

In The Shadows: The Threat Of an Islamic State On The Brink in the Middle East and Africa

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Key Points

- As Islamic State's (IS) continues its attacks in Iraq and Syria, its expansion into Africa poses a threat that warns of an enduring battle in a new environment.
- IS has been creating various connections with African insurgency groups to retain its global image while the groups receive international recognition and support.
- Some of ISIS's branches embed themselves in local communities as alternatives to state governance by using tactics aimed at winning the population over.

Introduction

The Department of Defence's Inspector-General report concerning the progress of Operation Inherent Resolve covering October-December 2020 reveals IS's capability in the Middle East, where it is stated that ISIS's members are conducting low-level insurgencies and small scale attacks, yet displaying a persistent degree of cohesiveness despite organisation's loss of territory, major population centres and finances.¹ This cohesiveness was highlighted in the previous 2019 report as well, where it was stated that the death of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi merely vaguely impacted the organisation's ability to strike.² Yet, as the group continues its fight in the Middle East, IS also expanded its operations into Africa as a means to regain its strength, as evidenced by the Mozambique attack in April 2021.³ In this article, the status and threat of IS in the Middle East are briefly reviewed, while its second part will focus on IS's push towards moving into Africa and how their tenacity is a signal of their willingness to once again return as a ferocious threat.

Operation Inherent Resolve: IS in the Middle East

Despite its major losses, IS has demonstrated a continuous ability to adapt and carry on with attacks in Iraq and Syria. The COVID-19 pandemic had an effect on IS's operations in the

¹ Department of Defence Office of Inspector General, "Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report To The United States Congress, October 1, 2020 - December 30, 2020", Department of Defence, 5 February 2021, Available at: dodig.mil/In-the-Spotlight/Article/2497908/lead-inspector-general-for-operation-inherent-resolve-quarterly-report-to-the-u/

² Department of Defence Office of Inspector General, "Operation Inherent Resolve Lead Inspector General Quarterly Report to Congress October 1, 2019 to December 31, 2019", Department of Defence, 3 February 2020, Available at: <https://oig.usaid.gov/node/3751>

³ Ramsay S., "Mozambique insurgency: Unseen pictures show 'carnage' of Islamic State attack that killed dozens", Sky News, 5 April 2021, Available at: <https://news.sky.com/story/unseen-pictures-show-carnage-of-islamic-state-attack-that-killed-british-man-in-mozambique-12265947>

Middle East, offering an opportunity to intensify their attacks since March 2020.⁴ The extremists increased their attacks as governments around the world, Western and Arabic, were distracted with tackling the pandemic, which led to them regrouping and launching increasingly more complex attacks and increasing the risk of a possible return of their caliphate.⁵ **The defeat of IS is argued to be merely territorial in nature, and declaring a victory over the group now would not take into account the non-material aspect of fighting their movement.**⁶ Reports indicate that even if IS lost its final enclave in 2019,⁷ its ideology remains persistent, with fighters claimed to have merely dispersed and waiting for an opportunity to regroup at a more opportune time; launching persistent attacks on soldiers and police forces in the meantime to retain presence.⁸ The risk of a major return is not only real but also backed by persistent exploitation of hostilities between Shia and Sunni Muslims,⁹ as well as recruitment campaigns¹⁰ and large cash reserves.¹¹

Where the US ponders on withdrawing some troops from Iraq as its own forces become more capable in fighting IS,¹² the terrorist group conducted over 300 attacks in the last quarter of 2020, out of which 65 were targeted at civilians.¹³ In January 2021, IS further conducted attacks, where it struck a market in Baghdad which involved 2 suicide bombings and killing 32 people.¹⁴ In April 2021, a car bombing in the same city killed 4 people and wounded 20.¹⁵ And in the same month, another notable attack involved targeting two oil wells located in Bay Hassan, Northern Iraq, where officials denied any substantial damage was made to the facilities

⁴ Hanna A, “ISIS Offensive Exploits Pandemic”, Wilson Centre, 8 June 2020, Available at: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/isis-offensive-exploits-pandemic>

⁵ Abdul-Zahra Q. et.al., “IS extremists step up as Iraq, Syria, grapple with virus”, AP News, 3 May 2020, Available at: <https://apnews.com/article/22cf69f5f7ab4a3268fd224107fadc61>

