulated policy regarding foreign fighters introduces a significant faultline. The potential incompatibility between a centralising, ostensibly nationalist state-building project and transnational jihadist actors raises the prospect of intra-coalition fragmentation. Should the administration seek to marginalise or exclude these elements, disaffected factions may pursue tactical convergence with IS remnants, thereby intensifying insurgent activity and further destabilising the security environment.

Ultimately, Syria's trajectory will depend on the interaction of several structural variables: the effectiveness of security sector reform, the inclusivity and legitimacy of political institutions, the management of detainees and displaced populations, and the consistency of international engagement. Failure across these domains would not merely risk localised instability, but could facilitate the reconstitution of Syria as a central node within the global jihadist ecosystem.

In this context, the resurgence of transnational jihadist activity should be understood not as a hypothetical scenario, but as a plausible outcome grounded in observable trends. IS, while territorially constrained, remains operationally persistent and strategically adaptive. The Syrian case thus underscores a broader lesson for post-conflict environments: the defeat of a territorial entity does not equate to the dismantling of the movement it represents. Without sustained and coordinated efforts to address the underlying political, security and socioeconomic drivers of instability, the conditions that enabled the rise of IS are likely to endure—if not intensify—in the years ahead.

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Al-Qaeda's Evolution: Future Course and Key Implications for Peace and Security

Farhan Zahid

This article examines Al-Qaeda (AQ)'s evolution from a centralised global jihadist group into a decentralised network of regional affiliates. It argues that sustained counter terrorism pressure, leadership losses and competition from the Islamic State (IS) has compelled AQ to adopt strategic patience, prioritising local insurgencies over large-scale international attacks. The study highlights the growing significance of regional affiliates such as Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimeen (JNIM) in the Sahel, Al-Shabaab in Somalia, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen and Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) in South Asia. AQ's relationship with its regional affiliates demonstrates how it embeds within fragile states to exploit governance vacuums. While no longer the dominant global jihadist force, AQ remains a persistent and adaptive threat with long-term implications for regional stability and international security.

Introduction

Al-Qaeda (AQ), once the most prominent global jihadist group, no longer commands the same international attention. Its operational strength significantly decreased during the United States (US)-led Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan[1] and subsequent counter terrorism measures. At present, AQ has neither the capacity to perpetrate terrorist attacks against the West (the far enemy) nor to conduct violent operations in Muslim-majority countries (the near enemy).[2] Though AQ is not considered a substantial global risk, its affiliates continue to pose an imminent threat in parts of Asia and Africa. In the context of the Israel–US–Iran war,[3] AQ may get an opportunity to rebrand itself by exploiting the emerging security vacuums in the Middle East. Nevertheless, AQ must not be mistaken for irrelevance; rather, it has made a strategic recalibration to survive, adapt and embed itself within local jihadist groups in parts of Asia and Africa.[4]

Before the emergence of the Islamic State (IS), AQ was the torchbearer and the vanguard of the global jihadist movement.[5] It aimed to create a network of jihadist groups to jointly create a self-styled global Sunni caliphate. AQ has based its jihadist narrative on international conflicts involving Muslim states, such as Palestine, Kashmir, Afghanistan and several conflicts in Africa.[6]

Against this backdrop, it is important to unpack AQ's transformation strategy to understand its future trajectory. Ostensibly, AQ has evolved from a tight-knit, centralised, transnational jihadist organisation into a decentralised network of local militant groups.[7]

From Global to Regional to Local

Since its inception in the late 1990s and growth in the early 2000s, AQ, also described as Al-Qaeda Central or Al-Qaeda Core, worked as a hierarchical organisation with a centralised command structure based in Afghanistan.[8] It had training camps in Afghanistan operating under the first Taliban regime's (1996–2001) protection umbrella.[9] After the US intervention and subsequent counter terrorism operations in Afghanistan, AQ's command structure was disrupted, its top leadership was decapitated and its financial networks were tracked and hunted down.[10] Nonetheless, AQ fought on till the death of its *emir*, Osama bin Laden, in May 2011,[11] and the command structure remained in central control. However, AQ's next leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, was not as charismatic as his predecessor.[12]

In the post-2011 scenario, AQ transitioned from a centralised vanguard model into a distributed network of affiliates. Even after the killing of Zawahiri in August 2022,[13] AQ survived, as it adopted a symbolic and ideological role while backing and sponsoring its regional affiliates as well as giving the operational initiative to local branches.[14] As of 2026, these regional affiliates operate with substantial autonomy, but remain aligned with AQ and seek its strategic guidance. They function as semi-autonomous nodes within AQ's global ecosystem of jihadism.

