

Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

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Islamic State's Congolese Militants Increase Capabilities

Jacob Zenn

The Congo branch of the Islamic State in Central Africa Province (ISCAP) is increasingly following the footsteps of the most prolific Islamic State (IS) affiliate, Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP). Also commonly referred to as "Boko Haram," ISWAP has carried out more attacks than any other IS province in the first quarter of this year. In fact, ISWAP has carried out almost as many claimed attacks (162) as IS in Syria and Iraq combined (197) in that period ([Twitter/@Jihad Analytics](https://twitter.com/Jihad_Analytics), April 8).

ISCAP Congo branch's 37 attacks in the first quarter of 2021 trails only the above-mentioned provinces and Afghanistan-based IS in Khorasan Province (45 attacks), which means the Congolese militants are among the most active for IS. The Congolese militants are on the upswing with regards to attacks claimed, deaths inflicted on enemies, and expansion of the operational area. In contrast, IS fighters in Syria and Iraq are beleaguered by regional powers and proxy militias, despite still carrying out occasional deadly attacks on civilians or militiamen who oppose them (rudaw.net, April 11). Meanwhile, IS in Khorasan Province is threatened by the Taliban ([Terrorism Monitor](#), December 16, 2021).

Besides IS's Congo branch, only ISWAP is still ascendant among IS's provinces. One of the most recent threats from ISCAP's Congo branch involved planned bombings in Beni, about which the mayor warned the city's residents (politico.cd, April 11). Another attack attributed to the IS Congo branch involved the April 7 grenade attack at Katinda military camp in Goma (radiookapi.net, April 8). Other attacks have targeted Christians and villages close to the Uganda border ([Twitter/@TracTerrorism](https://twitter.com/TracTerrorism), April 11). At the same time, photographs from the IS Congo branch's attack claims confirm the group's expansion as far as the Ituri river in northeastern Congo ([Twitter/@ThinkTAC2022](https://twitter.com/ThinkTAC2022), April 7).

Not only is IS's Congo branch ascendant militarily, but its propaganda is also fully aligned with IS's "core". For example, the militants released a video pledging loyalty to the new IS caliph as well as a video celebrating the breaking of the fast during Ramadan ([Twitter/@erfanyousafzai](https://twitter.com/erfanyousafzai), April 2). Both of these video and photographic materials were part of a broader series involving all IS provinces globally.

One of the possible trajectories for IS's Congo branch is that it will become its own "IS in Congo Province," with the current IS Mozambique branch becoming its own "IS in Mozambique Province." Currently, both are unified under IS's organization structure as ISCAP. Once IS's new caliph was anointed in March, ISWAP and Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS) likewise became separated, with the former remaining ISWAP and the latter becoming IS's "Sahel Province" (aljazeera.com, March 29). Thus, the same might happen for their Congo and Mozambique-based counterparts.

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Patani United Liberation Organization Breaks up Peace Talks in Thailand

Jacob Zenn

On April 15, the Patani United Liberation Organization (PULO) carried out two bombings in the Sai Buri district in Patani Province, southern Thailand (benarnews.org, April 15). According to PULO's "G5" faction, the purpose of the bombings was to punish Thailand for not including PULO in the fourth round of peace talks that are ongoing in Malaysia between the Thai government and "G5" faction rival, Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN). Nevertheless, the Thai government announced that it would not withdraw from the ceasefire that it reached with the BRN in which both parties agreed not to attack one another during Ramadan (republika.co.id, April 17).

The BRN is the main militant group of the ethnic Malay Muslim Thai milieu and is open to an eventual accommodation with the Thai government. Originally, BRN refused support from external countries or organizations for their operations and instead focused on infiltrating traditional Islamic boarding schools in southern Thailand, which increased its popularity and entrenchment in the country's south (trtworld.com, October 23, 2020). Contrastingly, the PULO has its roots in militant leaders who trained in Syria and Libya in the 1980s and returned to southern Thailand. This resulted in the PULO gradually becoming weaker from the 1990s onward once those countries

became unable to continue sponsoring foreign militants.

