



ISIS Strengthens in Iraq

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The loss of ISIS' last stronghold in Baghuz (Syria) in March 2019 led politicians in the Muslim world as well as the west to eulogize the organization. Pres. Trump has even gone and said in February 2019 that the allied forces managed to drive ISIS' operatives off all the territories previously under its control and fully eliminate it¹. Yet, the increased volume of ISIS' activity in the past six months, especially during the last Ramadan (April 23rd- May 23rd, 2020) and its operational successes in the field point to a trend of recovery strengthening in the Iraqi theater. Moreover, lately ISIS has been hinting that it intended to open a new stage in the war in Iraq without providing details as to the nature of said stage. Whether these are idle threats or real intentions, it is clear the social, political and economical crisis engulfing Iraq, the rising tensions between Iran and the U.S., COVID-19 pandemic that attracts significant national resources from every country as well as other factors contribute to the organization's resurgence in the Iraqi theater.

The Increase of ISIS' Offensive Activity in the Iraqi Theater

On May 15th, 2020, ISIS disseminated in Iraq a 50 minutes video titled "Beheading" that documented for the first time this year its activity in Iraq's various regions. Assassinations, executions and attacks on posts and homes of Iraqi security forces personnel and Iraqi Shiite militias were documented². The video projects a show of force and was meant to convey the message that ISIS' might has not been hurt despite coalition forces activity. It is evident that ISIS regrouped, spread over wide area in Iraq and execute attacks deep inside its enemies' territories. In its weekly infographics, posted on al-Naba and social media, Iraq and Syria as a close second, are shown as the regions where most of the organization's attacks are being carried out. it was reported that during the last 10 days of Ramadan (May 13-21, 2020) ISIS carried out 133 attacks in Iraq and 51 attacks in Syria (see appendix)³. Terror researchers **Michael Knights and Alex Almeida**, of West Point have found that in 2018 ISIS carried out 1,470 attacks, 1,669 in 2019 and 566 attacks in the first quarter of 2020⁴. Per them, the number of regions where terrorist cells are on the offensive significantly grew from some 27 regions in December 2018 to approx. 47 regions in May 2020⁵. **Majid al-Qaisi**, a former Iraqi general and the director of the counterterrorism program in the "Center of Making Policies for

¹ Katie Rogers and others, "Trump Declares ISIS '100%' Defeated in Syria. '100% Not True,' Ground Reports Say", *The New York Times*, Feb 28, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/28/world/middleeast/trump-isis-territory.html>

² 16.5.2020. <https://justpaste.it/6x904>

³ **Al-Naba**, Vol. 236 (May 28th, 2020), P. 16.

⁴ Michael Knights & Alex Almeida. "Remaining and Expanding: The Recovery of Islamic State Operations in Iraq in 2019-2020", CTC Sentinel, May 2020, Volume 13, Issue 5. <https://ctc.usma.edu/remaining-and-expanding-the-recovery-of-islamic-state-operations-in-iraq-in-2019-2020/>

⁵ Ibid

International and Strategic Studies in Iraq”, pointed out to a new areas of activity and operations for ISIS such as: south and west Mosul region, north west and south Salah al-Din region, west and south Kirkuk region, north and east Diyala, the Makhoul and Hamrin mountain ranges in north eastern Iraq, al-Anbar desert and the regions close to the Iraqi borders⁶. According to a U.N. report, ISIS is currently approx. 14,000-18,000 strong in Iraq⁷.

Guerilla Warfare and Transitioning Into a New Phase

It should be noted, due to its loss of territories (the last one occurred in March 2019), ISIS has transitioned to guerilla warfare or as it calls it Harb Istinzaf (attrition war). It was **Sheikh Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi**, that specifically instructed, in April 2019, to adopt such a transition and focus the organization’s efforts in wearing out the enemy on all levels, military, economically, logistically etc. This is a repeated theme in al-Naba and the speeches of **Hamza al-Quraishi**, ISIS’ spokesman.

