



Has ISIS Been Defeated? Overview and possible developments after the fall of ISIS's enclave in the lower Euphrates Valley

March 25, 2019

Overview

On March 23, 2019 the SDF Kurdish forces announced that they had destroyed the ISIS forces and brought to an end their control over the last pocket in the village of al-Baghuz. Thus the campaign waged by the SDF and their American and coalition supporters ended, after more than six months of battle. The fall of the enclave in the lower Euphrates Valley marked the end of **a process during which important areas of ISIS control in Syria were retaken**: the region of the Yarmouk refugee camp south of Damascus; the southern Golan Heights; most of the rocky desert region northeast of Suwayda. Now that the process has been completed, a significant ISIS presence (in ITIC assessment a few thousand operatives) remains **only in the desert regions of eastern Syria, the area between the town of Sukhnah and the Euphrates Valley.**

► Almost five years ago, in the summer of 2014, **the Islamic Caliphate established by ISIS reached the height of its expansion.** Its territories included a third of Iraq and between a quarter and a third of Syria. The area had a population of between five and six million people and ISIS had control of the governmental petroleum production infrastructure in both Iraq and Syria (with an income from petroleum products estimated at the time at several million dollars a day). However, ISIS's dramatic achievements led to the forming, in September 2014, of **the American-led international coalition.** It also led **to Russian intervention in Syria** in support of the Syrian regime (beginning in September 2015). As a result of combined local, regional and international efforts, **ISIS's spread was halted in Syria and Iraq (its two core countries) and in recent years the organization has found itself continually on the defensive in those countries.**

► The campaign against ISIS in Iraq and Syria **brought about the collapse of the Islamic Caliphate at the end of 2017 and during 2018.** In recent years ISIS has lost all the areas it controlled, with their populations, including its two "capital cities," Mosul in Iraq and al-Raqqa in Syria. In addition, its chain of command was affected; the governmental institutions it established were closed; its economic assets (primarily oil and gas fields) were lost; and

some of its foreign fighters were killed, taken captive or returned to their countries of origin (a process which has not yet ended).

► In view of the blows suffered by ISIS, voices have been heard claiming the organization is facing extinction. The most conspicuous remark was made in **a Trump tweet claiming**, "We have defeated ISIS in Syria." The operative conclusion of the tweet was that there is no reason for American troops to remain in Syria. Therefore, American sources reported that the United States would pull out its 2,000 troops stationed in Syria (the number was recently lowered to 1,600).

► The tweet raises a number of fundamental questions: **has ISIS in fact been defeated? Is the entire organization or at least its branch in Syria no longer a significant threat to the Middle East and the international community? Can the organization overcome the blows it suffered and rehabilitate itself, and how will that be manifested in the coming years?**

"Our objective is clear: We will degrade, and ultimately destroy, ISIL through a comprehensive and sustained counter-terrorism strategy."



President Barack Obama delivers an address to the nation on the U.S. Counterterrorism strategy to combat ISIL, in the Cross Hall of the White House, Sept. 10, 2014. (Official White House Photo by Pete Souza)



Right: Trump's tweet, December 19, 2018. Left: Excerpt from a speech made by President Obama (White House website, September 10, 2014).

► In ITIC assessment, **ISIS has been weakened but despite the blows it suffered, it has not been defeated. It still possesses strategic assets which will enable it to rehabilitate itself and continue to pose a threat to the international community:** it has active provinces in Iraq and Syria and in countries in Asia and Africa, where the local regimes find it difficult to uproot the organization. **ISIS's charismatic leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi**, and several other senior figures, have so far managed to survive the blows and continue to lead the organization and control its various provinces, even if it is decentralized. **The ISIS brand has eroded to a certain extent but the organization and the ideology behind it continue to attract young Muslims in Iraq and Syria, other countries in the Middle East and**

around the globe. On the other hand, the anti-ISIS coalition, which successfully halted the organization's expansion and strongly assailed its strongholds in Iraq and Syria, is **heterogenic and its members have different and sometimes conflicting interests.** Thus it can be expected that following the loss of the regions ISIS controlled in Iraq and Syria, the powers and local and regional countries will put their emphasis on promoting other interests in Iraq and Syria and **the momentum of the campaign against ISIS is liable to wane.**