PULO's ties to the Middle East were also demonstrated by its longtime leader, Ma-ae Sa-a, who was also formally known as Haji Sama-ae Thanam. He once held peace talks with the Thai government in Egypt and Syria. Further, his nickname was "Ismael Gaddafi" in deference to the now slain Libyan dictator and similar to other Filipino jihadists, such as former Abu Sayyaf leader Khaddafy Janjalani, who also were trained in Libya (thepeninsulaqatar.com, April 9, 2016). Significantly, PULO has never had any explicit demand for Islamic rule in southern Thailand and, like BRN, has been ethno-nationalistic.

The previous demands from Ma-ae Sa-a while he was imprisoned for 18 years on rebellion and separatism charges until 2015 were three-fold: 1) the Thai state must guarantee the safety of Syura [PULO's leadership council] peace talk participants; peace talks must be elevated to the status of national concern and be approved by Parliament as opposed to unofficial meeting of political and military leaders; and the Thai state must officially recognize PULO's Syura (prachatai.com, July 23, 2015).

Ma-ae Sa-a had been released from prison due to good behavior in the hopes he could facilitate peace (bangkokpost.com, September 19, 2015). Although he then intended to rejoin PULO with other ethnic Malay Muslim rebel groups in Thailand's deep south, factions within PULO, including Nampra Army and now "G5," have been opposed to peace, have used heavy weapons, such as rockets against military camps, and are now acting as spoilers to,

among others, the BRN's peace efforts (benarnews.org, February 9, 2016).

The complex and disunified rebel milieu in southern Thailand suggests that if peace is achieved with the BRN, then PULO factions will continue the fight. At the same time, from the perspective of all factions, the Thai government has not sufficiently prioritized the peace talks, nor has it granted sufficient autonomy to the ethnic Malay Muslims in southern Thailand. Despite the lack of action on the part of Thailand, few rebel groups have tried to internationalize the conflict. As a result, spillover or "jihadization" of the rebels in southern Thailand remains a low probability.

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Pakistani Taliban Launches Spring Offensive amid Political Turmoil in Islamabad

Syed Fazl-e-Haider

On April 11, five policemen were killed when their patrol vehicle was ambushed by militants in Dera Ismail Khan in Pakistan's northwestern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province (The News, April 12). On the same day, in a separate incident, two soldiers were killed when terrorists attacked a military post in Angur Ada, South Waziristan in the same province (Express Tribune, April 13). The terrorist attacks were launched against security forces on the same day that Shehbaz Sharif of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) was elected as Pakistan's new prime minister to replace Imran Khan, who was ousted from office as a result of a no-confidence vote brought by opposition parties against him on April 9 (The News, April 10).

The two attacks represented the beginning of the so-called Al-Badr spring offensive by the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which is also known as the Pakistani Taliban. On March 30, the TTP announced it would launch the spring offensive during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan against security forces and their collaborators. According to the group's spokesman, Mohammad Khorasani, the offensive would include "martyrdom (suicide) operations, ambush attacks, mine operations, counter-attacks, target attacks, and laser and sniper operations." The announcement from the TTP also came at a time when Imran Khan was facing the no-confidence vote in Parliament ([Arab News](#), March 30).

The uncertainty on the political front provides the TTP with the opportunity to operate with more freedom in Pakistan. Political stability has been vital to fighting the group in Pakistan, which borders Taliban-ruled Afghanistan – a country that harbors the TTP. As a result, the TTP is set to exploit the political crisis and further entrench itself in Pakistan, as seen through the surge in attacks from the day "regime change" took place in Islamabad on April 11.

Terrorist Attacks amid Political Turmoil

After Shehbaz Sharif took the oath as the new Prime Minister of Pakistan and the two attacks on April 11, an army major and a soldier were killed during an encounter with militants in South Waziristan on April 12 ([Dawn](#), April 14). After this, on April 13, a soldier was killed in another exchange of gunfire between troops and militants in North Waziristan on April 13. Finally, on April 14, eight soldiers were killed in two attacks in North Waziristan ([Dawn](#), April 15).