The Strategic Logic of Patience

According to terrorism scholar Sara Harmouch, "Bin Laden's strategic logic was simple: Striking the far enemy—the United States, Israel, and other powers propping up local apostate regimes (the near enemy)—would collapse the regional order by severing its external support and forcing American withdrawal from the Middle East. Only spectacular violence, he believed, could achieve that end—a conviction reflected in the 1998 East Africa embassy bombings, the 2000 USS *Cole* attack and ultimately September 11 (2001)."[15]

After bin Laden, Zawahiri's policy was to avoid mass-casualty attacks, and he directed local AQ affiliates by issuing the *General Guidelines for Jihad* in 2013.[16] Zawahiri instructed them to refrain from sectarian violence and from targeting civilians, and to prioritise the cultivation of local support from the general population.[17]

After leadership losses and growing competition from its Iraqi offshoot, the so-called Islamic State (IS), AQ has embraced the policy of strategic patience.[18] This does not mean AQ has shunned its objective of establishing a self-styled Sunni global caliphate. Rather, it is now trying to achieve this goal indirectly by working with regional affiliates. This involves embedding itself within local conflicts rather than dominating them. AQ's strategy to work with the Afghan Taliban and help them regain power in Afghanistan exemplifies this. Most importantly, AQ has been avoiding high-profile terrorist attacks, especially in Western countries, to avoid international counter terrorism pressure. Ostensibly, this has worked well for AQ, as it seems to have gone off the Western security radar despite working alongside its regional affiliates in Africa, South Asia, Central Asia and other parts of the world.[19]

After Zawahiri's killing in Kabul in 2022, AQ's new presumed emir, Sayf al-Adl, has elucidated his thoughts in the book, *33 Strategies of War.* He believes in reorienting AQ into a disciplined, professional and methodical military organisation, rather than just a network that seeks spectacular attacks. He favours low visibility, strategic patience and carefully timed operations. He believes that earlier jihadist movements failed because of poor planning and a lack of expertise. His jihadist strategic doctrine stresses training, operational discipline and avoiding premature confrontation. Moreover, he is of the view that AQ, as a jihadist organisation, must be ready for a prolonged generational fight, which requires institutional strength, gradual expansion and survival under pressure.[20]

Growing Amongst Networks: A Geographic Assessment of Al-Qaeda

In recent years, AQ has broadened its network of affiliates across the globe, especially in Africa and Asia. This section looks at AQ's major affiliates in the two regions.

Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimeen in the Sahel Region

AQ has experienced unprecedented growth in Africa's Sahel region, where it operates through Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimeen (JNIM), a conglomerate of Al-Mourabitoun, the Macina Liberation Front (MLF) and Ansar Dine, among others. Founded in 2017, JNIM has capitalised on political instability, military coups and governance vacuums across Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger to entrench its footprint in the Sahel.[21] Under its governance model JNIM works with local communities instead of imposing rigid bureaucratic structures on them. It often negotiates with local communities while presenting itself

as a security provider to fill the vacuum created by state failures.[22] This has allowed JNIM to expand throughout the Sahel without drawing much international attention. Reportedly, JNIM rules over large chunks of land in the Sahel region (Burkina Faso, Benin, Niger, Côte d'Ivoire and Togo). JNIM's emir, Iyad ag Ghaly,[23] a Tuareg from Mali, commands over 6,000 militants.[24]

Al-Shabaab in Somalia

Al-Shabaab, an old AQ affiliate, formally aligned with AQ while Osama bin Laden was alive. After the state's failure in Somalia, Al-Shabaab managed to emerge as a powerful insurgent organisation, controlling territory in southern and central Somalia and maintaining a parallel governance structure. Al-Shabaab militants have carried out terrorist attacks in in Somalia and Kenya[25].

Despite the collapse of AQ elsewhere, Al-Shabaab remains strong in eastern Africa. Its emir, Ahmed Diriye (Abu Ubaidah), commands a force of 7,000-12,000 militants.[26] While primarily focused on local objectives, its allegiance to AQ underscores continued transnational ideological connections.

