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ISIS Ramadan 2021 Campaign Review

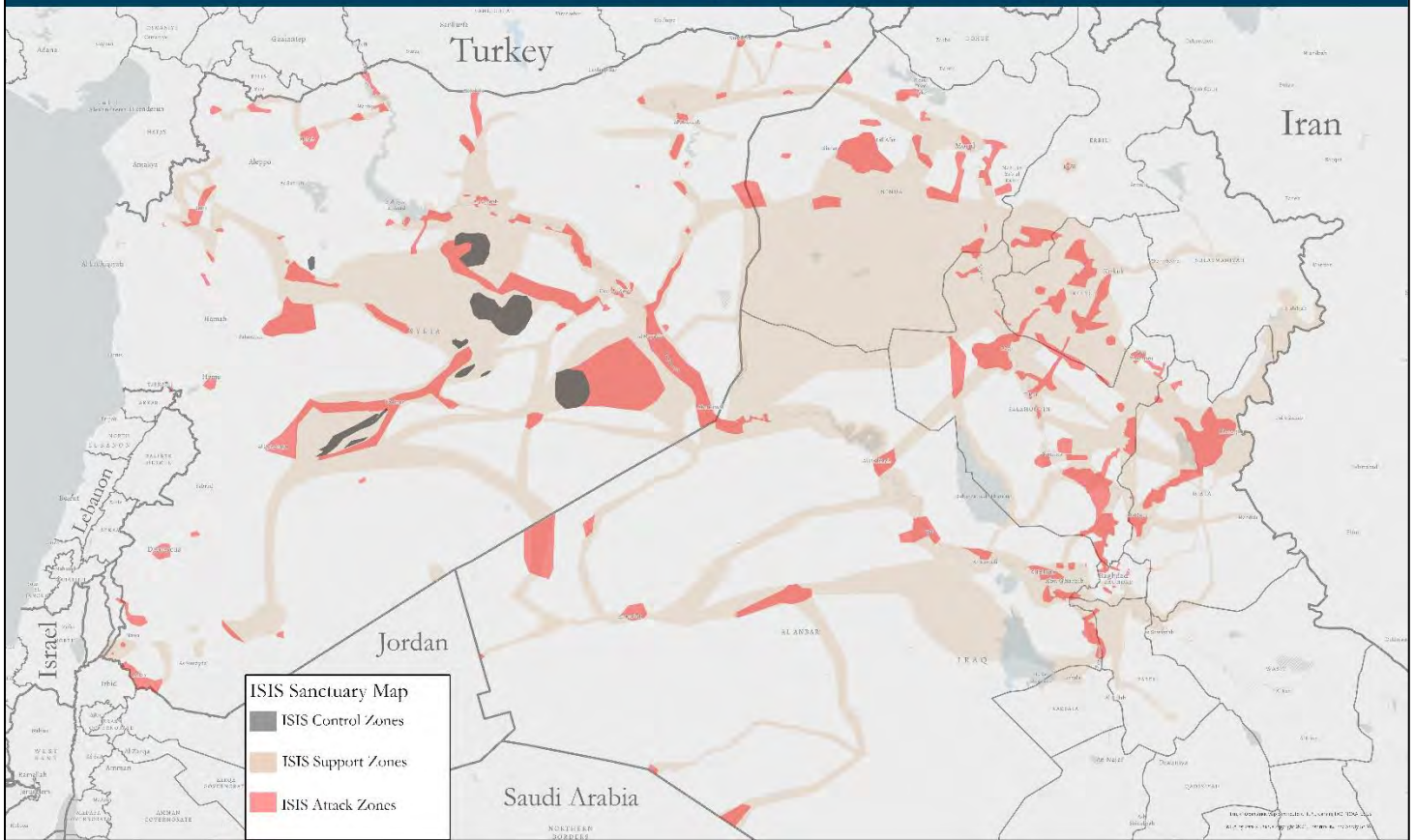
By Eva Kahan

Key Takeaway: ISIS escalated attacks during Ramadan 2021 despite sustained counterterrorism pressure. ISIS maintains its ability to recruit, conduct attacks, exploit gaps, and in some areas replace weakened governance systems. Local and international security forces are unlikely to fully defeat ISIS in its “core terrain” in Iraq and Syria in the short term due to competing priorities among counter-ISIS actors and decreasing international interest.