The opening article of the May 28th, 2020, al-Naba issue focused on the importance of guerilla warfare. It was written that “the style of guerilla warfare is the best suited”. Its main goal is to wear out the enemies, kill, maim, capture, severely beat them and loot their properties while minimizing ISIS casualties. Per ISIS, guerilla warfare was meant to not only weaken the enemy, drive him out of territories that the organization will take control of but also to wear it out to a level that will prevent it from recuperating and deny him the capabilities to fight the mujahidin “if the war [conducted by] enemy forces against the organization [ISIS] will despair them and make lose all hope to win then the mujahidin’s victory is inevitable. Therefore, there is no need to hasten and take over territories at this stage because that goal will be achieved in the near future thanks to jihad and harassing the enemy⁸.

Further, the spokesman also stressed the importance of using guerilla warfare at the end of May 2020. He called for the continuation of an attrition war that would be manifested by scaring the infidels; raiding areas where the enemy is located, ambushing the crusader, installing IEDs, demolishing posts and roadblocks and increasing the frequency of attacks⁹. This policy has been implemented by ISIS operatives. During May 2020 the organization launched a video campaign documenting its operatives torching grain fields and agricultural tools (e.g. tractors), owned by Shiite militias to destroy their food supply. Alongside the activity, a religious legitimacy for such attacks was provided on the grounds that such attacks are allowed if the enemy is being harmed by them (see appendix). Moreover, demolition of power lines, setting up surprise roadblocks and stopping suspicious cars and more was also shown in the video.

⁶ Majid al-Qaisi, “The Military Steps Required for the Elimination of the Remainder of ISIS in Iraq”, Center of Making Policies for International and Strategic Studies in Iraq, May 7th 2020, <https://www.makingpolicies.org/ar/posts/TheWaronISIS.php>

⁷ Paul Cruickshank, “UN report warns ISIS is reasserting under new leader believed to be behind Yazidi genocide”, CNN, January 29, 2020. <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/01/29/politics/un-terror-report-isis/index.html>

⁸ Al-Naba, Vol. 236 (May 28th, 2020), P. 3

⁹ Ibid, P. 11-14

Majid al-Qaisi explained ISIS' guerilla warfare goals as follows: (i) gaining a foothold in various regions, especially remote rural areas to serve as staging grounds to launch attacks; (ii) conducting an attrition war against the security forces on multiple fronts simultaneously using small teams (up to ten fighters); (iii) an effort to get close to major cities, undermine security in the areas around them and block the roads leading to them; (iv) an attempt to boost members' morale following the elimination of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and the loss of the territories the organization controlled under him; (v) undermining the civilian confidence in the security forces ability to defend the cities and maintain stability; (vi) focusing their attacks on mixed cities to widen the rift between Sunni and Shiite thus undermine security stability¹⁰.

At the end of May 2020, **Hamza al-Quraishi**, ISIS' spokesman alluded to the organization's readiness to launch a new stage in its operations in the Iraqi theater however without addressing the nature of said stage. **He warned the Shiite forces in Iraq that they needed to prepare for an impending confrontation with ISIS, and addressed ISIS' fighters to prepare for the next stage of fighting, alongside an attrition war** that will be manifested by increasing attacks frequencies, setting up ambushes, installing IEDs, raiding roadblocks and posts etc. Additionally, he called upon ISIS' fighters to perpetrate revenge attacks and act to liberate prisoners everywhere.

Contributing Factors to the Resurgence of ISIS in the Iraqi Theater

The Iraqi security forces as well as the Shiite militias in Iraq claim, from time to time, achievements in the fight against ISIS. for example, the Iraqi Defense Ministry announced on May 20th, 2020 that Iraqi security forces arrested Abd al-Nasir Kardash, a senior ISIS leader in charge of chemical weapons production such as mustard gas¹¹. Yet, ISIS' power base has not been significantly affected. Several factors contributing to ISIS resurgence may be pointed out:

1. The rising tensions between the U.S. and Iran culminated with the elimination and Qassim Soleimani at the beginning of January 2020 and the attacks of Pro-Iranian Shiite militias on the U.S. embassy in Baghdad. The above effectively severed any collaboration between the U.S. and Iran in coordinating the fighting vis a vis ISIS.
2. The U.S. withdrawal from five military bases in Iraq likely led to loss of deterrence among ISIS fighters.
3. Lack of quality intelligence on terrorist elements activities in the areas where the U.S. withdrew from, such as Kirkuk, Qayyarah base in south Mosul and K1 base in southern Kirkuk.
4. A decline in coordination of the counter ISIS activities in remote rural locations on the borderlines between the provinces.