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula in Yemen

Despite being torn apart due to regional politics and interventions, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), continues to operate in southern and eastern Yemen with impunity. AQAP is a network of Ansar al-Sharia in Yemen, the Islamic Army of Aden and Abyan, and Al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia. It consists of a potent force of around 4,000[27] well-armed jihadist militants and is headed by Saad bin Atef al-Awlaki.[28]

In the past, AQAP launched several international terrorist attacks in Europe and North America. AQAP was famed for having prominent AQ commanders and jihadist ideologues among its members, such as Anwar al-Awlaki, Abdul Majeed al-Zindani, Nasir al-Wuhayshi, Qasim al-Raymi and Khalid Batarfi.[29][30]

AQAP is now weak compared to its peak years but continues to operate within Yemen's fragmented political landscape. Although its external plotting capacity appears reduced, the group retains ideological significance and the potential for regeneration if the security vacuum in Yemen persists.[31]

Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent in South Asia

The South Asian chapter of AQ, Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), was Zawahiri's brainchild.[32] It was formed in 2014[33] because of AQ's growing competition with IS in the region. Although AQ Core was based in Pakistan even then, AQIS was established to execute terrorist strikes in the region. The 2014 attempted hijacking of the Pakistan Navy's ship, the PNS *Zulfiqar*, off the coast of Karachi, was a failed high-profile attack launched immediately after the proclamation of AQIS.[34]

Though AQIS has achieved limited operational impact, it maintains a symbolic presence in South Asia. At present, AQIS is based in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. It has found refuge in local militant alliances, such as Ittehad-ul-Mujahideen Pakistan, which is a conglomerate of Pakistan-focused militant groups based in Afghanistan.[35] Currently, AQIS is headed by Osama Mahmood and his deputy Yahya Ghouri, and is based in Kabul.[36]

In sum, AQ affiliates prioritise local insurgencies rather than orchestrating coordinated global attacks. In this sense, the "near enemy" becomes the focus of AQ and its affiliates' attention rather than the "far enemy". This is despite the fact that AQ continues to reinforce its anti-Western narrative, comprising global Muslim victimhood and an imminent civilisational confrontation between *Dar ul Islam* (the House of Peace) and *Dar ul Harb* (the House of War).[37] The latter remains part of AQ's rhetorical

discourse but is not currently the primary operational target.[38] Under AQ's strategy of strategic patience, though global jihadism persists as an ideological glue, its execution is local.

Major Challenges

Leadership Issues and Transitions

The foremost challenge confronting AQ is persistent leadership losses. Scores of high-value AQ leaders have been eliminated in Afghanistan, Pakistan and elsewhere, and many have also been arrested, creating a serious leadership crisis.[39] After the killing of bin Laden in May 2011, there has been no able or charismatic leader to lead AQ.[40] The current leadership status is unclear, but it is speculated that Sayf al-Adl has taken over as the new emir. It is important to mention that AQ has not made a formal announcement of his appointment.

Nonetheless, presumed de facto leader al-Adl is a former Egyptian military officer and one of AQ's founding members. He was involved in the planning and execution of the 1998 East Africa embassy bombings.[41] His location is said to be in Iran under the custody of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).[42] It could be argued that he is currently imprisoned and not able to execute his duties as emir of AQ.

These transitions have weakened AQ and diminished its potency as a premier jihadist organisation globally. This is another reason that AQ has opted to follow a strategy of localisation.

Competition with IS

IS, now AQ's archnemesis, emerged on the global stage after taking over Iraq's Mosul in 2014.[43] IS's rise forced AQ to redefine itself, and fierce competition ensued. IS, after splitting from AQ, adopted a somewhat different approach as far as executing violence and perpetrating terrorist attacks are concerned. IS embraced hyper-brutality,[44] territorial governance and international terrorist attacks, and presented itself as the true heir of bin Laden. This change of strategy eventually benefited AQ after the fall of IS territories in Iraq and Syria. AQ started to reinvigorate its affiliates, particularly in parts of Africa. From then on, AQ started its less conspicuous model, which may prove more sustainable over time.[45]

It is important to point out that competition between global jihadist factions can produce cycles of escalation, particularly in contested theatres, such as the Sahel. In a bid to outdo and outcompete each other, rival jihadist factions may carry out large-scale terrorist attacks.[46] Therefore, policymakers must monitor these dynamics carefully.

