

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	1299
Land:	Irak
Kilde:	International Crisis Group
Titel:	When measuring ISIS' Resurgence, Use the Right Standard
Udgivet:	13. maj 2020
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	1. september 2020

Document #2029876

ICG – International Crisis Group

When Measuring ISIS’s “Resurgence”, Use the Right Standard

[Commentary](#) / [Middle East & North Africa](#) 13 May 2020

Memories of the Islamic State’s 2014-2015 “caliphate” peak in Iraq and Syria colour views of its present capacity, leading officials and observers either to exaggerate or understate its threat. In Iraq, the group does pose a danger. Gauging it properly is key to containing it.

On the night of Friday, 1 May, the Islamic State (ISIS) launched one of its most ambitious operations in Iraq in recent memory. Several units of the jihadist group converged on Iraqi paramilitary forces securing a rural section of Salahuddin province, engaging them in an hours-long attack that ended with ten paramilitaries dead. The 1 May assault followed a month in which ISIS had become more direct and aggressive in its attacks on Iraqi security forces.

A military official in the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, the U.S.-led multilateral partnership that has supported Iraq’s fight against the group, noted the complexity of the Salahuddin attack and several others that weekend. He also confirmed that the preceding month had seen a postural shift from the group, even if there had not been a qualitative improvement in its equipment and tactics.

Yet he also emphasised how far ISIS remains from the height of its prowess in 2014, when it could marshal large motorised columns to roll across the desert, seize swathes of both Iraq and neighbouring Syria, and declare a “caliphate”. “Are they [ISIS] recruiting anybody?” asked the Coalition official. “No. Are they putting out a cool video that’s getting put on the front page of the *Daily Mirror*? No. Are they able to raise money from taxes, oil wells, foreign donations – a little bit, but mostly no. ... So their strength has to be measured in those terms”.

“In its recent flurry of activity, ISIS has demonstrated nothing close to its capability and reach circa 2014 or 2015.”

All of which is true. In its recent flurry of activity, ISIS has demonstrated nothing close to its capability and reach circa 2014 or 2015 – or even its potency in the preceding years, during which the group laid the groundwork for its eventual seizure of territorial control.

But ISIS’s “caliphate” apex was also a unique, anomalous moment. And memories of that moment have distorted subsequent analysis of the group’s insurgency in Iraq, years later.

The result is that both hyperbolic claims that ISIS has returned to the sort of operations and capabilities that immediately preceded its 2014 “caliphate” and attempts like the Coalition official’s to tamp down that alarmism are often framed and argued in terms of that 2014-2015 “caliphate” peak. ISIS’s current capabilities end up being measured relative to a historical experience that was shocking and terrible, but also likely an outlier.

Crisis Group itself [has warned](#) of ISIS’s “resurgence”. But that resurgence, if it happens, probably will not look like 2014. Meanwhile, using this “caliphate” standard may make it harder to discern changes in the group’s operations that are incremental but still meaningful for assessing the threat posed by its insurgent campaign – changes like the shift over the course of April, which seems to have presaged the genuine and deadly qualitative escalation on 1 May.

ISIS Leans Forward

The 1 May operation was apparently planned and complex. ISIS [first attacked](#) local tribal auxiliaries belonging to Iraq’s paramilitary al-Hashd al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilisation) force south of the Salahuddin city of Tikrit. The jihadists assaulted and killed one group of six Hashd fighters, only to [hit incoming reinforcements](#) with an improvised explosive device (IED) the group [claims](#) it planted in advance, killing three more. Another Hashd fighter was killed in a separate, simultaneous attack. The ISIS units advanced along four axes, [according to a Hashd official](#), who also said some militants approached on skiffs crossing the Tigris.

