

Global Security Briefing – March 2019

## **After Baghouz: A Jihadi Archipelago**

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### **Summary**

March saw the eradication of the last scrap of the Islamic State movement's Caliphate in Syria and Iraq after a five-year struggle. It did not witness the destruction of the movement, which new data shows remains highly active in Iraq, Syria and two dozen other countries. This briefing assesses the evolution of IS in Iraq and Syria and its re-emergence in Africa and Asia.

### **Introduction**

Last month's [briefing](#) in this [series](#) analysed the position of the Islamic State (IS) movement as it began to retreat from its final piece of territory in eastern Syria. Taking a long-term look the briefing pointed to the previous occasions since the 9/11 attacks when it appeared, mistakenly, that Al-Qaida and its offshoots were defeated, taking the view that "like Al-Qaida and the Taliban before it, IS and its appeal, though fragmented, are likely to endure, to evolve and to reappear". This briefing extends that analysis to review events of recent weeks that indicate that IS and similar movements are adapting to the end of the Caliphate and seizing opportunities to regroup, reorganise and refinance a global struggle. In response, the US and its coalition allies are moving increasingly from a war in-depth in the Levant back to a broader, seemingly perpetual and probably unwinnable global war on terror.

### **Last Days of the Caliphate**

Much has been made of the "last stand" of IS paramilitaries in eastern Syria as they have been forced out of the village of Baghouz by Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), heavily supported by US, UK and French special forces and air power. All told, the final battle to retake the Caliphate's last scrap of territory lasted over 10 weeks from 09 January, a more significant [length of time](#) than most had predicted.

One challenge was that there were far more IS paramilitaries in Baghouz than had been realised, at least 5,000 and perhaps as many as 10,000, as well as well over 20,000 civilians. Many of the civilians and fighters appear to have been in a large network of tunnels which were well protected by snipers, minefields and improvised explosive devices. As of 17 March, some 29,600 people had left the Baghouz area, including

4,000 to 5,000 surrendered or captured IS fighters. Some [SDF sources](#) give the total number of evacuees as over 60,000.

This is a problem that the SDF – itself, the military force of an unrecognised and embattled proto-state – is left to deal with virtually alone. Tens of thousands of IS fighters and their families from dozens of countries are now confined to SDF-run camps in northeast Syria. Most of the states of origin of this remnant of the Caliphate are unwilling to repatriate them and some, like the UK, will go to the legally dubious lengths of removing their citizenship. While the SDF is under pressure to detain them indefinitely, its capacity to do so, let alone try or rehabilitate them, is extremely limited. The alternatives are to hand them over to a brutal Syrian regime, release them, or risk militant attacks to free them of the sort that rocked Iraq in 2011-2013. The default option of a “Guantanamo-Plus” camp in the Syrian desert would likely be a public relations fiasco for the anti-IS coalition.

Given the extensive use of lengthy tunnels in Baghouz, a significant number of IS combatants and leaders may also have escaped the besieged enclave, not least Syrians and Iraqis able to merge into nearby communities. IS’s self-appointed Caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is said to have fled Baghouz before the final assault.

IS’s resistance at Baghouz fits into a pattern of a determination to maintain the struggle using any means available as the conflict in Syria and Iraq changes into a guerrilla struggle. Last month’s [briefing](#) covered this development. This is further aided by a strengthening antagonism among Iraqi Sunnis towards the Shi’a-dominated government and the unresolved nature of the war in Syria, where the Sunni Arab-majority country is essentially divided between Assad’s minority-led armed factions and the largely Kurdish SDF. In neither country does the large Sunni Arab population that IS partially mobilised have a clear route to meaningful political influence. Moreover, as a recent [RAND report](#) highlights, the new phase of post-conflict reconstruction of Mosul and other Iraqis towns destroyed in the bitter fight to dislodge IS is a major opportunity for IS to boost its revenues by extorting shares of construction contracts. This was key to Al-Qaida’s business model in Iraq in the previous decade.

Data gathered by [BBC Monitoring](#) suggest that IS claimed at least 3,670 attacks across the world in 2018, of which almost 1,900 (79%) were in Iraq (48%) and Syria (31%). In Iraq, where IS was substantially deprived of territory during 2017, there were an average of five IS attacks every day last year. While this incidence peaked in August-October, it remains at around 100 per month, indicating that, in Iraq at least, IS has melted into the landscape rather than into history.

### **The Islamic State *not* in Iraq and Syria**

That also leaves some 779 IS attacks in 2018 that were conducted in at least 23 countries outside of the “Caliphate” territory in the Levant. The most significant of these numerically were Afghanistan (316 attacks) and Egypt’s Sinai Peninsula (181 attacks), although in both there may have been a decline in prevalence of activity since last

summer. At least as interesting should be the largely ignored rise of IS affiliates in the Sahel-Sahara region of northwest Africa, Somalia and Yemen, and perhaps most surprising of all, the southern Philippines. In each of these three regions, as in Syria and Afghanistan, IS is developing as a rival to more established Al-Qaida-linked armed factions.