Contemporary Threat Profile and Future Implications

Presently, AQ poses a different type of threat than it did in 2001. It is not potent enough to perpetrate mass-casualty terrorist attacks in Western countries, but there is a likelihood of sustained growth in fragile states where Islamist insurgencies are gaining momentum, such as in Africa and the Middle East. AQ is trying to gradually entrench itself within local political and social structures and to promote its ideological influence.

Amid this situation, devising counter terrorism policies becomes complicated. Currently, the AQ threat is less dramatic but more persistent. The United Nations Security Council sanctions regime, which covers AQ and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, or Daesh), remains active, with the list updated as recently as February 2026, reflecting ongoing designations.[47]

Threat to Fragile States in Asia and Africa

AQ still carries weight as far as terrorism in the fragile states of Asia and Africa is concerned, by playing the role of a mentor to local jihadist movements in these regions. The absence of AQ's high-profile terrorist attacks in Western countries does not indicate a diminished threat.[48] Rather, AQ is now focused on embedding itself within local jihadist groups, as discussed above. Local jihadist insurgencies enable AQ chapters to erode governance, fuel humanitarian crises and create permissive environments for militant growth.

The Sahel region (earlier discussed) illustrates how political instability, economic marginalisation and military coups create conditions conducive to militant expansion. The same situation exists in regions like Syria, where Hurras al-Din, a branch of AQ, established itself against the backdrop of the Syrian civil war, but later dissolved.[49] Afghanistan, another war-torn country, has witnessed the growth of AQIS, which is now working in tandem with the Afghan Taliban regime. Therefore, it is apparent that seeking refuge in fragile countries is now a paramount policy of AQ.

Conclusion

The US intervention in Afghanistan marked the beginning of a sustained global counter terrorism campaign against AQ. Though AQ no longer retains the operational capacity to launch high-profile international attacks, it would be imprudent to consider it strategically defeated. Rather, it has evolved into a decentralised network of regional affiliates, which reflects a deliberate long-term strategy. AQ's organisational evolution has complicated the traditional counter terrorism metrics and responses.

AQ's transformation comes at a critical time when global counter terrorism is no longer a priority of the US. Hence, there would be limitations as far as global counter terrorism approaches are concerned, particularly vis-à-vis AQ and its local affiliates. Therefore, it is crucial to prioritise non-kinetic counter terrorism measures, including political stabilisation, local capacity-building and counter ideological efforts in fragile states where AQ is reinvigorating itself. Concurrently, there is also a need to craft effective counter terrorism policies against an evolving AQ to contain and mitigate its threat.

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The Iran War: Regime Resilience and the Threat of Violent Terrorism in the Middle East and Beyond

Ghada Soliman

An emboldened Iranian regime continues to leverage its network of regional proxies and their sleeper cells amid its ongoing conflict with the United States (US) and Israel. The US–Israel joint military operation, dubbed "Epic Fury",[1] culminated in the killing[2] of Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on February 28, 2026.[3] In the aftermath, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), long defined by its deep animosity towards the US, Israel and their allies, has signalled an uncompromising resolve to "fight to the end". This escalation has reinvigorated the so-called Axis of Resistance and its extensive network of sleeper cells and heightened the risk of regional instability. Regardless of the war's outcome, these regional security concerns will continue to simmer in the Middle East, with implications globally.

A Fragile Truce: Conflicting Ceasefire Plans

The Iran war is presently in a more volatile phase following a series of surprise airstrikes that targeted senior Iranian leadership beginning in late February 2026.[4] These strikes triggered an immediate Iranian counteroffensive and have contributed to widespread disruption to global energy flows, particularly through the Strait of Hormuz. In the period since, escalating military exchanges, heightened regional alert levels and concerns over proxy mobilisation have underscored the risk of a wider conflict. A temporary truce–brokered by Pakistan and framed by both Tehran[5] and Washington[6] as a strategic success–has sought to stabilise the situation and facilitate the reopening of critical maritime routes.

However, prospects for sustained de-escalation remain uncertain, as Washington and Tehran continue to advance fundamentally incompatible frameworks. The United States (US) has prioritised a framework[7] centred on constraining Iran's nuclear programme, including by limiting its stockpile of enriched uranium, alongside efforts to curb Iran-aligned militias. It has also pushed for expanded international oversight over key maritime routes, especially the Strait of Hormuz. In contrast, Iran has advanced a phased plan[8] that emphasises immediate de-escalation measures – such as sanctions relief, a ceasefire and the reopening of the Strait of Hormuz–while seeking to formalise a new governance framework which would transform the Strait into a quasi-sovereign, Iranian-administered passage.[9] Tehran's latest proposal, which has received a lukewarm response from US officials, also incorporates broader regional elements, including an end to the hostilities in Lebanon and reductions in American military presence. Nuclear negotiations, however, are strikingly deferred to a later stage.

