

CSAG INFORMATION PAPER:

Threat Potential of ISIS in the CENTCOM AOR

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The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of a number of international officers within the Combined Strategic Analysis Group (CSAG) and do not necessarily reflect the views of United States Central Command, nor of the nations represented within the CSAG or any other governmental agency.

1. **Subject:** Analysis of the threat potential of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in the CENTCOM AOR.
2. **Purpose:** The aim of this paper is to present the CSAG's analysis of the 'threat from ISIS' within CENTCOM AOR to formulate pragmatic recommendations for decision-making.
3. **ISIS Present Status:** After its comprehensive defeat in 2018, and despite losing many senior leaders over the past three years, ISIS continues to wage a low-level threat in Iraq and Syria and operates a network that has allowed the group to sustain its contested influence.
4. **ISIS Aims and Objectives:** The recovery of the group by exploiting security gaps and struggling to rebuild combat power for future operations; the ultimate aim is to *establish an Islamic caliphate in Iraq and Syria and eventually spread its influence globally*¹.
5. **ISIS Strategy/ Tactics:** ISIS operates in the shadows, in small cells that quickly attack and then disappear, reverting to guerrilla warfare. Keeping a low profile, some ISIS militants live double lives in populated areas and intends to break out detainees in different prisons/ camps and see this as the path to reconstitution and revival in the Middle East.
6. **Analysis:**
 - a. **Influence of different Actors in the Region vis-a-vis ISIS**
 - (1) **Russia.** Having achieved the primary objective of saving the Assad regime and bolstering its grip on power, Russia appears to be focusing on developing its endgame², centered on increased role in ME. Besides targeting ISIS, it is principally working on the 'post-Western' order and would continue to support the regime.
 - (2) **Türkiye.** Priority is to eradicate the 'Terrorists threat' and create a 'safe zone' across its borders with Syria. Türkiye struck ISIS elements in retaliation for attacks on its territory and recently announced sanctions against ISIS supporters.³ However, the US considers Türkiye's planned operation in northern Syria to be detrimental to efforts against ISIS.
 - (3) **Iran.** Although Iran supports the Assad regime, it is fighting ISIS to meet its own hidden agendas. Iran created popular mobilization forces (PMF), supported by ITN, and using ISIS as an excuse to legitimize its presence in Iraq

¹ <https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/islamic-state>

² Russia's dominant posture in Syria serves as a platform for its engagement across the Middle East, while also advancing a worldview that seeks to further erode the U.S.-led, rules-based international order

³ The US Department of the Treasury had imposed the restrictions on four individuals and two firms, all accused of taking part in the management, transfer and distribution of funds for ISIS

and Syria. Moreover, there is a controversy related to Iran that it may facilitate the spread of ISIS into Afghanistan (Afg) to further its own interests by providing shortest land route:

- (a). The National Resistance Front (NRF), supported by Iran and Tajikistan, may facilitate Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) to fight against Taliban (Tbn); alliance aimed to serve greater Iranian interests.
- (b). To leverage its own oil, Iran may threaten Chinese endeavors in Afg, especially the recently signing of a multi-million-dollar deal⁴ to extract oil.

(4) **ISKP** The weak response by Tbn against ISIS and devoid of any worthwhile US/ West military/ intelligence services in Afg bolsters ISKP to gain strength.