“ The new frequency of these direct engagements contrasted with the group’s previous preference for asymmetric attacks. ”

Throughout April, ISIS had seemingly been aiming more directly at Iraqi security forces. According to its own reporting, as well as diplomats and a military official who spoke to Crisis Group, the jihadist group initiated more head-on firefights with those security forces, as well as more daytime attacks. The new frequency of these direct engagements contrasted with the group’s previous preference for asymmetric attacks on Iraqi security personnel – relying more heavily on means like roadside bombs and sniper attacks – and the steady targeting of rural civilians.

As a Western diplomat from a Coalition member country put it: “They’re bolder, more aggressive. ... They use IEDs, as usual. But more and more they engage in firefights, whether with the [Iraqi security forces] or [the Hashd] – and they kill”.

ISIS’s latest, more assertive attacks have been concentrated in a rural belt reaching across Iraq’s centre north, in Kirkuk, Salahuddin and Diyala provinces. The stretch includes territories disputed between Iraq’s central government in Baghdad and the Kurdistan region. Since ISIS’s 2017 territorial defeat in Iraq, its guerrillas have taken shelter in especially rugged terrain in these areas. Over April, the group also seemingly escalated attacks on the western edge of Anbar province, along the Jordanian and Saudi Arabian borders.

“You have some remnants of the organisation, cells, that try to carry out operations here and there – in desert areas, like western Anbar, or on plains, ravines and mountains”, Iraqi defence spokesman Brigadier General Yehia Rasool told Crisis Group. “Areas where the nature of the terrain is difficult, which are hard to totally control”. In Iraq’s disputed territories, the organisation also exploits the stretches of no-man’s land separating federal Iraqi and Kurdish security forces, as well as failures of coordination between them.

ISIS’s April attacks did not mark a qualitative escalation, insofar as they evinced no obvious improvement in the group’s underlying capabilities. The group’s dispersed units used the same uncomplicated tactics they have adopted since 2017 – small guerrilla bands executing one-off attacks with small arms and IEDs.

“ Using the same means, ISIS units appeared to be making new choices in terms of target selection and timing. ”

Still, even if the attacks were not qualitatively better or more complex, they did seem qualitatively different. Using the same means, ISIS units appeared to be making new choices in terms of target selection and timing.

On 28 April, ISIS attempted a suicide attack on an intelligence service headquarters in Kirkuk’s provincial capital – an operation with scant precedent since 2017, given how the group has avoided suicide bombings and conserved manpower after losing its territorial control. Security personnel engaged the lone attacker as he approached, and he detonated his explosives before reaching the building. Several men were wounded but none killed. Delivering a single attacker equipped with an explosive belt for a failed attack thus mostly showcased the group’s intentions, not its capabilities.

The group’s coordinated attack on 1 May, however, is different – a real qualitative escalation after the group’s attitudinal change the preceding month.

Unclear Causation

ISIS’s latest attacks are likely an attempt to force Iraqi security forces to retreat into fortified bases and cities, while intimidating local civilians into non-cooperation with the Iraqi state. Such motives would follow a standard insurgent logic, one the group [has itself articulated](#) in its publications. In effect, the group has written, government forces would be ceding the countryside by moving into cities and hardened facilities. Then, they “would become encircled in the urban areas they are attempting to secure, which would turn little by little into fortresses”. At that point, ISIS could transform its units from guerrilla bands carrying out limited attacks into “semi-conventional formations that can – with the permission of God Almighty – carry out coordinated, medium-size or even large operations, in terms of their range and the nature of their targets”. But if this logic is fairly clear, why the group has escalated now is less so.

“The attacks come after months of tensions and tit-for-tat attacks between the U.S. and Iran-linked Hashd factions.”

The attacks come after months of tensions and tit-for-tat attacks between the U.S. and Iran-linked Hashd factions that have disrupted counter-ISIS cooperation between Iraqi security forces and the U.S.-led Coalition. On 3 January, the U.S. killed Iranian general Qassem Soleimani and Hashd chief Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis [in a drone strike](#) as the two men left Baghdad airport. Since then, Iraq has been beset by recurrent violence between the U.S. and Iran-linked Hashd factions. In addition, the country has been riven by controversy over whether to expel U.S. forces and end what Iraqi opponents of the U.S. presence call an “occupation”. Over March and April, U.S. and Coalition forces withdrew from a number of forward Iraqi bases, where they were exposed to attack, into a few safer compounds, claiming the move was “long-planned”.