More recently, the US facilitated a temporary extension of the ceasefire between Israel and Lebanon. But the fragility of the broader US–Iran truce has become increasingly evident, as reports of stalled or collapsing negotiations[10] point to a deteriorating diplomatic environment.[11] This has been accompanied by indications of expanded military posturing and stricter enforcement of maritime control in the Gulf.[12] Taken together, these developments suggest that while diplomatic channels remain open, skirmishes could resume at any time.[13]

An Empowered Iranian Regime

In recent months, Iran's leadership has attempted to consolidate its grip on power following Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's death. His passing has not diminished the power and influence of the

clerical establishment within the theocratic system of *Velayat-e Faqih*[14] (the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist), which remains the foundational pillar of the Iranian state. This is even as a growing number of young Iranians are distancing themselves from this clerical regime, which they perceive as ideologically rigid and increasingly disconnected with their aspirations.

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)–designated a terrorist group [15] by several countries,[16] including the US[17]–is now Iran's definitive ruling body despite Mojtaba,[18] the son of Khamenei, being appointed as the new supreme leader of Iran. The group remains the primary guarantor of the regime's longevity, ensuring its ideology persists even as the country undergoes a power shift.

While the IRGC's dominance over and mishandling of the economy and security have fuelled public resentment and demonstrations, it has effectively exploited the US–Israel–Iran conflict. The war has brought many Iranians together,[19] which, ironically, has allowed the IRGC to rebrand itself as a national hero.

IRGC Hardliners Preserve the Ideals of the Islamic Revolution

President Donald Trump has publicly made reference[20] to a "seriously fractured Iran", indicating divisions in the Iranian regime and its decision-making. There have also been recent reports that Masoud Pezeshkian, the president of Iran, is dissatisfied the IRGC's strategy for handling the conflict with the US.[21] Iranian officials have stressed, however, that the country's state bodies move within a unified framework under the leadership of Mojtaba. They continue to steadfastly deny the presence of internal divisions at a time when the country is exposed to simultaneous military and diplomatic pressures. Moreover, sources inside Iran have observed that Ahmed Vahidi,[22] the commander-in-chief of the IRGC, who was appointed on March 1, 2026, seems to be the *de facto* leader of Iran.[23] Vahidi is a known hardliner compared to his predecessor, Mohamed Pakpour, who was assassinated on February 28 in the same Israeli attacks that killed Khamenei. Vahidi appears opposed to the ceasefire talks with the US.

Reiterating this hardline position, Mohammad Bagher Qalibaf,[24] who is the speaker of Iran's Parliament and currently leading the negotiations with the US, stressed the importance of hardline rule in Iran to ensure complete obedience to the supreme leader of the Islamic Revolution. He added that all Iranians accept their role as revolutionaries.[25] This approach highlights the resilience of the Islamic revolution ideology despite changes in leadership.

Promoting the "Global Mujahid" Narrative

The IRGC has adopted a "call for jihad" narrative in the Shiite world to justify its dominance. In doing so, it has portrayed[26] Khamenei as a "global *mujahid*" (global warrior involved in a holy struggle), who resisted "Western imperialism" and "Zionism". This is despite millions of secular Iranians and diaspora members, who suffered under his rigid and often repressive domestic policies, celebrating his death.

Whether or not Mojtaba[27] will form part of this narrative–and for how long–remains to be seen. Reports indicate that Khamenei's choice of his son as successor has come under pressure[28] from the IRGC, as Mojtaba does not hold the rank of ayatollah and lacks his father's charisma. Leaked reports have also indicated that he is currently receiving medical treatment in Qom to manage severe physical injuries after recent airstrikes.[29] There is ongoing speculation that Ayatollah Alireza Arafi,[30] a member of the interim leadership council who is known for his close ties to the IRGC, is the acting supreme leader for now. This situation indicates the vulnerability of the role of a supreme leader, which would likely become more symbolic under consolidated IRGC rule.

Regardless of the office's future status, it could well still be exploited to promote a mujahid narrative and the idea of global jihad. For instance, a prominent IRGC supporter and influential Shiite cleric, Ayatollah Nasser Makarem Shirazi,[31] has issued a *fatwa* calling for jihad against the US and Israel for Khamenei's assassination.