This all took place after Imran Khan waved a cable in the air allegedly containing a threat from the U.S. during a large public meeting in front of a crowd in Islamabad on March 27. According to Khan, the U.S.

called for a no-confidence motion by opposition parties against his government, and this represented a foreign conspiracy over his independent foreign policy ([Dawn](#), March 30). Khan has been opposed to the U.S. war in Afghanistan, including Pakistan's role as a U.S. frontline ally in the war, and fiercely opposed U.S. drone attacks in Pakistan's tribal areas when he was in the political opposition before the 2018 election. Last year, he also refused to provide bases to the U.S. in Pakistan to target the Afghan Taliban ([ndtv.com](#), June 22, 2021).

The basis of the alleged U.S. cable was a conversation between Pakistani Ambassador Asad Majeed and U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Central and South Asia Donald Lu. Apparently, Lu conveyed to Majeed Washington's unhappiness with Pakistan's stance on the Russian war in Ukraine. The U.S. diplomat, as per the cable, threatened that Washington would get tougher on Pakistan if the no-trust vote against the Prime minister failed, but that Pakistan would be forgiven if the no-confidence vote succeeded ([Express Tribune](#), April 8).

Khan, however, failed to convince the country's security establishment and Foreign Office that the diplomatic cable contained evidence of any foreign conspiracy against the Khan government. The country's Foreign Office instead voiced concerns over the Khan government's move to achieve its political objectives by using secret and classified communication ([Express Tribune](#), April 6). Although the cable was real, the interpretation by the military and Khan was slightly different, with the former seeing it as interference in Pakistani internal affairs, but not conspiracy, whereas the latter, Khan, accused the U.S. of hatching conspiracy against his government because the cable was received one day before the no-confidence motion was proposed on March 8.

Khan's Geopolitical Backers

Both China and Russia have accused the U.S. of interfering in Pakistan's internal affairs to topple the government led by Khan. China closely monitored Pakistan's political turmoil in the wake of Khan's allegation. According to the mouthpiece of China's Communist Party, *Global Times*, Western countries, and particularly the U.S., did not "want to see Khan remain in power since he has gotten tougher on them" ([Global Times](#), April 6).

Moscow likewise vehemently condemned the attempt at "regime change" by Washington, which allegedly aimed to punish the "disobedient" Khan. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson, Maria Zakharova, stated, "This is another attempt of shameless U.S. interference in the internal affairs of an independent state for its own selfish purposes" ([Dawn](#), April 5). The U.S. State Department has dismissed allegations about U.S. interference in Pakistan's internal affairs ([Express Tribune](#), April 1).

Terrorism, however, still remains the main challenge for Pakistan even after Khan's ousting. Last year, Khan's government held peace talks with some TTP factions after the withdrawal of U.S. forces from neighboring Afghanistan with the Afghan Taliban playing the role of mediator ([Dawn](#), October 1). While the peace talks were underway, the TTP did not stop attacks on the country's armed forces and there was no decline in violence, which ultimately led to the failure of the peace talks ([Express Tribune](#), October 2).

Conclusion

A stable government in Islamabad will be the first line of defense against the TTP threat, including for new Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's coalition government. It was under the PML-N government led by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, who is the brother of Shehbaz Sharif, that Operation Zarb-e-Azb was launched in 2014. This operation destroyed the TTP command-

and-control structures and forced the TTP leadership to flee Pakistan and take refuge in Afghanistan ([The News](#), June 20, 2016). Today, the Afghan Taliban are again reluctant to launch any crackdown on TTP militants orchestrating attacks on Pakistani security forces.

The major challenge for Sharif is, therefore, to convince the Afghan Taliban to take action against the TTP. But it is unclear whether the new leader will follow in the footsteps of his predecessor, Khan, and engage in dialogue with the TTP. How the new government under Sharif deals with the TTP and Afghan Taliban remains to be seen. Whatever counter-terrorism strategy the new government formulates will be implemented amid this political stability in the country, especially in the wake of the Khan-led countrywide protests against the current government and Khan's demands for fresh elections ([Dawn](#), April 11).

