

Iraq after the 'caliphate': Islamic State insurgency re-emerges in troubled northern Iraq

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Derek Henry Flood reports from Kirkuk in northern Iraq, where the Islamic State has re-emerged as an insurgent movement following its territorial collapse

Key Points

- Following its territorial collapse at the end of 2017, the Islamic State has re-established itself in northern Iraq as an insurgent force.
- The burgeoning Islamic State insurgency in southern Kirkuk province appears to have been planned well before the fall of Hawija.
- With a good supply of surviving, well-honed fighters, coupled with a practiced propaganda arm, the Islamic State has reverted to portraying itself as a righteous insurgent movement in the cause of Sunni Islam in Iraq's contested spaces.

The Islamic State has been fiercely reasserting itself in northern Iraq since the onset of 2018. Although press accounts following the recapture of what was then being referred to as the 'Hawija pocket' on 4 October 2017 hailed the loss of the group's last major territorial enclave in northern Iraq, the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) – made up of the army, federal police, and Counter-Terrorism Service – along with Shia Muslim al-Hashd al-Shaabi militiamen in tow, focused primarily on population centres and the Baghdad-Kirkuk highway.

This left vast ungoverned or undergoverned rural tracts to the highway's east and west to the Islamic State. In 2018, the Hamrin mountain range, Hamrin basin, and Hawija plains act as a sanctuary for Islamic State militants who are threatening and extorting Sunni Muslim Arabs who receive deeply insufficient, or no protection from the ISF. Despite claims that the group's self-declared 'caliphate' was soundly defeated with the final capture of remaining urban territorial holdings in Anbar province in November, Iraq's principal external Western partner, the United States-led coalition (CJTF-OIR: Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve), has recognised that the fight against the Islamic State is ongoing in the Hamrin range and rural Ninawa province. On 9 February, CJTF-OIR issued a press release detailing airstrikes adjacent to the Hamrin range that the coalition claimed destroyed 20 Islamic State tunnels, two supply routes, and three fighting positions. In effect, the fight against the Islamic State never paused in the view of CJTF-OIR, but only transitioned from front-line warfare with a target-rich battlefield to more fluid counter-insurgency and intelligence collection. On 30 April, CJTF-OIR announced the end of major combat operations on the ground within Iraq's borders signalling the changing nature of the post-caliphate phase of the conflict. A ceremony was held in Baghdad to deactivate the Land Component Command. However, the following day CJTF-OIR stated that it had conducted several airstrikes in the vicinity of Hawija, indicating that the air war continues.

The ISF and its al-Hashd al-Shaabi partners initially set its military objectives, starting with the Mosul offensive in October 2016, as attainable strategic goals. The ISF's tactics consisted of phased offensives that involved encircling major cities and towns, capturing outlying villages on their peripheries, securing hydrocarbon and other resource facilities, and clearing key roadways as urban centres were ultimately liberated through either attrition or deal making that allowed Islamic State militants to escape and fight another day. Although these methods successfully smashed the Islamic State's territorial project in Iraq, they did not pacify rural mountain and desert areas where the Islamic State had laid the groundwork for remote, difficult-to-access refuges such as the Wadi Quri Chai river valley beginning in Salah al-Din province.



A lone Iraqi federal police officer stands watch monitoring the Kirkuk-Sulaimaniyah roadway (Derek Henry Flood)

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The flaw in Baghdad's approach was that it left many remote, rural areas insecure, particularly in areas that were abandoned by the Peshmerga (Kurdish security forces) just weeks following the Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG's) disastrous 25 September 2017 independence referendum after which Kurdish fighters withdrew northward as the ISF and Shia militiamen swiftly took territory held by the Kurds since mid-2014. After defeating the Islamic State on an imperfectly defined battlefield, Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's government immediately set its sights on land held by Iraqi Kurds as it sought to restore the broken republic's territory writ large.

Political impact

The Islamic State has not simply reappeared, in many areas it was never entirely evicted. These attacks occurred in the tense run-up to parliamentary elections scheduled for 12 May. Abadi is seeking re-election via his Nasr al-Iraq political bloc at an extremely fragile juncture where the Islamic State as an insurgency threatens security in much of the newly federally controlled districts in northern Iraq that have been taken from either the Islamic State or the security forces of the KRG.

The Iraqi premier hopes to capitalise on the victory he declared over the Islamic State on 9 December 2017 before the security environment deteriorates any further as the insurgency ramps up. Abadi's Nasr has put forward candidates in all 18 of Iraq's provinces in a bid to bridge the entrenched sectarian political divide in Sunni-dominated regions such as Anbar province, which have borne the brunt of war and neglect, as well as campaigning in the three KRG-administered provinces of the north in an attempt to bring Iraqi Kurdistan back into the national fold. Abadi is skilfully running his campaign, knowing that his predecessor Nouri al-Maliki's Shia chauvinism that underlined brutal crackdowns on Sunni protest camps in Hawija and Ramadi in 2013 was key to the Islamic State's precursor, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), storming into those areas and appealing to an insecure, politically disenfranchised populace.

Meanwhile on 22 April, the Islamic State's main spokesperson Abu al-Hassan al-Muhajir released an audio statement through its Al-Furqan media arm about the group's renewed focus on the near enemy among the Arab majority nation-states where it intends to focus its near-term efforts. In that context, Muhajir implored Iraqis to stay away from polling stations on 12 May, which have already been declared targets of the group. Voting premises in the three directly affected northern provinces, more specifically in the 'disputed territories' that were held by Peshmerga forces until October 2017, are therefore at high risk. The Islamic State will continue to exploit the ethnic and sectarian matrix where Sunni Arabs, Sunni Kurds, and Shia Turkmen inhabit a gulf in security that is providing the Islamic State space to resurge.

A cauldron of insurgencies

The troubled districts of western and southern Kirkuk province, and the small city of Hawija in particular, have acted as an insurgent incubator since the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. The Islamic State did not take over Mosul and swaths of northern Iraq in June 2014 in a monolithic movement. The group collaborated with, co-opted, subsumed, or clashed with other militant groups and tribes to achieve some of its principal early military victories. When the Islamic State, then referred to as ISIL, began taking territory in this region it did so as part of a coalition of concomitant insurgencies that had shared anti-government and anti-Shia grievances.

[Continued in full version...]

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