

Islamic State eyes comeback in Iraq

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Iraq's parlous security situation is affording the Islamic State space to regroup. Dr Jonathan Spyer reports from the Qara Chokh mountain range on how one Islamic State pocket is consolidating its presence

Key Points

- Losing its territorial holdings in Syria, the Islamic State is reverting to a networked insurgency, but still counts on its considerable numbers of fighters, weaponry, and resources.
- *Jane's* observation of Islamic State activity at Qara Chokh in Iraq reveals a movement seeking to build up remote strongholds in poorly policed areas and with potentially sympathetic local populations.
- Much of the Iraqi Sunni Arab population is likely to remain disaffected in the medium term, with the Islamic State engaged in a phase of reconstruction and reorganisation that could be a prelude to a relaunched insurgency.

There are increasing indications that the Islamic State is exploiting the chaotic and unresolved security situation in Iraq to re-establish itself. For example, a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) attack that killed three people at the Abu Layla restaurant in Mosul on 9 November was consistent with the group's returning potency, although no group immediately claimed responsibility. This does not appear to herald an imminent large-scale campaign: rather, the Islamic State appears to be in a phase of rebuilding its structures to prepare for a future recommencement of insurgency in Iraq, accompanied by a steady drip of armed attacks.

The Islamic State's efforts are aided by the absence of co-ordination between the security forces of the Iraqi state and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in relevant areas. Moreover, the sectarian nature and practices of certain elements of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) have also exacerbated the situation through the heavy-handed treatment of Sunni populations, which in turn could boost support for the Islamic State.

Regaining territory

The Islamic State is exploiting remote, often sparsely populated areas in which it can establish a physical and logistical infrastructure to offer shelter and food for its fighters. Some analysts, such as Dashty Ali, who wrote a piece on this topic for the Iraqi Niqash news website on 27 July 2017 that was subsequently adapted by the Daily Beast news and opinion website on 28 July 2017, have dubbed this effort an emergent 'mountain state' for the group. It reflects how the Islamic State is rooted in Iraqi societal realities and in elements of the country's Sunni Arab population, contrary to the impression sometimes related in Western media because of an excessive focus on the group's foreign fighters.

The group maintains this infrastructure in several areas, all of which were centres of support for the group and earlier manifestations of Sunni Salafist jihadism in Iraq. The area of Ninawa province south of Mosul city and west of the Tigris River – in particular the Hamam al-Alil area – is a centre of support dubbed ‘Kandahar’ by Iraqi and Iraqi Kurdish commanders, such as Lieutenant Colonel Surood Barzanji, who spoke to *Jane’s* at a local Peshmerga headquarters near Makhmur town on 11 November 2018.



Peshmerga fighters of the 14th Brigade stationed at Qara Chokh in the Kurdish region of northern Iraq on 11 November. They were monitoring one of the mountains in which Islamic State fighters have retreated to regroup. (Jonathan Spyer)

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The Islamic State also controls an area north of Baiji city and maintains a zone of control in the Hamrin Mountains, as well as additional zones in Hawija and Daquq, south of Kirkuk city. These are located within central Iraq’s Sunni Arab heartland; the Islamic State seeks to maintain – and even expand – the links between these locations.

Ultimately, the group may seek to develop (or revive) its capability to conduct operations across a far broader area, including into Baghdad, Mosul city, and Samarra, and then onwards into Syria and Iran. The infrastructures that the group is currently establishing are intended as strongholds for the movement, where it may exercise control, from which operations can be planned and launched, where it may domicile its leadership and its most committed cadres, and to which it can fall back when facing pressure from the ISF and Kurdish Peshmerga forces.

The regions south of Mosul in which the Islamic State is active extend down to southern Anbar province, to Salah ad Din province and the KRG area to the east, and to the Syrian border in the west. This large expanse of territory includes areas of open land and many abandoned villages. The ISF has not attempted a comprehensive ‘cleaning out’ of the inhabited villages in this area. This has enabled the Islamic State to establish a presence inside many of them, and to seek to disrupt and destroy communication between local tribal structures and the security forces – assisted in this by the sectarian behaviour of certain ISF elements.

For example, a 2017 US Department of State report quoted a September 2017 Human Rights Watch report that detailed the detention and beating of Sunni villagers by the Shia Badr Organisation (formerly known as the Badr Brigade) during counter-Islamic State operations in the Hawija region. The Badr Organisation is a Shia militia that forms a major part of the Popular Mobilisation Units (PMUs), which under Iraqi law are a part of the ISF. The PMUs are the part of the ISF most frequently accused of sectarian abuse.

The bad relations between the ISF and Kurdish Peshmerga – as a result of the heavy fighting between the two forces following the abortive Kurdish independence bid during September–October 2017 – exacerbate the situation. There is no direct communication between these forces.

Former Ninawa governor Atheel al-Nujaifi told the Saudi-supported *Asharq Al-Awsat* newspaper on 10 November 2018 that the current situation in Iraq was “very dangerous”. He added, “Sunni leaderships no longer play a role and the dispute with the Kurdistan Region is a ticking time bomb ... Given these conditions, any side, no matter how weak they are, can exploit the security in the region.”

[Continued in full version...]

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