b. Important Conclusions

- (1) The ideology of the Islamic State upholds 'sustained hostility' against the US/ West and its allies through future terrorist activities. ISIS/Daesh/ISKP, all terrorists' elements, are 'for sale', different actors have used these groups and will continue to use them to serve their vested interests.
- (2) After being effectively degraded, the level of ISIS operational activity stayed reasonably consistent. Outside the Levant, ISIS affiliates remain potent, especially in the Sahel region of Africa and in South Asia, where the ISKP threat is significantly rising.
- (3) If ISIS end state is to create a 'Caliphate', then under the present 'security environment', Afg provides the most suitable area to meet its agendas. The rise of ISIS is a source of concern for regional states, including China, Russia, Central Asian States and Pakistan.
- (4) Think tanks consider 'Info operations' to be an ISIS enduring capability; denial to do so would undermine ISIS's future activities. ISIS elements conveniently use technology (Internet, social media) to advance their interests.
- (5) While regional countries categorize ISIS as a 'security threat', there are different perceptions of the priority of the ISIS threat, e.g a few countries in the AOR consider ITN as the number one threat compared to ISIS, which is graded as threat priority two.
- (6) Dealing with ISIS is complex, especially given the dubious role of many actors. It is believed that presence of 'ISIS evil' serves the interests of many, including the coalition partners, either present on ground or supporting anti-ISIS US-led efforts.
- (7) The strong US commitment with Ukraine has not affected its proactive measures against ISIS. However, an increased/ shared focus of the US to Strategic Competition could allow ISIS to expand their influence in other troubled areas. This 'strategic neglect' of the US and its allies could lead to a resurgence of the Islamic State.
- (8) To address its vulnerabilities, Russia, through the 'Wagner group' increases recruitment of terrorist's elements (including elements of ISIS) from different areas, i.e., Iran, Afg, Levant and Africa, and uses them against its adversary's interests. Ukraine appears to be the 'test ground' for Wagner group (luring in fighters for money) that pursues Russia's imperialist ambitions.
- (9) Assad's rapprochement towards Arab states is aimed at reducing Iranian influence. However, this could lead to difficulties, as Assad's forces are not equipped to control areas that could be left by Iranian proxies and incite ISIS to fill the space.
- (10) The 'ISIS army' in the shape of prisoners and families in camps⁵ is a latent threat referred to as the 'ticking time bomb'; they are the potential next generation of ISIS.⁶
- (11) US CENTCOM objectively assesses ISIS threat in four categories;⁷ however, mitigating these is a huge challenge

⁴ The deal, estimated to be \$540 million; up to 87 million barrels of crude were estimated to be in Amu Darya

⁵ There are, today, more than 10,000 ISIS leaders and fighters in detention facilities throughout Syria and more than 20,000 ISIS leaders and fighters in detention facilities in Iraq

⁶ These are the more than 25,000 children in the al-Hol camp who are in danger. These children in the camp are prime targets for ISIS radicalization

⁷ First, vile ideology remains unconstrained, second category is ISIS in detention, third is the potential next generation of ISIS and the fourth includes ISIS at large i.e. those who are currently conducting operations against the coalition

and warrants collective action, involving all regional partners and allies, sharing the responsibility.

7. Recommendations:

- a. Improve/ expand the strategic communication to both internal and external audience to project extensive ongoing US actions to counter ISIS; devise better narrative against ISIS to strengthen perceptions of US support to partners and allies for D-ISIS.
- b. As the terrorists hide behind and exploit the situation of instability and disorder, the US may push/ mediate with the regional partners/ related countries to resolve their internal issues, which are benefiting ISIS and work more coherently to deny any profitable space to ISIS.
- c. The US may enhance the outreach through increased diplomatic efforts with Türkiye to find a common ground to remove Türkiye's concerns and denying ISIS any advantage.
- d. The strategy of People, Partners, and Innovation (PPI) can be used optimally against ISIS, especially innovation, using cyber capabilities to limit ISIS free hand.
- e. Strengthen and transform the existing mechanisms utilizing innovative tools, aimed at cutting the channels of uncontrolled flow of resources to ISIS, especially in finance; continued tracking/ monitoring is the key.
- f. While the US is not present in Afg, they still can support the regional countries, especially Pakistan, to target ISKP by providing 'strategic level intelligence' and 'high-tech military equipment'. To signal US enduring commitment towards partners and eradication of terrorism, like Al-Qaida, ISKP leadership may also be targeted by the US before they are strengthened.
- g. Ensure a well-calibrated and swift mechanism for dealing with 'ISIS families and prisoners' is in place; the US should conscientiously continue to focus on quick repatriation/ return in coordination with host nations. Nip the evil in the bud as 'now is the time' and do not wait for the 'time bomb' to explode. It's not just a US problem; urge the related countries to share the burden.
- h. While the return/repatriation of people within the camps is in progress, which may take a long time, the US may also consider utilizing these people as an opportunity by providing them with the best facilities and respectful treatment to develop their goodwill and improve their perception of US activities.
- i. It is important to devise a mechanism to prevent the coordination and support between ISIS elements in the Sahel region, the Levant and the South Asia. An effective and synchronized coordination mechanism between CENTCOM and AFRICOM is deemed essential. Deal with all the factions of ISIS and its splinters in different regions, i.e., the Sahel region in Africa, Iraq, Syria and Afg through simultaneous actions/ long term coordinated strategies.