



الائتلاف العسكري لمحاربة الإرهاب
ISLAMIC MILITARY COUNTER TERRORISM COALITION

Planning and Coordination Department



Spotlight
On

The Islamic State and U.S. Policy 2019







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Introduction

This report was prepared by the Congressional Research Service on September 25, 2019 and deals with the apprehensions of the U.S. Congress, President Trump's administration and leading defense and intelligence officials with regards to IS threats in the Middle East, Asia and western countries.

Intelligence views show that Da'esh evolution from an Islamic state into a covert insurgent force poses a great threat for stability and military gains achieved by American efforts in Iraq and Syria. Da'esh's insurgency and rebuilding will continue to form a threat as long as the causes of injustice and discontent prevail in the region.

Despite the great losses that Da'esh suffered in Iraq and Syria as a result of American and international intervention, its threat to Europe and the U.S. remains big. Therefore, the Congress report, and its summary, will review the American Administration's measures and apprehensions regarding what could happen over the next few years and will conclude with major dimensions related to this alliance and its leadership.



Posture and U.S. Threat Assessment

The Islamic State no longer occupies those vast areas of northern and western Iraq and central and eastern Syria. It suffered major regional losses which resulted from military operations by the U.S.-led international coalition and a number of U.S.-backed local forces. Nevertheless, Defense Department officials assess that the Islamic State "is well-positioned to rebuild and work on enabling its physical caliphate to re-emerge." The U.S. Administration believes that the group is prosecuting active insurgent campaigns combining an average of 30,000 insurgents in Iraq and Syria and the entire region.

Despite the major military gains achieved by defeating Da'esh, attrition of its financial resources and blockage of its recruitment streams and communications, the member states of the international coalition still believe that Da'esh's leadership and its main organizational structures remain intact.

The manner in which the Islamic State will work as an organization and the way it will sustain itself remain vague; however, it is clear that the losses it suffered and the continued military operations against it have forced it to work undercover as a terrorist network. Da'esh insurgents could be dormant to protect themselves or for strategic purposes. But the threat of their reappearance and Da'esh's ability to depend on them still prevail. Da'esh's media messages increased in 2018, focusing on launching attacks in Iraq, Syria and western countries by its affiliate groups and supporting individuals. The number of new foreign fighters who travel to Iraq and Syria has fallen because of travel difficulties; yet the threat of returnees is still eminent in western countries.

There is also another threat that targets stability and the economic and political atmosphere where Da'esh functions. Iraq and Syria as well as oth-

er areas provided a safe haven for terrorism to grow. Unfortunately, these countries will continue to be an enabling environment for insurgency and terrorism as long as the Islamic State can exploit internal conflicts, political discontent and neglected injustice.

The Obama Administration's strategy for reducing the threats posed by the Islamic State was predicated on the principle of working by, with, and through U.S.-supported local partners as an alternative to large and direct applications of U.S. military force and/or large investments of U.S. personnel and resources. The Trump Administration has maintained this general partnership-based approach but also temporarily deployed additional U.S. military personnel to both Iraq and Syria. U.S.-led coalition operations and coalition-backed offensives by local partner forces enabled the recapture of IS strongholds at Mosul, Iraq and Raqqah, Syria in 2017. As of August 2018, only isolated pockets of IS control remain in eastern Syria, and U.S. officials state their intent to launch a very significant military operation against ISIS fighters holed up in a final area of the Middle Euphrates Valley, followed by efforts to train local forces to hold the ground to make sure that the area remains stabilized so ISIS cannot return. Necessary funds have been provided to maintain U.S. military operations and train partner-forces that stand against Da'esh.

Responding to Da'esh's Transnational Terrorist Attacks

As of February 2018, the Islamic State's local threat in the United States – bearing in mind the scope and magnitude of Da'esh's followers – one of the major threats acknowledged by the U.S. Administration. Da'esh actively and vehemently continues to manipulate religious texts to launch violent lone attacks. In August 2018, IS leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi praised individual attackers regardless of their affiliations, and urged others to follow suit in all western countries to distract the

efforts of U.S. led coalition member states.

Although the scope of Da'esh's influence and capability to launch or support attacks inside the United States has not been confirmed yet, American intelligence officials believe that such attacks are inevitable and that terrorist threats may persist for years to come.

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U.S. Strategy, Policy Options, and Related Issues

The Trump Administration has broadly continued the Obama Administration's partnership-based approach to the conflict with the Islamic State, while linking military operations to U.S. assistance programs. The global coalition has unified its military efforts supporting local ground forces, gathering and sharing intelligence, and making efforts to restrict flows of foreign

fighters, and eliminate Da'esh's leadership.

With more gains achieved in Iraq and Syria, the Trump Administration faces continued attacks in both countries. The long-term challenges of achieving stability, reconstruction and economic and political stability not only mean the resurgence of IS, but also its permanent stay in the region. Experts believe that Islamic State will seek to exploit the failed uprising against the Syrian government and co-opt the resistance against Assad. They also believe the lack of stability of Assad's dictatorship will add more vitality and will provide the right environment for Da'esh to flourish again.