Indeed, Al-Qaida continues to see a resurgence. Early in March the US government offered a reward of \$1 million for information leading to the death or capture of Osama bin Laden's son, Hamza, allegedly a favourite among several dozen offspring of the Al-Qaida founder. While this may have highlighted an evolution in the next generation of leadership of Al-Qaida, in reality bin Laden Junior ranks below at least 30 other Al-Qaida-affiliated leaders on the State Department's [Rewards for Justice](#) "most wanted" list. After 18 years in hiding, the network's Egyptian current leader or Emir, Ayman al-Zawahiri, has a bounty of \$25 million on his head, equal only to that offered for Baghdadi.

If the Rewards for Justice list provides an indicator of which groups the US defines as terrorist and currently takes most seriously, IS is now far behind Al-Qaida. Apart from Baghdadi, only two other IS leaders carry bounties: Iraqi IS border and immigration chief Abu-Muhammad al-Shimali (\$7 million) and Tajikistani recruiter Gulmurod Khalimov (\$3 million). Russia claims to have killed both in air strikes; US and allied targeted killings have killed many others who would otherwise be on the list.

By contrast, no less than 28 Al-Qaida members still feature on the list with individual bounties of \$5 million or more. Leaders of its Afghani (Haqqani Network), Syrian (al-Nusra Front) and Yemeni (Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula: AQAP) affiliates all carry bounties of \$10 million, while the leaders of Nigerian (Boko Haram), Somali (al-Shabaab) and Algerian and Sahelian (Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb: AQIM) franchises carry bounties of \$7 million, \$6 million and \$5 million, respectively. No leaders of Al-Qaida's former hosts in Afghanistan's more mainstream Taliban group, with which the US is now negotiating, feature any longer on the list. More embarrassingly, the SDF's close (and equally secular) ally in Turkey, the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK), does have three members on the list.

## **The Sahel-Sahara**

In an indirect way Al-Qaida is certainly [emerging from the shadows](#) in providing inspiration for a number of Islamist movements operating across the Sahel-Sahara region of northwest Africa. Over the past 15 years, and especially since the 2011 termination of the Gaddafi regime in Libya, there has been an upsurge in paramilitary activity across the region. AQIM was at the forefront of this emergence last decade, moving from coastal Algeria to the deserts of Mali and Mauritania, but three IS affiliates have latterly arisen to challenge Al-Qaida, weak local states and foreign forces alike for control of territory. An offshoot of IS seized control of Libya's central coast in 2015-2016. IS in the Great Sahara (ISGS) is very active on the Mali-Niger border. IS West Africa Province (ISWAP) in northern Nigeria may have the largest current membership of any IS franchise globally and is arguably the fastest growing.

While the Boko Haram insurgency in north-eastern Nigeria – now split into rival IS- and AQ-affiliated factions – has been the most protracted and intense, many other countries are affected, including Mali (where AQIM briefly gained control of half the country in 2012-2013), Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad and Mauritania. These five countries are grouped into the G5-Sahel Joint Force, an over-stretched regional operation supported by the United States, France and a growing number of other Western states.

Across the region, France has some 4,500 troops stationed as Opération Barkhane, while US Africa Command (AFRICOM) now has around 6,000 troops and 1,000 civilians deployed across the continent, about half of them at its major base in Djibouti. UK troops and Chinook helicopters now support Barkhane in Mali, where the initial Islamist insurgency in the northeast has morphed into widespread inter-communal violence and atrocities in central regions. Germany and Italy also opened military bases in Niger last year, adding nearly 1,400 more troops to the Sahel.

Following the death of several US troops in Niger in late 2017, President Trump is actively seeking to withdraw a substantial minority of US troops from Africa but is meeting resistance from senior military commanders and diplomats, including the US Ambassador to Burkina Faso, where escalating violence is following a similar trajectory to Mali, and the head of US Special Operations in Africa, Major-General Marcus Hicks. The latter [stated](#) recently “I would tell you at this time, we are not winning.” Why they are not winning is complicated and varies from country to country but circumstances on the ground, and especially the life prospects of young men, certainly aid recruitment into violent groups. This is a point made recently by Ruth MacLean writing about the problems in Burkina Faso, where the UN estimates that 150,000 people stay away from school and 100,000 people have been displaced from their homes by the violence. As she [put it](#):

“The country’s poorest regions in the north and east have been neglected, with the government providing minimal health services, education, jobs and infrastructure. Locals have in response taken up arms and forged links with militant groups who promised, and delivered, more services than the state.”