This narrative has arguably contributed to legitimising the IRGC on a global scale. The organisation has also signalled heightened aggression,[32] notably by raising[33] symbolic red flags[34] of revenge in Tehran over the Jamkaran Mosque, a move widely interpreted as an explicit warning and an indication of a potentially escalating threat to global security. The IRGC's ongoing operations,[35] including launching missile and drone attacks against American military installations in Bahrain,[36] Qatar,[37] Saudi Arabia,[38] Kuwait[39] and the United Arab Emirates (UAE),[40] have fuelled geopolitical tensions in the region and beyond, further exacerbated by the US and Israel's coordinated military campaign against Iran.

The mujahid narrative appears to have influenced how segments of the Shiite community worldwide are interpreting this conflict. On Shiite-orientated social media platforms, the late Khamenei and his regime are increasingly portrayed as the "true protectors" of Islam. At the same time, Arab nations are accused of allegedly facilitating Western military operations against Iran and Gaza. Such discourse, if left unchecked, risks deepening sectarian divisions by reinforcing an "us versus them" narrative within the Muslim world.

A Mosaic Defensive Structure

While exploiting the ongoing war to reshape Iran's global image, the IRGC also appears to be learning from previous conflicts such as the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988), where the loss of key commanders often led to temporary battlefield paralysis. To mitigate the impact of leadership losses since Ali Khamenei's death, the IRGC has activated a mosaic defensive strategy[41]–a doctrine designed to ensure operational continuity during wartime. This approach decentralises command and control, empowering regional and field commanders to make independent battlefield decisions. It is specifically designed to counter asymmetric threats from the US and Israel, even in the event of disruptions to central leadership or communications.[42]

Under this strategy, Iran is divided into 31 distinct[43] military sectors, one for each province, allowing mid-level IRGC commanders to operate autonomously. With a standing force of over 600,000 active and reserve personnel as well as absolute control over Iran's nuclear infrastructure through the Basij national militia, the IRGC commands a defence force in its own right. Through its Quds Force, it also coordinates proxy militias throughout the Middle East.

The IRGC and the Axis of Resistance: Challenging US Hegemony

The Houthis

The IRGC's forward defensive strategy is anchored in Iran's so called Axis of Resistance–a loose network of state and non-state actors, including Hezbollah, the Houthis and Iran-backed Iraqi militias, which collectively project Iranian influence and challenge US and Israeli influence in the region. Recently, Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, the Houthi leader, characterised the fragile truce between Iran and the US as a strategic victory,[44] asserting that the ongoing confrontations with the US has effectively restored a sense of deterrence for Tehran. He added that Iran has demonstrated that the Axis of Resistance is now a formidable force[45] which can no longer be sidelined. He further called for the region to accept Iran as its key security guarantor, positioning the IRGC as the only credible protector of regional interests. In doing so, this narrative effectively challenges the long-standing perception of American military dominance, portraying Washington as increasingly ineffective in ensuring regional stability.

In Yemen, the IRGC's Quds Force, which oversees Iran's proxy militias, has significantly upgraded[46] the Houthis' military arsenal. The latter declared its active participation[47] in the Iranian conflict by launching a series of ballistic missiles at southern Israel in late March. The group also threatened to target shipping[48] in the Bab al-Mandab Strait if the hostilities against Iran continue. This comes after Iran's Ali Akbar Velayati, advisor to the supreme leader, threatened[49] in early April to close the Bab al-Mandab Strait,[50] along with the Strait of Hormuz, if President Trump carried out his threats to attack Iran's energy infrastructure. In response to this, and given the Houthis'

influence in the country,[51] Somalia announced a ban[52] on Israeli ships passing through the Bab al-Mandab Strait. The closure of Bab al-Mandab, which is crucial[53] for around 12 percent of global oil shipments as well as other goods, would be yet another blow to economies relying on imports from the Middle East.