¹⁰ Majid al-Qaisi, "The Military Steps Required for the Elimination of the Remainder of ISIS in Iraq", Center of Making Policies for International and Strategic Studies in Iraq, May 7th 2020, <https://www.makingpolicies.org/ar/posts/ThewaronISIS.php>

¹¹ 21.5.2020. https://diyaruna.com/ar/articles/cnmi_di/features/2020/05/21/feature-03

5. Internal conflicts within Shiite militia Hashad al-Shaabi, in light of conflicting allegiances to power sources such as Iran, Muqtada Sadder, which slows down their decision making process and their collaboration with the Iraqi security forces vis a vis the counter ISIS activity.
6. Lack of complete security coverage of remote rural areas due to various difficulties such as troop shortage, lacking intelligence gathering and small number of sophisticated monitoring devices in these areas.
7. ISIS' hideouts are hard to reach due to their location in mountains and deserts typified by harsh terrain.
8. The popular protests against corruption in Iraq (started October 2019) required significant military and financial resources to suppress them.
9. ISIS fighters' assimilation within the local civilian population.

Summary

The noticeable increase in ISIS scope of activities in various regions in the Iraqi theater especially during Ramadan points to its recovery, regrouping, high capabilities and boldness to carry out offensive operations. It is likely that **sheikh Ibrahim al-Hashemi al-Quraishi**, appointed as ISIS new leader following the elimination of al-Baghdadi in October 2019, wishes to prove both internally and externally that ISIS managed to recover, regroup and become even stronger, inter alia, to solidify its legitimacy as the leader and attract new recruits. Undoubtedly the new geopolitical reality and the COVID-19 pandemic are playing into his hands and are fully capitalized to make the most for ISIS. That said, it is too soon to assess if ISIS does intend to launch a new stage in the fighting in Iraq alongside its guerilla campaign, as alluded by ISIS' spokesman, but it is clear that as long as the region is undergoing through complicated events such as a civil war, political and economic crisis combined with concerns from the spread and effect of COVID-19 there is a chance that ISIS' radical ideology will attract many who have despaired off the current reality.

Appendix



Left to right: an Infographic posted in vol. 235 of al-Naba showing a distribution of ISIS attacks between April 23rd – May 20th, 2020¹²; infographic published in vol.236 and titled “Attrition War 3” showing a distribution of 228 attacks carried out by ISIS in its 12 provinces between May 14th – 23rd, 2020. Iraq province leads the list with 132 attacks¹³.



ISIS members in Iraq province pledge allegiance to Abu Ibrahim al-Quraishi, the new leader, and threaten to continue their wave of attacks (from the “The Beheadings” video)¹⁴

¹² Al-Naba vol. 235 (May 21st, 2020), P. 16.

¹³ Al-Naba vol. 236 (May 28th, 2020), P. 16.

¹⁴ Telegram, May 28th, 2020



ISIS members in Iraq province torch fields of grain and agricultural equipment (from "The Beheadings" video)¹⁵