## Somalia

If the Trump administration plans to reduce the US military presence in the Sahel, then this is in marked contrast to Somalia, where AFRICOM has accelerated the use of strike aircraft and drones and has also deployed a substantial number of special forces units across the country. In the first two months of this year the [US staged attacks](#) on 24 targets killing 225 people, including 71 people killed in three attacks on successive days. This compares with 47 attacks killing 326 people in the whole of 2018.

There is no clear answer to why the US has increased its activity, although a drawdown from elsewhere across northern Africa and the Middle East may have released more air force units and Somalia itself may be considered more important because of its strategic location. [Recorded](#) US drone strikes on nearby Yemen, also largely conducted from the

AFRICOM base in Djibouti, dropped from a surge 127 in 2017 to 36 in 2018 and just one so far this year. Trump's delegation of attack approval to regional commanders may also have made a difference. It could be down to a view within AFRICOM that the Somali war is winnable, in marked contrast to the Sahel, yet the imminent commissioning of a purpose-built air base in Agadez, northern Niger, whether to replace or to complement current US drone bases in Cameroon and Tunisia, suggests that AFRICOM is looking to concentrate rather than drawdown its forces in the Sahel-Sahara and to reduce its risk exposure. It already switched from unarmed to armed drone operations from Niger last year.

Whatever the US dynamic, al-Shabaab paramilitaries in Somalia remain potent, still control a fifth of the country and at the end of last month undertook a double bombing and siege of a hotel in the capital, Mogadishu, that killed at least 25 people. The United States does maintain an Embassy, but it is fortified behind the perimeter of the heavily protected airport, where the UK and EU also have their missions. With an estimated 4,500 combatants, al-Shabaab is probably Al-Qaida's largest Africa affiliate and is estimated by the [US Military Academy](#) to outnumber IS's Somali start-up about 30:1. This is similar to Yemen, where AQAP has gone increasingly underground and IS has largely failed to seize the initiative.

### The Philippines

This is not the case in the Philippines, where IS has largely eclipsed Al-Qaida in recent years. In May 2017, Islamist paramilitaries loosely linked to IS began a campaign to take control of Marawi, a city in the southern Philippines with a population of 200,000. Catching the government largely by surprise, the insurgents took control of most of the city and there then followed a bitter struggle with the army as it fought to take back control in an operation aided by US and regional surveillance resources. Exactly five months after the start of the conflict, on 23 October, the government in Manila was able to declare victory, but many tens of thousands of people had been displaced and large parts of the city badly damaged.

Perhaps what surprised most in Marawi was the scale of the uprising. Almost one thousand militants died in the city, and a significant number presumably escaped, making the attack far larger than anything that Abu-Sayyaf, the small hard core of IS-aligned separatist rebels in the region, had been capable of over its previous quarter-century.

While IS in Syria is on the defensive, it is now [regrouping and attracting recruits](#) in the Philippines, and there has been an uptick in its attacks since 2018. This is a conflict rarely covered in the Western media and reporting is made more difficult by the determination of the government of President Rodrigo Duterte to downplay the extent of the problem and to counter any idea that IS has foreign fighters operating in the country.

The government's position is undermined by its activities on the ground, not least in Jolo island, where it has responded to the bombing of the local cathedral in late January with

the deployment of thousands of troops and the use of air strikes. According to Roman Banlaoi of the Philippine Institute for Peace, Violence and Terrorism Research, “ISIS has money coming into the Philippines, and they are recruiting fighters. ISIS is the most complicated, evolving problem for the Philippines today, and we should not pretend that it doesn’t exist because we don’t want it to exist.” Despite a number of small-scale insurgencies, South East Asia has been remarkable in its [avoidance of larger scale Islamist conflicts](#). This may no longer be the case.

## Conclusion

The media and political concentration on the destruction of IS’s proto-state in Syria and Iraq is diverting attention from the progress and determination of Islamist paramilitary groups in the Sahel-Sahara, Somalia and the Philippines. The latter is particularly significant because the re-emergence of IS has been so unexpected. Taking all three together, as well as much activity in Egypt, Afghanistan, Yemen and the Maghreb, should serve as salutary indicators that meeting the threat from such groups is highly unlikely unless the underlying reasons why recruitment continues and the movements prove so robust are understood. If those factors are not addressed then the conflict will continue indefinitely, whatever the apparent short-term gains of battlefield victories. This is far from being the case as the military option remains ascendant. [Interviewed](#) earlier this month by ORG on French, G5 and UN operations in the Sahel, Canadian academic Bruno Charbonneau summarised the situation well:

“Military intervention incorporates ‘development’ and ‘holistic approaches’ into its logic only to the extent that it normalises and legitimises the use of force. And the distinctive feature of this counter-insurgency politics, or counter-insurgency governance, is perpetual war.”

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