Less than two weeks after Islamic State's (IS) March 10 announcement of its new caliph, Abu Hassan al-Hashimi al-Qurashi, al-Qaeda's leader, Aymen al-Zawahiri, released a new audio speech ([alarabiya.net](#), March 10). Unlike the significant attention given to IS's caliph announcement in both mainstream media and IS propaganda outlets, al-Zawahiri's speech went under the radar, with little mainstream or jihadist attention to it. This contrast demonstrates that while al-Zawahiri is alive and remains al-Qaeda's leader, he lacks the charisma to galvanize jihadists' attention towards al-Qaeda even while IS's own leadership has been in turmoil and transition.

Al-Zawahiri's speech appears to lack any mention of current events, so it was unclear whether the video was current or recorded several months earlier. The purpose of the video was *dawa* (proselytization) and he discussed the history of Islam, challenged the theories of atheism, communism and capitalism, promoted the righteousness of Islam, and mentioned thinkers ranging from Malcolm

X to Egyptian academic, Abdel Wahab El-Messiri, who were notably not jihadists ([Twitter/@minaallami](https://twitter.com/minaallami), March 21). His avoidance of an explicitly jihadist tone comes at the same time the most successful al-Qaeda-allied group, the Taliban, is distancing itself from overt jihadism. This suggests that al-Qaeda and its allies' future success may depend on minimizing the violent rhetoric of al-Qaeda's past and focusing more on diplomacy and intellectualism.

Such an approach has already been employed by the formerly al-Qaeda-allied Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in northeastern Syria, which now is officially organizationally separately from al-Qaeda (mei.edu, June 24, 2021). It has attempted to appear as a 'normal,' albeit authoritarian, state actor in areas that it controls in Syria. Al-Qaeda's Sahelian affiliate, Group for Supporters of Islam and Muslims (JNIM), still engages in asymmetric warfare, but has tended to avoid attacks specifically on foreign interests, except for on mines and kidnappings, and remains open to negotiations for autonomous jihadist rule and is loyal to the Taliban (aljazeera.com, October 19, 2021). JNIM could possibly follow the Taliban and HTS path in the future.

In contrast to the unheralded video from al-Zawahiri, IS's announcement of the new "caliph" received great fanfare from all of IS's provinces, which, in turn, led to widespread international media reporting on it ([Telegram](https://t.me/Telegram), March 14). Nevertheless, Abu Hassan al-Hashimi al-Qurashi himself is unable to be any more of a "public" figure than al-Zawahiri because, as the announcement of his appointment indicated, security reasons necessitate his remaining in hiding. Thus, although his becoming "caliph" inspired IS provinces more than al-Zawahiri's video inspired al-Qaeda affiliates, it does not appear that either of these leaders will dramatically influence the operations of either group.

Further, it is speculated that IS's new caliph may have obtained his position amid internal divisions with IS (aawsat.com, March 2). This could make it more difficult for him to unite IS at a time when it is no longer holding territory in the heartland of Iraq and Syria. It may require a highly skilled leader to keep IS fighter morale high, and it remains to be seen whether Abu Hassan al-Hashimi al-Qurashi will become such a leader.

At the organizational level, however, it appears he may already be having an impact. For example, Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), which previously included Nigeria-based "Boko Haram" and Sahel-based "Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS)," for the first time is now claiming attacks in the name of "ISWAP" and a separate new "Islamic State in Sahel Province," the latter referring to what previously was ISGS ([Twitter/@SimNasr](https://twitter.com/SimNasr), March 23). Evidence suggests the two groups had virtually no overlap and that this will result in more provinces statistically existing under the new caliph's leadership. Moreover, IS's renewed focus on attacking Israel could also reflect the new caliph's strategy (jpost.com, March 28).