ISIS aims to expand insurgencies against the Iraqi government, Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), pro-Assad regime forces, and Turkish-backed forces in Iraq and Syria to maintain ideological coherence and leadership security. In pursuit of expanding these insurgencies, ISIS seeks to increase control zones and deep support zones, reconstituting key capabilities, generating new revenue streams, maintaining external lines of support (to Turkey, possibly Jordan, and Iran), and demonstrating its ability to rival other jihadist groups active in Syria.

ISIS must maintain its insurgent activity in Iraq and Syria – its “core terrain” – to guarantee its legitimacy and leadership security. The ISIS affiliates in Africa carry out faster-paced and larger-scale attacks than their Iraqi and Syrian counterparts, providing useful propaganda and justifying the ISIS argument that they are a global organization. However, ISIS groups in Africa are less clearly ideologically orthodox due to their lasting connections with their pre-ISIS networks.¹ ISIS’s core terrain in Iraq and Syria presents a fallback option if affiliates further afield are defeated or diverge from central ISIS messaging. ISIS’s teleological ideology depends on the reclamation of a territorial caliphate in Iraq and Syria, which they claim will set conditions for the end of days.² ISIS leaders depend on known routes through the vast ungoverned areas of the Central Syrian Desert between Iraq’s Anbar Desert and Syria’s salafi jihadist-dominated Idlib Province. ISIS leadership in Iraq and Syria is likely vital to maintaining connections between the organization’s global cells. Were ISIS completely incapable of leading from Syria and Iraq, cells in Africa, southeast Asia, and elsewhere could be forced to decentralize similar to how al Qaeda has done in the past.

ISIS Sanctuary Map (as of May 2, 2021)



ISIS has sustained three coherent operational patterns across the Iraqi-Syrian theater. ISIS historically used its Ramadan campaigns to expand its area and scope of operations on the global stage.³ ISIS's Ramadan campaigns in 2020 and 2021 have instead demonstrated the viability of its post-caliphate insurgency within these operational patterns, given the consistently degraded security infrastructure of Syrian and Iraq.

1. **ISIS exploits areas with weak governing bodies to aggravate popular discontent and reduce trust in local governance.** ISIS targets tribal and civic leaders in northeast Syria, Iraq's Disputed Internal Boundaries, and the Baghdad Belts in order to delegitimize government security and replace it with ISIS. Likely ISIS militants attacked Iraqi Security Forces in Diyala and the northern Baghdad Belts to degrade their governing capacity and perceived legitimacy during Ramadan 2021.⁴ ISIS similarly attacked symbols of SDF governance in order to diminish the SDF's legitimacy and discourage local conscription. ISIS conducted fewer attacks on tribal leadership in northeast Syria during this time than in late 2020, and instead doubled down on attacking SDF infrastructure.⁵
2. **ISIS houses key leadership in small zones of control within sparsely populated desert and mountain areas that are largely beyond government control, including the Central Syrian Desert and the Hamrin and Makhmour Mountains.** Some ISIS cells based in Central Syrian Desert control zones additionally attack high-value resources and transit routes in order to deter clearing operations targeting those control zones and erode security force will and capacity in the desert.⁶ ISIS conducted a string of attacks targeting regime-held oil and gas fields immediately prior to Ramadan 2021, leading Russian companies to abandon the project of rehabilitating those fields. Some ISIS cells in Iraq's Hamrin Mountains

aim to build complex vehicle-borne IEDs (VBIEDs) to launch from ungoverned areas towards urban areas or disputed areas of governance, but are unlikely to build a sustainable VBIED production pipeline unless the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) are significantly degraded.⁷ ISIS may also be attempting to build motorcycle-borne IED (MBIED) capacity in the deserts of northeast Syria, but have only conducted two parked, small-scale attacks since March 2021.⁸