► **ISIS represents the loss of its stronghold in the lower Euphrates Valley as having lost the battle but not the war.** In a recent ISIS video, prompted by the expected fall of its last stronghold in the village of al-Baghuz Fawqani, an operative explained that in the beginning Islam also lost battles but in the end succeeded in establishing itself and putting down roots. He said war is fickle, "**sometimes you win a battle and sometimes you lose, but the war isn't over yet**" (ISIS video entitled "The importance of standing firm in al-Baghuz," Shabakat Shumukh, March 11, 2019)

In ITIC assessment, ISIS will change the nature of its activities and adapt itself to the new circumstances. After a period of reorganization and learning the lessons of experience, **ISIS will position itself as a global guerrilla terrorist organization operating in many arenas, decentralized and not bound by a territorial framework and not taking upon itself the burden of a population** (and thereby return to its roots as a branch of al-Qaeda in Iraq). That will **mean a temporary postponement of implementing the vision of the Islamic Caliphate and moving the focus of its jihad to the "infidels" in the Middle East, Asia and Africa.** However, in ITIC assessment **ISIS has not abandoned its aspiration to establish the Caliphate,** which may return to ISIS's agenda in the future, after it rehabilitates itself and again controls large territories.

► **What may be the level of danger ISIS will pose in the coming year?** On the one hand, it seems unlikely that in the near future ISIS will be a significant threat, as it was at the height of its power in 2014. On the other, its strengthening in Iraq and its continued activity in Syria and countries in Asia and Africa **may contribute to continuing the chronic instability from which those countries suffer,** making it difficult for failing countries to rehabilitate themselves. ISIS's terrorist attacks will claim a high price in human life in the countries where its provinces operate and in Western countries as well. The destructive potential of ISIS is still great, especially in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan and West Africa, **and the level of danger it presents must not be underestimated** (as it was in the past, before the beginning of the

American-led campaign against ISIS). **The international community, led by the United States, should not ease the pressure on ISIS and must continue the campaign against it, in the Middle East and around the world, invest the necessary resources and support the countries threatened by ISIS.**

ISIS's remaining strategic assets

Overview

► ISIS left the campaign against it in recent years **beaten and bleeding**. However, in ITIC assessment, **ISIS still has important strategic assets which will help it rehabilitate itself and position itself as an highly dangerous global guerrilla terrorist organization:**

- ◆ **Strategic asset number 1:** The existence of operative military infrastructures in its core countries, Iraq and Syria, and the difficulty of the local regimes to uproot them. The difficulty comes mainly from the regimes' instability, the schisms between sectarian, ethnic and religious communities (especially between Shi'ites and Sunnis), and the conflicts between regional and international powers.

- ◆ **Strategic asset number 2:** ISIS still possesses **a charismatic leader, an attractive Salafist-jihadist ideology** and the **broad media network** it established to wage the battle for hearts and minds and to maintain contact with its operatives and provinces.

- ◆ **Strategic asset number 3: ISIS provinces in several countries in Asia and Africa.** In some of those provinces intense military activity continued, and in some even increased, regardless of the blows to ISIS in its core countries. The attempts of the local regimes to uproot ISIS provinces were unsuccessful even when considerable efforts were invested (the success of the Sinai Province to stand firm against the campaign waged by Egypt is a good example). In ITIC assessment **the great potential for ISIS's subversion and terrorism now lies in Afghanistan and West Africa.**

- ◆ **Strategic asset number 4: The support ISIS and its ideology have in large sectors of the Muslim population in Western countries.** The alienated Muslim communities in the West (especially in western Europe) are fertile ground for radical Muslim ideology and the recruitment of local supporters to carry out ISIS-inspired attacks. The possible return of operatives and their families to their countries of origin in the West may increase the value of the asset.

Strategic asset number 1: ISIS is still rooted in the Sunni communities in Syria and Iraq, and the local regimes find it difficult to uproot it

Overview

Even after the loss of considerable territory in Syria (and before that in Iraq) **ISIS still has military networks spread throughout Iraq and Syria**. Some of the networks work covertly within Sunni urban communities (such as Mosul). Some operate inside the large cities and some outside, particularly in the desert and mountain regions. In ITIC assessment, **there are thousands of operatives in each of the two core countries** who continue waging terrorist-guerrilla war. It can be assumed that after the loss of its enclave in the lower Euphrates Valley **ISIS will make an effort to increase the operational capabilities of those networks. It will do that through a united, decentralized command and control system**. At the same time, the counterterrorism activities of the Syrian and Iraqi regimes (as well as the Kurds) will continue. However, in ITIC assessment, **the regimes in Syria and Iraq do not have the ability to uproot ISIS's networks**. ISIS's continued activity in Iraq and Syria may contribute to chronic destabilization and undermine rehabilitation efforts in both countries.