⁶ Cordesman A.H., “The Real World Capabilities of ISIS: The Threat Continues”, Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 9 September 2020, Available at: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/real-world-capabilities-isis-threat-continues>

⁷ VOA News, “US-backed Fighters Launch Final Push to Defeat IS in Syria”, VOA News, 9 February 2019, Available at: <https://www.voanews.com/middle-east/us-backed-fighters-launch-final-push-defeat-syria>

⁸ Vohra A., “‘Constant fear’: Iraq and Syria face ISIL resurgence”, Aljazeera News, 2 March 2021, Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/3/2/we-liv-in-constant-fear-iraq-and-syria-face-isil-resurgence>

⁹ DoD Office of Inspector General, “Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report Oct-Dec.2020”, Online

¹⁰ Meyer C., “Terrorists Ramping Up Recruitment and Propaganda Efforts”, Asis International, 4 November 2020, Available at: <https://www.asisonline.org/security-management-magazine/latest-news/today-in-security/2020/november/terrorists-ramp-up-recruitment-propaganda-efforts/>

¹¹ Talley I., Faucon B., “Islamic State, Defeated U.S. Foe, Still Brims With Cash, Ambition”, Wall Street Journal, 18 September 2020, Available at: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/islamic-state-defeated-u-s-foe-still-brims-with-cash-ambition-11600464409>

¹² Liebermann O., “US eyes eventual Iraq exit as ISIS threat wanes”, CNN News, 8 April 2021, Available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/04/07/politics/us-iraq-exit-isis/index.html>

¹³ DoD Office of Inspector General, “Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report Oct-Dec.2020”, Online

¹⁴ BBC News, “Iraq attack: Twin suicide bombings in central Baghdad kill 32”, BBC News, 21 January 2021, Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/54a3ad8c-f65c-4759-9c16-8ca2a07427d1>

¹⁵ Reuters, “Car bomb blast kills four in Baghdad’s Sadr City - police”, Reuters, 15 April 2021, Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/car-bomb-kills-four-baghdads-sadr-city-police-2021-04-15/>

that would disrupt their operation.¹⁶ Meanwhile, the coalition equally pushes back against the jihadist's campaign of violence. **On March 12, 2021, 'Operation Ready Lion', a ten-day strike campaign against IS's tunnel networks in the Makhmour Mountains, was launched with the backing of the US and Royal Air Force, complemented by Iraqi ground forces.**¹⁷ The coalition's attack destroyed over 120 hideouts and resulted in the deaths of over 27 terrorists.¹⁸ Furthermore, the coalition assisted Iraqi forces on the ground as well, with at least a part of the 200 Canadian special forces deployed in Iraq supporting the ground offensive during the operation.¹⁹

In Syria, the Islamic State is equally relentless, especially in the Dayr Az Zawr region.²⁰ As the organisation remains locked in a fight against the increasingly unassisted Syrian Democratic Force (SDF), it now faces an uptick in battles against regime-backed forces as well.²¹ **Among many other attacks, IS ambushed and killed a Syrian Arab Army brigadier general and 9 other soldiers on November 20, 2020, and carried out another ambush against a bus convoy that resulted in the deaths of over 39 regime troops on December 30, being the highest-profile IS attack of the year in Syria.**²² On April 8 2021, IS launched a raid against a police station in al-Saan, killing 11 people and kidnapping over 45.²³ In return, where IS originally controlled the Syrian oil fields, the area is now under the control of the SDF which benefitted from intensive training specialised in the protection of petroleum infrastructure and also benefits from the backing of the coalition, deterring IS from attacking the fields directly again.²⁴ Furthermore, between April 12 and 17, 2021, Russian and Bashar al Assad's regime forces launched their own operation against IS, which involved 70 Russian airstrikes against

¹⁶ Reuters, "Islamic State claims responsibility for Saturday's attack at Iraq's oilfield", Reuters, 19 April 2021, Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/islamic-state-claims-responsibility-saturdays-attack-iraqs-oilfield-2021-04-18/>

¹⁷ Sabbagh D., "RAF engaged in 10-day attack on Isis in Iraq this spring", Guardian News, 8 April 2021, Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/apr/08/raf-engaged-in-10-day-attack-on-isis-in-iraq-this-spring>