Hezbollah

Unlike the Houthis, Iran holds more pervasive control over Hezbollah–its frontrunner in the Axis of Resistance. Despite the elimination[54] of several senior leaders, including its Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah in the 2024 conflict with Israel, the group remains a potent and resilient actor within the pro-Iran militant alliance. The group has been adapting its tactics to survive with the assistance of IRGC advisors, who deployed 100 officers to Lebanon following the November 2024 ceasefire with Israel. The IRGC has helped the group to decentralise, allowing for small, isolated units with restricted operational awareness to bolster security against intelligence infiltration. The group now relies on manoeuvring and mobile defence instead of positioning itself on fixed lines, which reduces its losses and increases damage to attacking forces.[55] Recent attacks are indicative of this approach and are attributed[56] to Hezbollah's Unit 910, which has mobilised its sleeper cells across Europe, Africa and the US as a deterrent against threats.

Iran-Backed Militias

In recent months, there has been a notable surge in public sentiment across neighbouring Iraq, particularly among the Shiite population. Many there increasingly view Iran's military actions as a necessary defence of its national sovereignty. Iran-backed Iraqi armed groups[57] have adopted a retaliatory tone, declaring they would not remain neutral and would defend the current regime. The powerful militia Kataib Hezbollah[58] said it would attack US army bases after two of its fighters were killed in airstrikes in southern Iraq. The pro-Iran Shiite groups in Iraq also said they had launched dozens of drone strikes against "enemy bases in Iraq and the region including Saudi Arabia", in retaliation for Khamenei's assassination.

This shift is significant, as it includes Iraqis who had previously expressed strong opposition to Iranian influence over Baghdad's domestic and foreign policy decisions. This solidarity has gained further traction as the conflict has intensified, with Iran demonstrating resilience against coordinated US–Israeli hostilities. Pro-Iranian factions in Iraq, bolstered by the endorsement of influential Shiite clerics, have established recruitment hubs[59] for volunteers seeking to join the defence of Iran. This development highlights a stark divergence from the official Iraqi state policy of neutrality, exposing the government's limited capacity to constrain the operational autonomy of these paramilitary groups.

Simultaneously, the Iranian-backed Sayyid ul-Shuhada[60] Brigades issued a stern warning to the Al-Sabah leadership in Kuwait and Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa's forces that any facilitation of a ground offensive against Iran via Kuwait would be regarded as a fundamental breach of regional security. Similarly, any unauthorised foray by al-Sharaa's forces into Lebanese territory would be treated as an act of aggression, the militia said. In either event, the Axis of Resistance would execute a reciprocal ground-based response, asserting that any American-led ground incursion into Iranian territory would escalate the current conflict into a total regional war, effectively dismantling existing national borders.

Implications of Activating Terrorist Sleeper Cell Networks

A New Lease of Life

Through its decentralised approach, the IRGC has reinvigorated a range of[61] sleeper cell networks in the region and beyond to counter American and Israeli attacks. Reports indicate that nine sleeper cells linked to Iran and its proxies, led by Hezbollah, in Qatar,[62] Bahrain,[63] Kuwait[64] and the UAE[65] were arrested within 27 days of the start of the ongoing conflict. Around 74 individuals of multiple

nationalities were engaged in activities such as espionage, collecting funds and planning operations targeting key leaders and interests.

Most sleeper cells comprise both local citizens and individuals of diverse nationalities,[66] notably from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Algeria and Tunisia. These cells reportedly operate within small, interconnected groups, which make them difficult to detect all at once. They also have links, whether through direct or indirect channels, with parties linked to Iran and its proxy Hezbollah; the latter often plays the role of mediator or operator in such operations. The members of these cells are engaged in a range of security work to commercial, economic and financial tasks. Hezbollah-linked groups have also reportedly played a role in transferring expertise, training personnel and managing some operations, particularly in Kuwait[67] and Bahrain,[68] on behalf of Iran. This clearly reflects the IRGC's long-term strategy to consolidate its regional influence.

Elsewhere, the Michigan synagogue attack,[69] assessed as a Hezbollah-inspired event, in the US on March 12, 2026, also demonstrates how the IRGC has evolved to become a transnational ideological and operational force. It also underscores the growing challenge of radicalised individuals acting independently. Another gunman bearing an Iranian symbol was arrested[70] in Texas after shooting two individuals and injuring 14 others, also in March. Additionally, a newly formed Shiite terrorist group linked to Iran, known as Ashab al-Yamin (HAYI),[71] has claimed responsibility for the stabbing of two Jewish men in north London as well as a series of attacks in Europe and the United Kingdom targeted at Jewish communities and US assets.[72] This new group first surfaced on pro-Iranian social media platforms one month after the outbreak of the war. HAYI is suspected to be a new front of the IRGC in Europe, given its use of Quranic terminology,[73] which mirrors the ideological branding used by the current regime. This is evident in its symbol, which features an arm clutching a rifle, resembling that of the IRGC and its proxy Hezbollah. HAYI also seems to operate in a leaderless structure, and utilises digital platforms for recruitment. Taken together, such developments are a major concern for the US and the international community, as these sleeper cells can undertake lone-wolf attacks or more sophisticated coordinated plots against US and Israeli assets worldwide.