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Germany Continues Crackdown on Kurdish PKK Leaders

Christian Jokinen

On April 6, the *Oberlandesgericht* (higher regional court) of Frankfurt opened proceedings in the counter-terrorism prosecution of an alleged *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan* (Kurdistan Workers' Party, PKK) leader in Germany, who was identified as "Abdullah Ö." The 58-year old Kurdish Turkish citizen was accused not only of being a PKK member, but also of serving as a leader of the PKK regional divisions of "Hessen," which includes the cities of Frankfurt, Mainz and Giessen, and "Stuttgart." As the "PKK regional manager" from 2019 to his arrest in 2021, Abdullah Ö was responsible for the coordination of organizational personnel and propaganda activities. He was further "able to task his subordinates and control the implementation of his orders" and answered to the "PKK leadership in Europe" whose orders he had to follow.

Interestingly, Abdullah Ö's influence in Germany was not limited to the PKK regions of Hessen and Stuttgart, but extended, according to the prosecution, to the PKK region of "Saarland," which includes Darmstadt, Mannheim, and Saarbrücken ([Generalbundesanwalt](#), December 9, 2021). Besides this, Abdullah Ö collected "donations" for the PKK. In this area he seems to have excelled. According to the prosecution, from June 2020 to April 2021, he was able to collect more than 900,000 euros by personally contacting potential "donors."

The counter-terrorism prosecution of Abdullah Ö is, however, just the latest bead in a string of criminal investigations targeting PKK leaders in Germany.

Arrests and Convictions of PKK's leading functionaries

On May 11, 2021, Abdullah Ö was arrested in Heilbronn in a joint operation by police

in Frankfurt and the *Landeskriminalamt* (State Police) in Baden-Württemberg ([Generalbundesanwalt](#), May 11, 2021). A few months earlier, in February 2021, a similar sting operation took place and the higher regional court in Koblenz convicted "Gökmen Ç" to a 27-month jail sentence for serving in a similar position as Abdullah Ö. Specifically, this conviction referred to the PKK regional leader in "Mainz", which was included in PKK's internal regional divisions of "Hessen" and "Saarland/Rheinland-Pfalz."

The then 38-year old Gökmen Ç had served in his position from late June 2017 until June 2019 and was arrested on January 2, 2020 at the train station of Frankfurt International Airport ([Generalbundesanwalt](#), May 26, 2020; [Generalbundesanwalt](#), January 3, 2020). Gökmen Ç's area of responsibility overlapped with that of Abdullah Ö. Therefore, it is likely that his arrest led to Abdullah Ö taking over his responsibilities.

In addition, Gökmen Ç's predecessor faced German justice. The 60-year old Kurdish Turkish citizen, Mashar T, received in August 2020 a two years and six month jail sentence for his activities as the PKK regional manager for "Mainz." Mashar T was arrested on June 25, 2019 in Hessen after an investigation concluded that he collected 223,000 euros for the PKK during his leadership period in 2018-2019 ([Oberlandesgericht Koblenz](#), August 18, 2020). Separately, in April 2021 in Lower Saxony, the higher regional court sentenced a 50-year old man also of Kurdish origin to a one year and six months jail sentence for serving as the local PKK leader for Wesermarsch ([Oberlandesgericht Celle](#), April 13, 2021).

PKK's Resilient Structures in Germany

The efforts to disrupt PKK activities in Germany seem to be especially successful in the states of Hessen and Rheinland-Pfalz, which have a track record of strong cross-state border law enforcement cooperation in their investigations. Law

enforcement authorities and the prosecution have been successful in those two states in collecting evidence and securing sentences against PKK regional leadership figures. However, it is also evident that the PKK structures are robust and able to cope with successive regional-level leadership losses.

The German internal security service Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz (BfV) in the state of Hessen, for example, reported in its 2020 yearbook that the state counted approximately 1,500 PKK activists out of 14,500 in all of Germany ([Hessisches Ministerium des Innern und Sport, Verfassungsschutz in Hessen Bericht](#), August 10, 2021). The activities of the PKK have mainly consisted of protests against the so-called “fascist Turkey,” demonstrations for the release of the overall PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, who has been jailed in Turkey since 1998, and protests against the ban on PKK activities in Germany.

