

Islamic State is Wounded but not Dead



Islamic State. Photo Flickr

All but pushed out of [Iraq](#) and on the defensive in [Syria](#): international headlines paint a dismal picture of the [Islamic State](#) (IS) group's prospects. Yet less than four years after [declaring a caliphate](#), is this really the end of IS?

In Africa, [Boko Haram](#)'s pledge of allegiance to ISIS leader [Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi](#) and its rebranding as Islamic State's West Africa Province [amounted](#) to little more than a publicity stunt, although it has overseen a steady stream of [attacks](#) in IS' name. However, [IS](#) did force a change in leadership of the affiliate, promoting a young and politically savvy fundamentalist over the more divisive former leader, [Abubakar Shekau](#).

In East Africa, the scale of IS' efforts pale in comparison to elsewhere. In May 2017, the group [claimed](#) a suicide bombing in the semi-autonomous Puntland region of northern Somalia, its first attack since February 2017. The group lags behind al-Shabab as the principal jihadi force in Somalia. However, a number of defections to IS from al-Shabab, which has long had links to [al-Qaeda](#), could indicate growing sympathy for IS in the region.

Afghanistan, too, has been back in American headlines, in part thanks to IS. Abu Sayed, the leader of

the terror group's Afghanistan affiliate, was **killed** in a US drone strike in July 2017, but the affiliate is far from a spent force. The same month, four IS militants attacked the **Iraqi embassy** in the capital Kabul, seemingly in retaliation for the organization's defeat in the Iraqi city of **Mosul**. In April 2017, the US air force dropped its largest conventional **weapon** on a cave complex that has been garrisoned by IS fighters for the last two years, garnering international headlines but making little quantifiable impact. Few of the fighters in Afghanistan are thought to be from **outside** the country, and with a steady supply of recruits ready to replace battlefield losses, the prospects of IS disappearing anytime soon look slim.

In less prominent theatres of jihadi violence, IS continues to make its mark. In June 2017, IS-aligned militants took over **Marawi**, a city on the southern Philippines island of Mindanao, burning churches and schools in the process. Although the city has largely been retaken by government forces, it has come at the cost of hundreds of casualties and an '**indiscriminate**' air campaign. Perhaps most worrying is the spread of tactics and training, such as urban combat and the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), from Iraq and Syria to other countries like the Philippines. Evidence points to the militants in Marawi coming from across South-east Asia. IS-inspired terrorism in **Indonesia** has also been on the rise, sparking fears of a new, more unified militant Islam in the region. The US government has delivered **arms** to the Philippines as its military campaign drags on. But as IS capitalizes on long-standing **grievances** within this Muslim-majority region to build insurgent networks, it could cause trouble for Manila for years to come.

IS has enjoyed considerable success in and around the Palestinian communities in Syria and **Gaza**. The **Palestinian refugee camp in Yarmouk**, in south Damascus, has been an important stronghold for the group. As of **April 2016**, IS controls some **60 per cent** of the camp, where it continues to clash with rival jihadi factions. However, despite efforts by Israeli Prime Minister **Benjamin Netanyahu** to **tie** Palestinian attacks to IS, there have only been abortive **attempts** to establish an IS branch inside **Israel** proper. The group has had more success in Gaza. Since 2015, a new militant group has been gaining ground in the enclave. Frustrated with **Hamas'** approach to the war with Israel, the **Omar Hadid Brigade** has followed a more violent and confrontational path, also pledging allegiance to IS.

Hamas has also reportedly been losing **fighters** to the IS affiliate in Egypt's **Sinai region**. With a spate of attacks targeting **Egypt's army**, **Coptic Christian** community and **tourism industry**, it remains one of the group's most active branches.

Yemen has provided a convenient refuge for IS. The **ongoing civil war** and a lack of international interest in the conflict have allowed the group to operate with relative impunity (bar some US-led drone **strikes** and raids), directing suicide bombings that have **killed** dozens of soldiers and civilians in the country's major cities, as well as some operations aimed at territorial **expansion**. Although al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) remains the dominant jihadi force in the country, Yemen may prove an attractive destination for IS fighters forced from other locations. Given IS' **attacks** on AQAP's record and jihadi qualifications, this could lead to tensions between the two groups.

In **Turkey**, anti-terror raids in May 2017 rounded up some 400 suspected IS **members**. Most of those arrested were foreigners and included at least 60 suspects in the capital Ankara, a city far from the Syrian border and not usually linked to militant smuggling routes. This may point to efforts by IS to establish broader support networks in the country. Since mid-2016, IS has called for, and **claimed**, attacks on Turkish soil. As the country has been the main thoroughfare and supply route for **IS militants in Syria**, Turkey should expect IS to remain a credible threat for the foreseeable future.

Although Chechens were behind the 2016 attack on Istanbul's Atatürk airport and an Uzbek national shot dead 39 people in the **Reina nightclub** on 31 December 2016, a large group of Turkish IS members were **responsible** for most of the suicide bombings in Turkey. Turkish militants were

recruiting openly from 2012 to 2015, and those arrested could establish new networks within Turkey's prison system.

The Caucasus has proved a fertile recruiting ground for IS. Al-Baghdadi even declared the **region**, on Europe's doorstep, an ISIS wilayah (province). Russian security forces have conducted raids against suspected IS-affiliated groups in the Caucasus since 2014. With many Chechens joining IS with the aim of fighting **Russia**, it seems unlikely that this threat will subside with IS' **loss of territory** in the Middle East. Although Caucasian animosity towards Russia is here to stay, if allied to IS, the region could pose a wider risk to Europe.

Since 2014, IS has **masterminded** 140 terrorist attacks in 29 countries other than Iraq and Syria, where its carnage has taken a much deadlier toll. The weight of international efforts has stopped the group for now, but the possibility of territorial defeat in Iraq was no doubt considered by IS leaders. The group originated as a 'terrorist-cum-insurgent' organization and is more than **capable** of returning to these roots, which offer the chance for revenge, resurgence and renewed media coverage. The outposts that IS has developed across the world and the followers it has attracted are critical to its future. Al-Baghdadi has repeatedly **called** on his followers to shore up these bastions rather than migrate to Iraq and Syria.

The survival of IS' media outlets will determine the capacity of the group to rebound from its losses in Iraq and Syria, rally its supporters and inspire continued allegiance. IS' **Amaq news agency** remains active online, helping to spawn the lone wolf attacks that have plagued IS' enemies from **Australia** to **Brazil**. These ardent followers represent a potent new global threat, one as difficult to calculate as it is to counter.

IS' proto-state in Iraq and Syria may be on the verge of collapse, but the **ideology** and violence the group propagates are far from dead.