¹⁸ Everstine B.W., "Coalition Aircraft, Iraqi Forces Continue Large Offensive Targeting ISIS", Air Force Magazine, 24 March 2021, Available at: <https://www.airforcemag.com/coalition-aircraft-iraqi-forces-continue-large-offensive-targeting-isis/>

¹⁹ Berthiaume L. "Canadian special forces supported major Iraqi military assault on ISIS last month", CTV News, 11 April 2021, Available at: <https://www.ctvnews.ca/canada/canadian-special-forces-supported-major-iraqi-military-assault-on-isis-last-month-1.5383073>

²⁰ DoD Office of Inspector General, "Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report Oct-Dec.2020", Online ²¹ *ibid.*

²² *ibid.*, pages 54-55

²³ Rose D., "Islamic State takes dozens of hostages in surprise Syria desert attack", The Times, 8 April 2021, Available at: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/islamic-state-takes-dozens-of-hostages-in-surprise-syria-desert-attack-gvlq6cnpng>

²⁴ DoD Office of Inspector General, "Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report Oct-Dec.2020", Online

the group's bunkers and caves in the Hama-Aleppo-Al-Raqqah area, followed by ground forces aimed to launch combing operations in the nearby desert.²⁵

The New Frontier: IS in Africa

Since the Islamic State's territorial gains were almost entirely reversed in the Middle East, and with the group being forced into hiding, the organisation sought to expand in other areas to ensure its survivability and operability. **Africa is a prime choice that fits these criteria, particularly the Sahel Region: a 3.05 million square kilometre region sprawling from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea, between the Sahara Desert and the Sudanian Savanna, which has become a theatre for the fight against Islamic insurgents over the last years.**²⁶

As the Sahel's importance to IS in particular will be explored in the following paragraph, a note will be made on one of the group's main local factions: Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), and the population-centred tactics it uses near the Lake Chad region.

The Sahel region includes parts of many states bordering the south of Northern Africa, most relevant for this article being Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger who together form the 'G5 Sahel': an organisation that aims to bring the states closer economically and security-wise as they combat insurgencies in the region.²⁷ The formation of this France-backed group comes as a response to increased attacks from Islamic insurgents operating in the region, where the number of attacks increases every year and reaches 4,161 since June 2020.²⁸ **Since the Sahel region sees a yearly increase in attacks, this is a sign of frequent activity from local fighters as well, which are often formed not due to an extreme ideology of Islam, but rather due to the local grievances with the state government; something that both IS and Al-Qaeda exploit to their advantage.** However, despite their similar approaches, they are by

²⁵ Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, "Syrian desert | Over 70 airstrikes hit ISIS caves and bunkers in 24 hours", Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 18 April 2021, Available at: https://www.syriahr.com/en/214107/?fbclid=IwAR1NUV1nC_VsopEvl-m2ZWjjGhdYPIJNXVvkrD-kssHKglcLWTi9KiQFflo

²⁶ Petesch C., Kabore A., "West African leaders meet on extremism in the region", AP News, 14 September 2019, Available at: <https://apnews.com/article/africa-mali-niger-west-africa-burkina-faso-4c33e26f4c324055aba6a26182540378>

²⁷ Reuters, "African nations form G5 to work on Sahel security, development", Reuters News, 16 February 2014, Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-africa-sahel-g-idUSBREA1F0P520140216>

²⁸ Africa Centre for Strategic Studies, "African Militant Islamist Groups Set Record for Violent Activity", Africa Centre for Strategic Studies, 21 July 2020, Available at: <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/african-militant-islamist-groups-new-record-violent-activity/>

no means complementing each other's efforts: reports of clashes between IS and Al-Qaeda groups in Africa have been reported in Mali and beyond.²⁹

One way IS uses local insurgencies to its advantage is by creating loose ties with them, which would help promote recruitment and fundraising campaigns.³⁰ The symbiotic relationship crafted features the small group receiving international legitimacy by using IS's brand, receiving more recruits and support, while IS reaffirms its global image of strength and also motivate affiliate branches to continue fighting.³¹ An example of this is the 3-day siege on the city of Palma, Mozambique, where the local insurgency with loose ties to IS killed more than 55 persons and displaced tens of thousands of people.³² Despite IS claiming the attack, it was a largely independent insurgent group that arose from local grievances which carried it but used the IS brand to gain international exposure and reinforce the image that IS still has power and reach in spite of its losses.³³ **The Mozambique attack is a symptom of how the security situation in Africa is exploited by the IS, used to entrench its networks in Africa and also recreate strength for future counter-attacks there or in the Middle East by harnessing local insurgencies to their advantage with new recruits and more funds.**