While these activities, together with the fundraising activities for PKK, can easily be classified as minor political activism, the PKK is also involved in recruiting fighters and constituting violence in Germany. According to the German security services, since June 2013 at least 290 persons travelled from Germany to Syria and Iraq or Turkey to take part in the PKK’s guerrilla training and armed militancy. Out of these individuals, 150 have returned to Germany and around 30 have died, with the rest still in the region ([Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, Webpage](#), 2022). Indeed, in November 2021, fearing further recruitment of fighters, authorities in Hamburg banned a “Cultural and Music Event” organized by the PKK youth wing Tevgera Ciwanên Şoreşger (Patriotic Revolutionary Youth, TCS). The group advertised the event on Instagram, featuring videos of PKK attacks against Turkish military forces ([Die Welt](#), November 28, 2021).

Notably, while the PKK’s armed activities against Turkey take place outside Europe,

the organization has not shied away from violence against their own people in Germany either. In May 2021, five 25- to 37-year-old PKK supporters, including then PKK regional leader for Baden-Württemberg, Veysel S., were sentenced to three-to-four-year sentences for kidnapping former PKK member and local leader for Karlsruhe, Ridvan Ö. They used coercion and blackmail in an attempt to force him into continuing his activities for the PKK ([Generalbundesanwalt](#), January 15, 2019; [der Spiegel](#), May 5, 2021).

Conclusion

In Germany, PKK activities were banned in 1993 as a reaction to terrorist attacks against Turkish interests both in and outside of Germany ([Bundesministerium des Innern, Bulletin 106-93](#), December 1, 1993). In 2010, the German federal high court stated that the PKK constituted a “foreign terrorist entity.” Since then, high-ranking PKK functionaries have been sentenced to jail after thousands of criminal investigations against PKK members, activists, or sympathizers. In 2017, Germany added PKK emblems to the list of forbidden symbols.

Meanwhile, the EU added the PKK to its list of terrorist groups in 2002. However, the developments in Turkey and Syria, where several Western states allied themselves with the PKK’s Syrian branch, Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat (Democratic Union Party PYD), against the Islamic State (IS), boosted voices against the criminalization of the PKK. In January 2020, the Belgian higher court, for example, argued that the PKK was not a terrorist organization but a “party in an armed conflict” for the rights of Kurds and was reacting to the violence of the Turkish state ([The Brussels Times](#), January 30, 2020). Not surprisingly, Turkey reacted angrily to the verdict and dismissed it as “ideological and political” ([Euronews](#), October 13, 2020).

In Germany, politicians from the left have also argued for the lifting of the ban on PKK activities ([Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung](#),

March 28, 2022). It is, however, unlikely that Germany will change its stance on the PKK in the near future, with criminal investigations and court proceedings set to continue. As a result, the cycle of counter-terrorism operations to disrupt PKK activities, including its efforts to replace lost cadres with new functionaries, will continue, but it is questionable whether this will have a lasting impact on the PKK's overall activities in Germany.

In March 2022, Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP) highlighted the story of Najeeb al-Hindi, the group's latest recruit from the southern Indian state of Kerala, from its latest flagship publication, *Voice of Khurasan*, ([Hindustan Times](#), March 11). The decision to feature an Indian in this publication reveals ISKP's continued interest in attracting Indians into its ranks, the continued flow of fighters into Afghanistan from India, and the increasing importance given to Indians with regards to their roles within the group. This is significant if the trend continues, as there will be a possibility of seeing more Indians becoming active operatives of ISKP, which would then have implications within and beyond India and Afghanistan.

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Islamic State Strategies and Propaganda in Iraq Raise Prospects for Resurgence

Daniele Garofalo

The Islamic State (IS) province in Iraq (Wilayah Iraq) stabilized its operations in 2020 and increased them in 2021 ([Jihad Analytics](#), January 24; [Jihad Analytics](#), February 4). After the fall of IS as a territorial entity and the death of the previous caliph, Abubakar al-Baghdadi, IS

reorganized its multiple Iraqi provinces into a single Wilayah Iraq divided into several sectors. This followed a broader reorganization that focused on creating mobile groups of fighters, exploiting sleeper cells, or utilizing small cells to conduct attacks ([al-Jazeera](#), March 2, 2021).