The height of the Islamic Caliphate's expansion, June 2014: the Islamic Caliphate controlled extensive areas in western Iraq and northeastern Syria. The map was uploaded to jihadist forums on August 18, 2014 (hanein.info; alplatformmedia.com)

Syria

► After the collapse of the Islamic Caliphate ISIS kept control over several regions in Syria, all of which were conquered during 2018 by the Syrian army with the support of Russia and Iran: the area of the **Yarmouk refugee camp south of Damascus** (May 2018); the **southern Golan Heights** (July 2018); **and the area of al-Safa, northeast of Suwayda** (November 2018, but

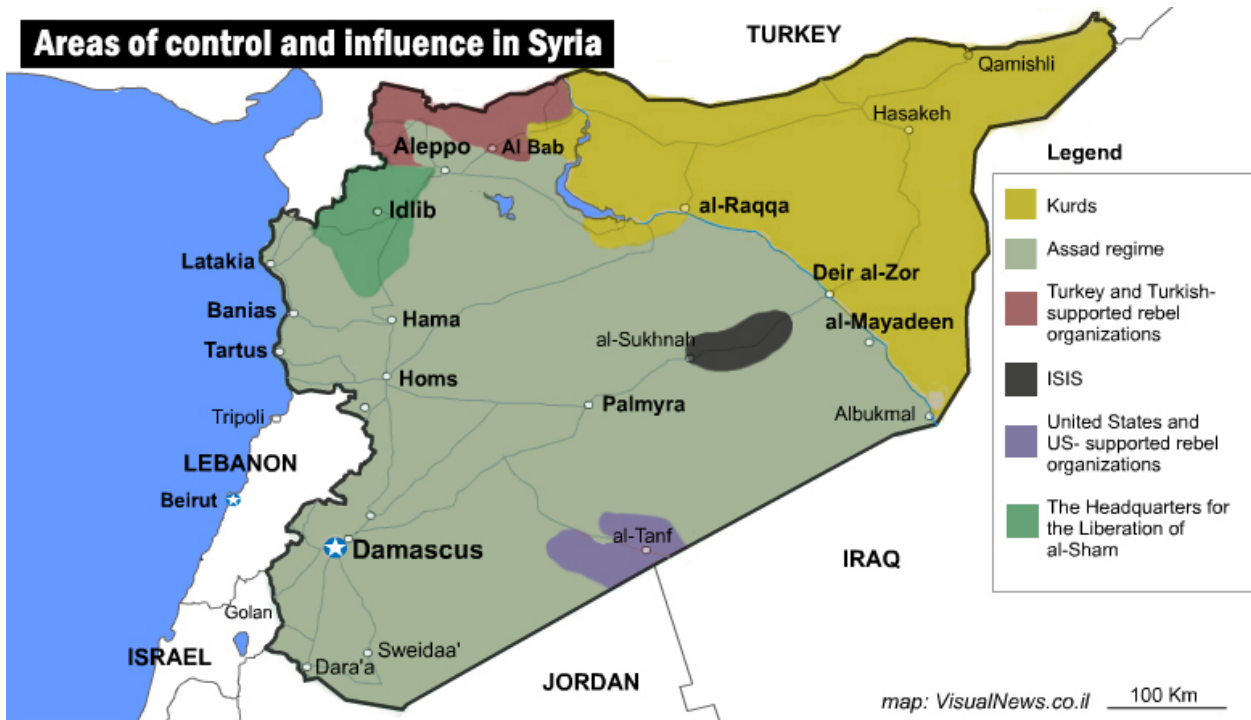
there are still a few ISIS fighters left). The last important area of control in the **lower Euphrates Valley** fell to SDF forces.

► The attack on the ISIS stronghold in the Euphrates Valley began more than half a year ago, waged by the Kurdish forces (SDF) with support from the United States and the coalition countries. After more than half a year of fighting, the village of al-Baghuz Fawqani, northeast of the city of Albukamal (the southern part of the enclave), fell to the SDF forces.