Another means through which IS establishes a foothold in Africa is by directly exploiting lacklustre socio-economic and military security situation in areas where the state cannot deliver. This is especially true with ISWAP, which was the new name given to Boko Haram by al-Baghdadi after the group's allegiance in 2015. The initial leader Abubakar Shekau was soon replaced with Abu Musab al-Barnawi in 2016 over the excessive imposition of 'takfir' (accusation of apostasy) prompting the leader to break away from ISWAP under the original name: Jamā'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-Jihād (JAS), but still having allegiance to IS's leader.³⁴ **A common tactic used by ISWAP is to distance themselves from the connections with JAS and even protect local civilians from their attacks.** And while lacklustre socio-economic and security circumstances are exploited by the IS branch, human rights abuses done

²⁹ Baldaro E., Diall S.Y., "The End of the Sahelian Exception: Al-Qaeda and Islamic State Clash in Central Mali", *The International Spectator*, 55:4, p.69-83 (2020), Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2020.1833566>

³⁰ Campbell J., "Islamic State and al-Qaeda Linked to African Insurgencies", Council of Foreign Relations, 8 April 2021, Available at: <https://www.cfr.org/blog/islamic-state-and-al-qaeda-linked-african-insurgencies>

³¹ Goldbaum C., Schmitt E., "In Bid to Boost Its Profile, ISIS Turns to Africa's Militants", *New York Times*, 7 April 2021, Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/07/world/africa/ISIS-Africa-Mozambique.html>

³² Goldbaum C., "Insurgents Seize Mozambique Town, Killing Several People; Fate of Hundreds Unknown", *New York Times*, 27 March 2021, Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/27/world/africa/27mozambique-insurgents-attack.html>

³³ Goldbaum C., "ISIS Claims Responsibility for Mozambique Attack", *New York Times*, 30 March 2021, Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/30/world/africa/isis-mozambique-attack.html>

³⁴ Zenn J, Pieri Z, "How much Takfir is too much Takfir? The Evolution of Boko Haram's Factionalization", *Journal for Deradicalization*, Nr. 11, (2017), Available at: <https://journals.sfu.ca/jd/index.php/jd/article/view/107>

by state militaries and their proxy groups are also used to their advantage. For instance, the Islamic State of Greater Sahara (ISGS) operating in the Liptako-Gourma region similarly offers protection from the state-sponsored GATIA and GSA armed groups, which attack the Fulani ethnic community under the pretext of counterinsurgency, resulting in ISGS painting themselves as a pragmatic alternative to the untrusted state.³⁵ For the purposes of this section, however, the article will focus on ISWAP and how their distinctive approach to the population makes them not only a military threat but a political one too.

ISWAP, being the branch directly under IS rule, receives financial support and trainers from its core organisation.³⁶ It uses a suite of tactics focused on winning ‘hearts and minds’, portraying themselves as a better choice between counterinsurgency forces and JAS, the former having a long list of grave human rights abuses³⁷ while the latter being especially known for their brutality.³⁸ **ISWAP also seeks to win over the population through various policies that make for an alternate form of governance, including offering protection from attackers, allowing local communities to operate economically in markets and engaging in agriculture while paying taxation to them.**³⁹ Furthermore, ISWAP’s approach allows it to spread its ideology across local communities, and more importantly embed itself in the local life by controlling the education, marrying the women and trying to recruit marginalised youth by providing weapons, motorbikes and more.⁴⁰ The opportunity for local communities to pay taxes in exchange for being able to do business is a more acceptable outcome than being under the threat of the military or JAS, and their connections deepen with the group by treating Muslims comparatively better than other Boko Haram factions and even constructing basic infrastructure like wells, with this strategy paying dividends in recruitment and loyalty.⁴¹ This results in communities eventually seeing ISWAP as a more tolerable alternative in a region where none have full control.⁴² Naturally, ISWAP and ISGS both use violence to coerce the

³⁵ Raineri L., “Explaining the Rise of Jihadism in Africa: The Crucial Case of the Islamic State of the Greater Sahara”, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, (2020), Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2020.1828078>