One aspect of IS's tactics in Iraq is to keep the enemy in a state of constant tension on the one hand and to transmit a false sense of security on the other hand to induce them to decrease their pressure and vigilance. Wilayah Iraq has reformulated its combat strategies according to the new realities on the ground and has intensified its activities in areas that are still affected by Iraq's internal problems and the weakness of the local security forces. The most notable example is Diyala, an important road junction 60 kilometers northeast of Baghdad and between three other Iraqi governorates, including Sulaymaniyah, Wasit, and Salah al-Din. This makes Diyala an important logistics link to Kirkuk, Anbar and Mosul. All these areas, however, share mountainous areas, rough roads, a mixed Sunni and Shiite population affected by violent sectarian clashes in the past, and lack a strong presence of security and anti-terrorism forces ([Terrorism Monitor](#), January 14; [al-Jazeera](#), March 2, 2021; [al-Jazeera](#) October 28, 2021).

To date, an estimated 8,000 fighters are still part of Wilayah Iraq, with roughly 4,000 of them active. The rest belong to sleeper cells or are supporters integrated into local communities in Sunni-majority provinces. This situation could lead to a strengthening of IS military capabilities in Iraq and an expansion of its operations in areas where it has already been active.

Wilayah's Iraq's Main Strategies and Areas of Operations

Wilayah Iraq and part of IS's central leadership [1] rely on bases in remote, desert, and mountainous areas, where they exploit tunnels and caves, house fighters,

establish checkpoints, and secure supply and communication routes ([al-Jazeera](#), March 2, 2021). The areas in which IS operates, including Anbar, North Baghdad, Kirkuk, Salah al-Din, Ninewa, Diyala, Tigris/Dayla, Babil and a large area in the south of the country called South Sector, all saw militants pledge an oath of allegiance to the new IS leader, Abu Hassan al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi, in March ([Jihadology](#), March 11, 2022).

The areas of Salah al-Din, Kirkuk, and Diyala, which consist of valleys, mountain ranges, and agricultural areas with dense orchards, are the most important geographical areas and the center of IS activities in Iraq. Although the group expanded its operations in Iraq in 2020, carrying out 1,211 attacks across much of the country, in 2021 Wilayah Iraq conducted fewer attacks. There were only 1,079 attacks in all of its Iraqi sectors combined in 2021 ([Jihad Analytics](#), January 24). The pace is even slower in 2022, with only 120 attacks in Iraq from January 1 to April 8 ([Jihad Analytics](#), April 8, 2022).

Wilayah Iraq conducts two main types of operations, referred to as "war of attrition" and "economic warfare", which both do not require the use of large numbers of fighters. The first strategy involves various types of attacks including improvised explosive devices (IEDs), suicide vehicle-borne IEDS (SVBIEDs), ambushes, shooting operations using snipers, and assassinations of social and political leaders. Adding to this, IS conducts kidnappings, and attacks Iraqi security force checkpoints, Shiite paramilitary militias, pro-government Sunni tribal forces, and local officials and tribal leaders collaborating with the Baghdad government. IS in Iraq further aims to prevent the normalization, stabilization, and reconstruction of areas previously under IS territorial control and to intensify sectarian violence.

The economic warfare strategy, in contrast, involves burning crops, houses, and farms and attacking public and private

infrastructures, such as gas stations, oil wells, gas companies, oil and gas pipelines, wells, water supply facilities, electrical towers and telecommunication towers. In Iraq, attacks were conducted in 2021 mainly on electrical infrastructure in the areas of Diyala, Kirkuk and Salah al-Din. ([Jihad Analytics](#), October 12, 2021). These attacks cause chaos and force security forces to protect economic facilities, leaving other areas uncovered that facilitate IS attacks. Over 400 attacks were conducted in Iraq in 2021, 80% of IS's global economic warfare operations ([Jihad Analytics](#), October 12, 2021).