- 3. ISIS maintains small cells in urban areas with the aim of conducting high-profile and spectacular attacks that undermine government legitimacy and increase ISIS's long-term relevancy and viability.** Spectacular attacks are aimed at feeding ISIS worldwide propaganda. ISIS exacerbates and benefits from security force competition in urban areas in order to blur responsibility for the attacks, sow doubt regarding rival security forces, and avoid capture.⁹ ISIS conducted a VBIED attack in Sadr City, Baghdad, during Ramadan 2021, which was initially wrongly attributed to Iranian-backed militias, exacerbating intra-communal tensions in the city. Iranian-backed militias conduct intimidation IED attacks and rocket attacks throughout Baghdad. ISIS attacks in Aleppo and Dera'a are often misattributed to Syrian National Army (SNA) infighting and opposition remnants, respectively. ISIS activity in Dera'a and Aleppo provinces also supports smuggling routes to external support zones through Jordan and Turkey, respectively. ISIS conducted and claimed several attacks in Dera'a during Ramadan 2021, and has conducted and claimed intermittent attacks on Turkish-occupied areas north of Aleppo since June 2020.¹⁰

The Iraqi and Syrian security environments are too crowded and competitive to enable the conclusive defeat of the ISIS insurgency in the near term. ISIS is unlikely to significantly lose attack capabilities in the next year. However, the international coalition can take several measures to mitigate the degradation of Iraqi and Syrian partners' security forces and contain ISIS.

The international coalition can mitigate degradation of Iraqi and Syrian partner forces and contain ISIS by:

- Providing consistent air support to ISF and SDF counter-ISIS operations and supporting counter-ISIS planning at the operational and strategic levels.
- Supporting the ISF in cooperating with the Kurdish Regional Government Peshmerga forces, including by building planned coordination centers in Ninewa, Kirkuk, Salah ad-Din, and Diyala Provinces.
- Supporting continued Iraqi Army presence in Iraqi cities to the detriment of the Popular Mobilization Forces, which aim to gain influence in cities rather than countering ISIS.

Additionally, these proactive steps can help prevent ISIS from potentially making major breakthroughs in its effort to reconstitute lost territory in Iraq and Syria

- Mediate between the SDF and partner nations, most importantly Iraq, that have yet to repatriate their citizens from al Hol. Facilitating those returns will protect the thousands of innocent displaced persons in the camp from ISIS-initiated violence and will slow the spread of ISIS's ideology to the next generation.
- Support the SDF in decentralizing governance in Arab tribal communities and slow attacks by ISIS and pro-regime insurgents.
- Renew airstrikes that target ISIS-occupied and -claimed territory in the Central Syrian Desert. This campaign could prevent ISIS from abusing oil and gas resources in the Central Syrian Desert to generate revenue.
- Gain support from Turkish partners to openly face the ISIS threat in Turkish-held northwest Syria and slow ISIS smuggling routes between Turkey and Europe.

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- ¹ <https://ctc.usma.edu/outlasting-the-caliphate-the-evolution-of-the-islamic-state-threat-in-africa/>
- ² <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-30083303>
- ³ http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ISIS_Ramadan_Chart.pdf
- ⁴ <http://www.dot.sotaliraq.com/2021/04/26/رواية لـ خالد بن الوليد في فتح العراق>; http://pukmedia.com/AR_Direje.aspx?Jimare=157835
- ⁵ <https://www.syriahr.com/%d9%85%d8%ac%d9%87%d9%88%d9%84%d9%88%d9%86-%d9%8a%d9%81%d8%ac%d8%b1%d9%88%d9%86-%d9%85%d9%82%d8%b1%d8%a7%d9%8b-%d8%b3%d8%a7%d8%a8%d9%82%d8%a7%d9%8b-%d9%84%d9%82%d8%b3%d8%af-%d9%81%d9%8a-%d9%82%d8%b1/435025/>
- ⁶ <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/isis-poised-ramadan-surge-syria>
- ⁷ <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/isis-and-iranian-backed-militias-compete-control-baghdad-region>
- ⁸ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/208831/>
- ⁹ <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/isis-and-iranian-backed-militias-compete-control-baghdad-region>
- ¹⁰ <https://www.stitcher.com/show/overwatch-2/episode/e34-isis-escalates-violence-in-turkish-held-parts-of-northwest-syria-76964317>