³⁶ Foucher V., “The Islamic State Franchises in Africa: Lessons from Lake Chad”, *International Crisis Group*, 29 October 2020, Available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/islamic-state-franchises-africa-lessons-lake-chad>

³⁷ Amnesty International, “Nigeria 2020”, *Amnesty International*, [31st December 2020], Available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/africa/nigeria/report-nigeria/>

³⁸ Ewang A., “Gruesome Boko Haram Killings in Northeast Nigeria”, *Human Rights Watch*, 1 December 2020, Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/12/01/gruesome-boko-haram-killings-northeast-nigeria>

³⁹ Berlingozzi L., Stoddard E., “Assessing Misaligned Counterinsurgency Practice in Niger and Nigeria”, *The International Spectator*, 55:4 (2020), p.37-53, Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2020.1833472>

⁴⁰ *ibid.* p.42

⁴¹ *International Crisis Group*, “Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa Province”, *International Crisis Group*, 16 May 2019, Available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/273-facing-challenge-islamic-state-west-africa-province>

⁴² Berlingozzi, “Assessing Misaligned Counterinsurgency Practice in Niger and Nigeria”, *Online*.

local population to abide by the group's rules. **Their embedding in the local life gives IS the opportunity to radicalise African communities, resulting in more fundraising, recruiting more people and eventually having communities resisting an eventual change from ISWAP's control due to prolonged exposure to their influence.** Moreover, the G5 Sahel's armed forces and Niger's, are exacerbating the situation with their own record of human right abuses, which involves extrajudicial killing or forceful disappearances of civilians in areas where IS and other insurgents operate.⁴³

Conclusion

While IS turned to low-level insurgency attacks in the Middle East, it sees to expand its foothold in Africa by winning over communities through providing services to them and exploiting grievances. Despite losing all of its territories, the persistent nature of the attacks conducted by IS in Syria and Iraq, combined with the networking of insurgent groups in Africa, showcases that IS is not defeated and that their fighting power remains robust. The territorial perspective provides an insufficient vision on what would bring the end of IS, as the vectors of attack the organisation employs have gone beyond that of military nature, and into socio-economic ones. Branches such as ISWAP combine violence and coercion with the provision of services and business, where it is the state that should provide such instead. **IS is placing local communities in a situation where the locals would prefer them over other alternatives such as JAS or state military, pushing them to support the Islamic State out of necessity or even choice if they are exposed enough to their ideals in so much as to be radicalised.**

⁴³ Amnesty International, "Sahel: Soldiers rampage through villages killing people under guise of anti-terror operations", Amnesty International, 10 June 2020, Available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/06/sahel-soldiers-rampage-through-villages-killing-people/>

Recommendations for the international community

1. The approach towards counter-insurgency in the Sahel Region must complement the military aspect with providing support to the local communities, such as welfare, healthcare and other public services to pose as a valid alternative to that of the IS's.
2. The G5 Sahel requires further support from regional and international actors to be able to combat the increasingly aggressive Islamic insurgencies in the region. Not only global awareness needs to be raised further to facilitate action, but the type of support offered must be inclusive to that of a military nature, but also economic as well, with regional actors being able to support more robust services to its citizens to minimise the opportunities for jihadists to exploit these grievances.
3. The international community must cooperate with the G5 Sahel members in tackling the root causes of mistrust between the governments and the citizens. Among other means, by ensuring that the state militaries are held accountable for their own actions and guaranteeing justice against human rights abuses by state-sponsored actors. These would be starting points to improve the willingness of the community to cooperate with the government against IS.
4. Offering military training to Sahel states can help provide both the tools and the doctrine necessary to avoid the frequent occurrence of human right abuses, and make the state militaries more approachable and justify the trust from the local communities. This would help counteract IS's push in offering protection from various insurgent forces, as the military would be able to provide that while also being able to build rapport.
5. Tackling arms trafficking routes from North Africa, such as from Libya,⁴⁴ or other regions can help combat the growing violence done by extremist insurgents by making it more difficult for them to acquire the necessary armament to carry out large scale attacks in the Sahel Region and beyond.

⁴⁴ Dhaouadi R., "Social media and the sale of arms in Libya", Enact Africa, 12 April 2019, Available at: <https://enactafrica.org/research/trend-reports/social-media-and-the-sale-of-arms-in-libya>

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