Iraqi counter-ISIS operations have nonetheless continued, and, after an initial interruption in January, so has at least [some Coalition support](#). “We never had a large number of troops [in those bases] anyway”, said the Coalition official. “And in the past week, the Coalition has provided support for Iraqi forces, including drones and airstrikes. We didn’t need infantry sitting in Kirkuk to do that”. Yet it is unclear how the Coalition forces’ withdrawal from these bases – where they worked alongside some of the Iraqi units most directly involved in fighting ISIS – has affected counter-ISIS cooperation and the Coalition’s situational awareness in insurgent hot-spots. Moreover, tensions between the U.S. and Iran’s Iraqi allies have had other effects. According to Western officials, for example, some U.S. surveillance assets that had been used for counter-ISIS operations have been diverted to “force protection” – keeping watch for paramilitary attacks on U.S. soldiers.

ISIS has evidently followed these developments, and in particular the base withdrawals, [referencing them](#) in its weekly newsletter for members and sympathisers. It is unclear what conclusions the group has drawn, however, or if they informed its field units’ operational thinking.

“COVID-19 does seem to have some impact on Iraqi security forces’ readiness.”

ISIS may also be seizing on Iraqi security forces’ distraction by the COVID-19 pandemic. In March, [ISIS enjoined](#) its members and sympathisers worldwide to capitalise on their enemies’ preoccupation with coronavirus and to continue carrying out attacks. The [withdrawal](#) of foreign Coalition trainers from Iraq because of COVID-19 and a [related halt to training](#) Iraqi forces seems unlikely to have had an immediate effect on counter-ISIS efforts. But COVID-19 does seem to have some impact on Iraqi security forces’ readiness. Some have been tasked with enforcing curfews and other public health measures, according to military officials. A second security unit that had been based near the paramilitaries targeted on 1 May [was reportedly redeployed](#) to urban areas to help implement COVID-19 measures.

“The army has a number of missions; among them is this humanitarian effort”, said Iraqi defence spokesman Rasool about the security forces’ role in enforcing COVID-19 measures, though he emphasised that counter-ISIS efforts were also continuing.

Iraq has also suffered through a protracted political vacuum, going without a functioning government from December until a [new government was formed](#) earlier this month. The country has also faced a deepening economic crisis. ISIS may have also timed a surge of attacks to coincide with the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.

The coincidence of these various factors in Iraq makes it hard to clearly identify a single cause for ISIS’s latest moves. As a Coalition member country diplomat said: “It’s too early to draw conclusions. But it’s clear something is happening”.

An Unlikely 2014 Redux

Still, ISIS’s current insurgent attacks do not compare to the outsized threat the group posed in the past.

“ ISIS wants to communicate that it still has this capability. But really, its capabilities are low. ”

As Rasool, the Iraqi defence spokesman, stressed, ISIS is no longer blowing up massive car bombs or seizing territory. Speaking before the 1 May attack, he said the organisation has reverted to its “old style – one-off attacks, here and there, to send a media message, and to raise the morale of the group’s members who may now be lying low. It wants to communicate that it still has this capability. But really, its capabilities are low; they don’t rise to the quality they were previously”.

Indeed, ISIS insurgent activity is limited mostly to the country’s rural periphery. Iraqis who lived through the group’s 2014 rampage, as well as, before that, its years-long campaign of mass-casualty bombings and mafia-style violence in places like Mosul, know that ISIS’s violence is much reduced.

In parts of the countryside, said a Kirkuk-area tribal sheikh, ISIS “is present, and it’s merciless”. But, he added, “It’s not in cities or urban areas. It’s out in the [rural] districts and subdistricts; in the bush, or in ravines and mountains”.