Scene from the ISIS video "ISIS's Pocket in al-Baghuz Fawqani" (Shabakat Shumukh, March 11, 2019).

► In ITIC assessment, even after the fall of the ISIS enclave in the Euphrates Valley, **thousands of ISIS operatives will remain in Syria**. The most important region of operations for those operatives is now **the desert region between Palmyra and Deir al-Zor**. ISIS also has local and regional networks that continue operating **in the area northeast of Suwayda, in the upper Euphrates Valley and the region of Idlib**. However, ISIS has no control over the population in those regions in Syria and continues waging guerrilla warfare against its various enemies: the Syrian army (supported by Russia); the Kurds (supported by the United States), and the jihadist organization, Headquarters for the Liberation of al-Sham (the dominant organization in the region of Idlib).



► With the fall of the ISIS enclave in the Euphrates Valley, in Syria as well the loss of its control over territory and population was completed. In the meantime, **the process of turning ISIS into a guerrilla terrorist organization has begun**. In its new form ISIS will not be bound by a territorial framework and will enjoy flexibility and greater freedom of action in orchestrating hit and run attacks. In ITIC assessment, in Syria ISIS will undergo **period of reorganization** during 2019. ISIS will make an effort to continue its military activities and even improve them to prove it is still viable and the leading jihadist organization, while in reality, the Headquarters for the Liberation of al-Sham (the former Jabhat al-Nusra) remains the dominant organization in the Idlib region and the leading jihadist organization in Syria.

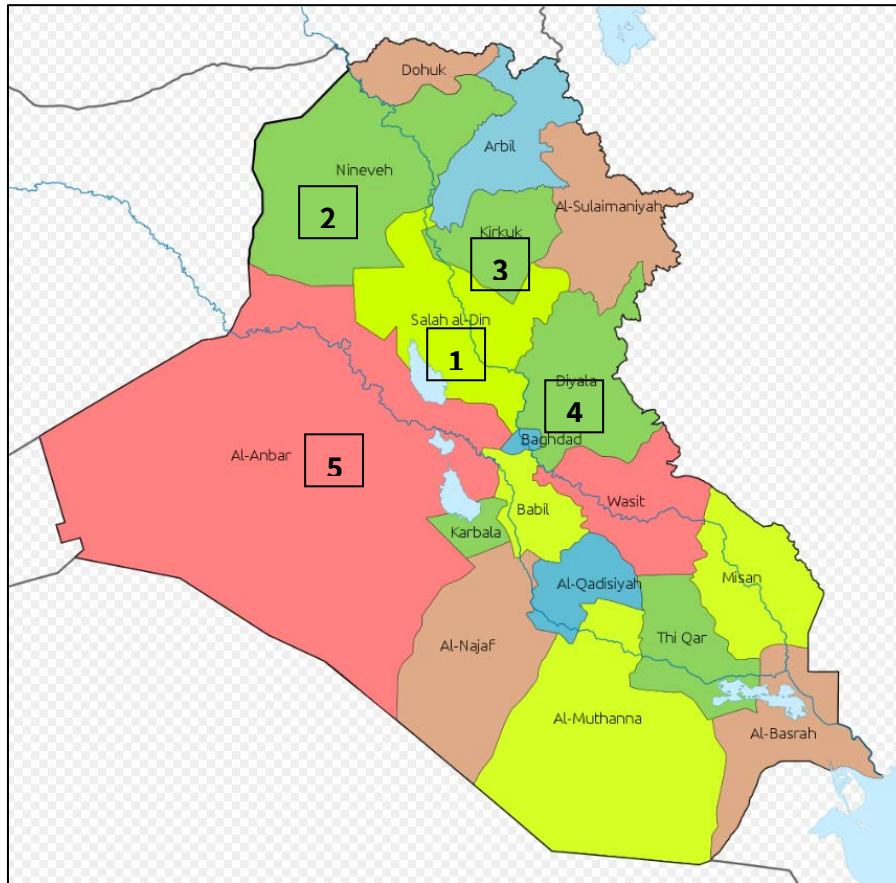
In ITIC assessment, ISIS in Syria will no longer pose a regional strategic threat. However it is liable to be a factor undermining attempts to stabilize the security situation in Syria and **interfere with efforts to reconstruct Syria's economy, politics and culture.** From a military point of view, ISIS's activities in Syria are liable to be a **serious annoyance for the forces operating in the country:** the Syrian army (with Russia supporting it), Iran and its Shi'ite militias, the Kurdish SDF forces and their American advisors. It is probable that in the near future the United States will seek to withdraw most of its forces from Syria, given the "defeat of ISIS" with the conquest of the lower Euphrates Valley, **while ISIS will make an effort to accompany the withdrawal of the American forces from Syria with attacks and casualties.**