The Islamic State (IS) Exploiting the Conflict

The Islamic State (IS), the terrorist Sunni group that sees itself as the guardian of Islam and operates through a decentralised global network of cells, has sought to exploit the current conflict to expand its global influence. In its March 2026 publication of *al-Naba*,[74] the group's main publication, IS framed the war between the US, Israel and Iran as one between infidels, viewing the bloodshed as a favourable development for its own cause.

It has celebrated the death of Khamenei and has sought to exploit the regional instability created by the war with Iran to its own advantage. Through leveraging its decentralised cell network, IS has sought to expand its influence in vulnerable areas like Syria and Afghanistan, generate funding, and intensify its digital outreach through its media platform to actively recruit and radicalise individuals far beyond its traditional operational theatres.

Southeast Asia: A Call to Vigilance and Preparedness

The IRGC has threatened to attack US and Israeli installations around the world,[75] mainly via its proxies in the Middle East and Europe.[76] These threats have implications globally, including Southeast Asia. Singapore, for example, has long-standing strong ties with both the US and Israel. The IRGC has also been actively exporting its revolutionary ideology to Thailand through religious outreach, exemplified by the 2024 visit of high-level cleric Meysam Motiee to the country.[77] Central to this effort is Al-Mustafa University,[78] a Bangkok-based[79] institution sanctioned by the US for its role in enabling the IRGC's Quds Force to recruit students for intelligence operations and militia support, mirroring similar activities in Indonesia[80] and Malaysia.[81]

With religious diversity a defining characteristic of its social fabric, Southeast Asia must carefully navigate external geopolitical tensions–particularly emanating from the Middle East–to safeguard

internal stability, while promoting moderate religious discourse through community engagement. Regional security is particularly challenged by the emotional resonance of conflicts, such as the Israel–Gaza conflict and the Israel–US war against Iran, where prolonged exposure to graphic footage on social media can amplify public sentiment and societal tensions.

Such reactions risk being exploited by terrorist groups, who may seek to reframe these conflicts as broader struggles against perceived enemies of Islam, rather than as state-based confrontations. Consequently, religious leaders and community stakeholders across all faiths play a crucial role in shaping informed, measured public discourse to help ensure emotional responses do not evolve into radicalisation or violence.

Conclusion

The US–Israel–Iran conflict remains a protracted one. The recent truce appears less a pathway to peace than a strategic pause which has allowed all sides to consolidate their respective positions. Proposals such as a US blockade of the Strait of Hormuz, intended to guarantee freedom of navigation, risk heightening the chances of confrontation, while the growing militarisation of this vital transit corridor further destabilises the region. Such conditions create opportunities for extremist groups to exploit, increasing the likelihood of violent spillover and global terrorism. The conflict has also exposed the fragility of several Arab states, prompting renewed calls for a cohesive, integrated Arab defence framework capable of safeguarding regional stability and responding more effectively to external threats.

Despite the neutralisation of senior Iranian officials by US and Israeli forces, the Iranian regime remains resilient, leaving the Iranian people to confront an uncertain future. It remains unclear whether they can challenge the entrenched authority of the IRGC, rally behind a moderate leadership alternative, or face the possibility of a transition from theocracy to military rule.

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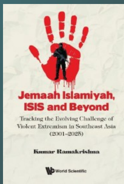

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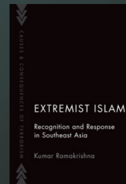

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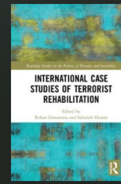

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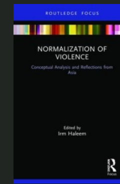

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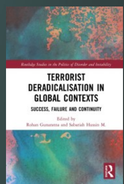

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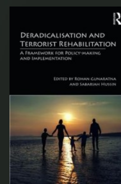

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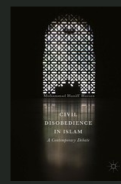

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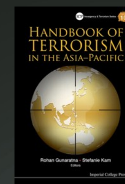

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