The impulse to discourage residual ISIS scaremongering is understandable, particularly as Iraq has worked to recover from the war to defeat the group and to address the country’s many, accumulated non-ISIS problems. It is all the more reasonable given the at-times melodramatic descriptions of the putative threat. Analysts have often couched warnings of ISIS’s possible resurgence in terms of the group’s imminent [return to territorial control](#), or to the [2013](#) and [2014](#) periods that anticipated its “caliphate”.

In the [most recent issue](#) of ISIS’s newsletter, the group itself noted the alarmed media coverage of its escalating operations, as part of “the great shock [the group’s] latest attacks had yielded in enemy ranks”. ISIS’s enemies “are comparing the situation today to how things were before [Iraq’s] cities fell into the mujahideen’s hands” in 2014, the newsletter reported.

The awful spectacle of ISIS circa 2014 and 2015 has also helped frame discussions of jihadist insurgents far from Iraq. To take one example, U.S., French and West African officials recently told the [Washington Post](#) that “to avoid scrutiny from the West, [West African jihadist] groups are not declaring ‘caliphates’”.

“ Now, after the years-long, destructive battle to dislodge ISIS, both Iraqis and their international partners are alert to the group’s threat. ”

But setting aside terminological issues – local ISIS affiliates would not announce a second “caliphate” to rival the one the main branch declared in 2014, which the group still insists is extant and valid – the proto-state that existed in Iraq and Syria is unlikely to reappear.

In 2014, ISIS seized on an exceptional historical circumstance. The Arab world was in epochal flux, as longstanding incumbent regimes had fallen, and national borders seemed suddenly subject to revision. Money, arms and thousands of foreign fighters had poured into Syria’s roiling insurgency, which by then had diminished the Syrian state’s writ to a fraction of the country. ISIS – whose origins lay in neighbouring Iraq – used the non-state void in Syria as an extensive, resource-rich rear base, from which it prepared an Iraqi surge. In Iraq, the group had already infiltrated a mass Sunni mobilisation against the central state, a movement that was encouraged publicly by Sunni states in the region. Too many people – not only in Syria and Iraq, but [also in the West](#) – were too slow to recognise ISIS’s threat. By the time the group had swept through large sections of Iraq and Syria in the summer, then doused local municipal buildings with its trademark black paint, it was too late.

Now, after the years-long, destructive battle to dislodge ISIS, both Iraqis and their international partners are alert to the group's threat. ISIS [maintains](#) that its ultimate aim is a return to territorial control and administration, after an extended war of attrition. But while the organisation remains dangerous – in Iraq and elsewhere – it can no longer surprise its enemies in the same way.

Country:

None of which is to say that a redux of 2014 – that type of military blitz, the return of the “caliphate”, or renewed ISIS control of more than a handful of peripheral, rural areas – is hard to imagine. The group would evidently like to duplicate its 2014 surge. But the confluence of factors that permitted it ICG ~~International Crisis Group~~ seems unlikely to be there any time soon. Gauging the organisation's capabilities in those terms, therefore, is not useful.

Original link:

“It is crucial to stay tuned to subtler shifts in ISIS's activity, below the 2014 threshold.”
[https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-](https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-and-north-africa/israel-and-the-palestinian-territories/israeli-iraqi-iraq-isis-resurgence-and-escalation)

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 groups, a May attack in Salahdin. That prospect might not animate an international audience, the way remnants of another 2014 would. But for Iraqis – particularly in the rural areas most vulnerable to the group's attacks – that sort of resurgent ISIS would again be terrifying and lethal.

Document type:

Appears News Release
 It is thus crucial to stay tuned to subtler shifts in ISIS's activity, below the 2014 threshold – qualitative “change”, if not necessarily qualitative “escalation”. That is the sort of change that may alert Iraq and its international partners to the need for a course correction.

Language:

English

Published:

13 May 2020

Document ID:

2029876

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