This concern urged the Congress to consider the policies that will maintain the gains achieved against IS by realizing the need for long-term stability, effective governance and reconstruction of areas recaptured from Da'esh.

Combating the Islamic State in Complex Contests

Officials and congressmen face complex challenges in the war on terrorism, particularly against IS in the Middle East and Africa. Following is a brief of the considerations for each country:

Iraq:

- ▶ Giving support to public security forces under the leadership of the central government
- ▶ Supporting forces of the government of Kurdistan region
- ▶ Maintaining Iraq's political and regional unity in accordance with its constitution
- ▶ Dealing with weaknesses in combating terrorism such as lack of cooperation between security forces, law enforcement agencies and the intelligence.
- ▶ Destruction of prisons and the limited abilities of Iraqi security forces to prevent cross-border smuggling.

Syria:

- ▶ Reaching a settlement of the conflict through negotiations that force President Assad and his followers to leave power, while keeping the security organizations and institutions.
- ▶ The support of Kurdish coalition forces in northern Syria alerted Syria's neighbors and worried Arabs about integrity of Syrian soil.

Egypt and Nigeria:

- ▶ U.S. partnerships with national governments and military forces to combat terrorism might contradict with the U.S. commitment to political reform and human rights.
- ▶ The lack of credible governments or partners which can be identified and relied on in the war on Da'esh.
- ▶ Working with select partners is risky in terms of its impact on political conflicts and the possibility of stirring such conflicts in unpredictable ways.

U.S. Military Operations against the Islamic State

Following is a brief account of U.S. participation in anti-terrorism operations against Da'esh:

Iraq and Syria:

Under the command of Combined Joint Task Force, Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) included:

- ▶ Use of combat aircraft, armed unmanned aerial vehicles, and sea-launched cruise missiles that conducted 24,500 strikes against Da'esh.
- ▶ Iraq and Syria training and equipping programs
 - Iraq: U.S. military personnel have deployed to Iraq to advise, assist, and train Iraqi forces, gather intelligence on the Islamic State. As of March 2018, 138,000 Iraqi personnel have received training.

- Syria: groups fighting the Islamic State received training and equipment and were compensated for their effectiveness against Da'esh.

Afghanistan:

Operation Freedom's Sentinel:

- ▶ The NATO-led mission, known as "Resolute Support Mission" (RSM), has focused on training, advising, and assisting Afghan government forces.
- ▶ Combat operations by U.S. counter-terrorism, along with some partner forces, continued and increased since 2017, targeting the Islamic State's Khorasan Province under Da'esh's control.

Libya:

U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM), and Operation Odyssey Lightning

- ▶ Helped local militia recapture land from Da'esh in 2016
- ▶ Launched air strikes and deployed small numbers of U.S. military personnel to gather information and build relations with anti-Da'esh groups

Philippines:

Operation Pacific Eagle-Philippines (OPE-P)

- ▶ Launched to assist Philippines armed forces defeat Da'esh and other insurgent forces in the south
- ▶ Deployed 250 U.S. military advisors, including U.S. special operations forces, to provide training, advice and assistance on a bilateral basis to the Philippines armed forces

Future Outlook

Persistent fears that Da'esh might transform into a covert terrorist organization, and the threats of its reemergence pushed the U.S. to consider sustaining support and military action in the Middle East, Africa and Asia. Complex positions and competing active local groups in those countries, raise major questions about combating Da'esh:

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- How should the United States balance the use of diplomatic, military, intelligence, economic, and law enforcement tools in responding to various IS-related threats? How can the United States best undermine the appeal of the Islamic State's ideology? Should the United States prioritize the fight against the Islamic State, prioritize efforts to stabilize Syria and other countries where IS forces operate, or pursue counter-IS operations and stabilization simultaneously?
- How have military operations that have recaptured territory from the Islamic State affected the threat that the group poses? Which forces should carry out future military and counterterrorism operations against the group, and what support or direction should the U.S. government provide?
- What political and military arrangements might best keep extremists from returning to recaptured areas or drawing new support? What stabilization assistance might be needed? Who will provide it, for how long, and on what terms?
- What should be done to address short and long term risks posed by returning foreign fighters in numerous countries? What unique challenges do foreign fighter issues pose in various places and what should the U.S. approach be?
- Does lasting progress against the Islamic State depend on durably altering the political dynamics of Iraq, Syria, and other locations where the Islamic State has attracted supporters? How should the evolving IS threat shape overall U.S. policy toward Syria and Iraq, the provision of assistance to U.S. partners there, and U.S. policies toward displaced persons and stabilization?
- What effects might U.S. assistance for government security forces and select subnational actors in the fight against the Islamic State have on broader and longer term security and political conditions in various countries of interest?



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