غزوة الاستنزاف
تحرق الروافض الأنجاس

استنزاف يليه استنزاف... هذا حال رافضة العراق ومن دار في فلكهم من مرتدي الأعراب ..
فلقد ظن شيعة المجوس أن بمقدورهم إيقاف المجاهدين باتباع سياسة الأرض المحروقة
فأتاهم الله من حيث لم يحتسبوا وسلط عليهم عباده المجاهدين ليطشوا بهم
ويسموهم سوء العذاب..
فدخل هؤلاء المشركون رغم أنوفهم بحرب استنزاف لا خروج منها ولا قيل لهم بها.. فأصبحوا
يتخطفون قتلاً وأسراً وتفجيراً ، وأصبح حالهم كحال من يتخطفه الشيطان من المس..
لا يدرون كيف يجدون مخرجاً مما هم فيه.. فعمدوا إلى الكذب والدجل في الإعلام بعمليات
عسكرية كاذبة لحفظ ماء الوجه، ولعل أسيادهم يمدونهم بمدد نجيحهم مما هم فيه..
ولكن هيهات هيهات وعمما قريب يصبحكم جنود الخلافة في بغداد والتجف وكربلاء
بخميسهم العرمرم بإذن الله .. إنهم يرونه بعيداً ونراه قريباً والعاقبة للمتقين.


البطار
 ALBATTAR

تحريق مهابيل الكفار والمرتدين وتخريب ممتلكاتهم

عن ابن عمر رضي الله عنهما، (أن رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم حرق نخل بني النضير، وقطع وهي البؤيرة، فأتى الله تعالى: [إِنَّا كَفَعْنَاكَ مِنْ لِبْنَةِ أَوْ تَرَكْنَا مَا قَالَمَتْ عَلَى أَمْوَالِهَا فَيَذَرُ اللَّهُ الْفَاسِقِينَ]) متفق عليه. قال مالك: "لا بأس أن تحرق قراهم وحصونهم بالنيران وتغرق بالماء وتخرب". وقال مالك: "يقطع الشجر في بلادهم المشر وغير المشر ولا بأس بذلك". المدونة [3 / 17].

قال الإمام الشافعي: "كل ما كان مما يمتكون لا روح له فإتلافه مباح بكل وجه، وكل ما زعمت أنه مباح فحلل للمسلمين فعله، وغير محرم عليهم تركه، وأحب إذا غزا المسلمون بلاد دار الحرب وكنت غزاتهم غارة، أو كان عدوهم كثيراً ومتحصناً ممتنعاً، لا يغلب عليهم أن تصير دارهم دار الإسلام ولا دار عهد يجري عليها الحكم: أن يقطعوا ويحرقوا ويذروا ما قدروا عليه من شأهم وشجرهم، ويؤخذ متاعهم، وما كان يحمل من خفيف متاعهم فقدروا عليه اختارت أن يغموه وما لم يقدروا عليه حرقوه وغرقوه". كتب الأئم للشافعي [5 / 630].

وقال إسحاق بن راهويه: قال إسحاق: "التحريق سنة إذا كان ذلك أنكى فيه". مسائل الإمام أحمد وإسحاق بن راهويه رواية الكوسج [3866 / 8].

الغزوة الاستنزاف

Banners posted by ISIS supporting media outlets on social media under the hashtag # attrition war in favor of torching grain fields and agricultural equipment while providing religious legitimacy to these actions¹⁶.

¹⁵ Telegram, May 28th, 2020

¹⁶ Telegram, May 2020

ABOUT THE ICT

Founded in 1996, the International Institute for Counterterrorism (ICT) is one of the leading academic institutes for counterterrorism in the world, facilitating international cooperation in the global struggle against terrorism.

ICT is an independent think tank providing expertise in terrorism, counterterrorism, homeland security, threat vulnerability and risk assessment, intelligence analysis and national security and defense policy.

ICT is a non-profit organization located at the Interdisciplinary Center (IDC), Herzliya, Israel which relies exclusively on private donations and revenue from events, projects and programs.

ABOUT THE JIHADI MONITORING GROUP

The Jihadi Websites Monitoring Group (JWMG) is a specialized research and analysis team at the International Institute for Counter Terrorism (ICT). Composed of researchers fluent in Arabic, the JWMG monitors websites that support and serve the Global Jihad organizations. The

unique characteristic of JWMG publications is the team's integration of diverse materials from a wide variety of Arabic sources. JWMG connects each source to larger trends, providing a complete understanding of events on both a local and a global scale.