Wilayah Iraq Propaganda

IS propaganda about Wilayah Iraq continues to be published daily and draws on a wide range of technological resources that have seen a significant increase in quantity and quality, including those of the *Furqan Foundation*, *Amaq News*, and the weekly newsletter *Al-Naba*. [2] In addition to browser-based sites, propaganda is also disseminated on numerous social platforms and messaging apps, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Youtube, and Tiktok. Additionally, the dissemination of claims, magazines, audio, video, photos, and recruitment material takes place on Telegram, Element, Rocket Chat, Hoop Messagero, Threema and Tam Tam.

Since 2021, IS has released numerous photos and claims from Iraq, as well as two long videos of the "Makers of Epics Battles" series ([Jihadology](#), May 28, 2021; [Jihadology](#), October 5, 2021). A shorter video of Wilayah Iraq fighters pledging allegiance to IS's new caliph, Abu Hassan al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi, was also released in March ([Jihadology](#), March 17). Other videos and photos published by *Amaq News* or in *al-Naba*, show attacks against Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) [3], local tribal forces, state security forces, Kurdish Peshmerga stationed in rural areas, civilians accused of being "spies" and collaborating with Iraqi forces against IS, and attacks against the country's economic infrastructure.

Conclusions

IS remains a threat to the security and stability of Iraq. The elimination of the group in Iraq is improbable, if not impossible, in the short and medium term, regardless of the military and political strategy that is implemented. Nevertheless, any attempt to reduce the threat in the long term from the point of view of recruitment, operations and financial support likely can only be realized through a political solution that integrates Sunni Arabs into the political process, ends religious sectarianism, realizes a fair distribution of power and wealth according to the proportions of the population, and reconstructs cities destroyed by the war.

It is also necessary to deal with forced migrants and displaced persons, who will have to be allowed to return to the governorates in western and northwestern Iraq. The management and social reintegration of the families of former IS members who are still in displaced or prison camps is also of great importance ([DW](#), February 21). Another issue is controlling the operations of paramilitary militias, which must be stopped or significantly reduced, possibly by integrating them into the Iraqi security forces. These militias, and in particular the PMF and militias linked to Iran, have often been accused of sectarian violence, not complying with the directions of the state security forces, threatening the government in Baghdad and attacking U.S. forces or bases ([Al-Jazeera](#), June 21, 2021 and [Al-Monitor](#), November 24, 2021).

The Iraqi army and the Iraqi security forces will likely also have to increase their military operations and control in the border and desert areas, particularly along the Iraq-Syria border. A first step by the Iraqi government has been to build a 3.5-metre-high wall in the area of Jabal Sinjar in Ninewa Province, while increasing troops in the area ([Al-Jazeera](#), March 28).

In the medium term, attempts may also be made to reduce and counter IS by setting

up checkpoints in all areas of the country, conducting intensive surveillance on all entry points into Baghdad and other provinces, and increasing the number of raids to destroy sleeper cells. The protection of villages and towns in border and desert areas will also need to include 24-hour professional patrols, fortified checkpoints and watchtowers, rapid response security stations, video surveillance with cameras and drones, coordination between border posts, and a special command exclusively responsible for the border with Syria.

Iraq's stability, however, ultimately depends on combating the enormous spread of corruption among the ruling political elite. Endemic corruption fosters sectarianism, infighting, violence, protests and thus the expansion of jihadist terrorism. IS in Iraq, despite a decrease in operations in early 2022, can still conduct a sustained insurgency and use its ideology to recruit and integrate Iraq's Sunni population. In fact, IS struggles in the past have always been an intermediary and preparatory phase towards larger and more violent operations.

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NOTES

[1] Part of IS's central leadership is in Iraq, but the new leader is reportedly now in Syria and only moving to Iraq out of necessity. See Daniele Garofalo, *The New Caliph of IS: the Winding Career of Bashar Khattab Ghazal al-Sumaida'i*, Militant Leadership Monitor (March 2022).

[2] *Al-Furqan Foundation* is the official central media of IS, broadcasting audio and video of the central leadership. *Amaq News* oversees disseminating the claims (also

with pictures and videos). *Al-Naba* Newspaper is the weekly newsletter reporting on all IS operations in different provinces.

[3] Composed of some 67 different armed factions that are mostly Shia Muslim groups, the PMF also includes Sunni Muslim groups, Christians and Yazidis.