Iraq

In ITIC assessment, **in the coming year the focus of ISIS's activities will move from Syria to Iraq**, the country from whence it sprang, and where it has networks numbering, in ITIC assessment, **thousands of operatives**. Since the fall of the Islamic Caliphate at the end of 2017, **ISIS in Iraq has functioned as a guerrilla terrorist organization in every respect**. As opposed to Syria, after the fall of the Caliphate **no areas of control remained in ISIS's hands** and its operatives scattered to provinces in northern and western Iraq where the population was Sunni or mixed Sunni-Shi'ite. In the coming year ISIS is expected to improve its operational capabilities in Iraq by exploiting the weakness of the Iraqi regime, the sectarian tensions and the relative weakness of the United States and the West in the Iraqi arena.

► **From an organizational point of view, the various provinces in Iraq were united by ISIS into an "umbrella province"** that encompassed the various regions: Dijla (the Tigris), al-Anbar, Diyala, Baghdad, northern Baghdad, Saladin, Nineveh, Jazeera and the Southern Province. **ISIS's leadership has control over its networks throughout Iraq, but in ITIC assessment it is weak, and ISIS networks in the various regions enjoy a certain amount of autonomy,**

► **The regions where ISIS is more intensively active are Saladin, Nineveh and Mosul, Kirkuk, Diyala and al-Anbar** (see map). The central objectives of ISIS's attacks are the **Iraqi security forces and Shi'ite and Sunni militias affiliated with the Iraqi regime**: the Iraqi army, the "popular mobilization" (an Iranian-sponsored Shi'ite militia), the "tribal mobilization" (militias of Sunni tribesmen who collaborate with the regime), members of Iraqi intelligence and "agents" suspected of collaboration with the Iraq regime. Attacks also targeted **the Shi'ite population**, with the objective of deepening the sectarian schism between Shi'ites and Sunnis. It is a tactic similar to that used by the al-Qaeda branch in Iraq when it began, out of which ISIS grew. That branch, led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, waged terrorist-guerrilla warfare against the United States and its allies, and at the same time against the Shi'ite population. The tactics contributed, in the final analysis, to the withdrawal of the American troops from Iraq and the fundamental weakness of the Iraqi regime.



A map of the provinces of Iraq (Wikipedia). The numbers in the north and west indicate areas of intensive ISIS military activity.

► **In 2018 ISIS carried out a variety of attacks:** detonating IEDs to attack security force vehicles; attacking security targets using rockets and mortar shells; ambushes; placing IEDs; attacks on Iraqi security force positions and roadblocks; sniper fire; killing security personnel and civilians who helped them, and burning their houses; abducting civilians and members of the security forces and attacking civilians and their property. In most cases the attacks were "simple" and did not require exceptional operational sophistication. However, in some instances more complex attacks were carried out, including suicide bombing attacks.¹ **The extensive terrorist activities undertaken in Iraq indicate the potential for intensive terrorist attacks ISIS may carry out in the future.**

¹ Particularly prominent were the suicide bombing attacks carried out by ISIS on a post and headquarters of the "popular mobilization" and Iraqi security forces southwest of Tikrit. A suicide bomber drove a car bomb and blew himself up near an Iraqi security forces' post. Another suicide bomber, who was wearing an explosive belt, participated in the attack. ISIS claimed that 17 Iraqi security personnel were killed and 12 wounded (al-Ghurabaa', December 25, 2018)

Types of ISIS Attacks in Iraq



Right: Vehicle belonging to the Iraqi security forces burns east of Tikrit after ISIS operatives detonated an IED (Shabakat Shumukh, February 14, 2019). Left: ISIS operative launches a mortar shell at a village northwest of Baqubah (Shabakat Shumukh, February 14, 2019).



Right: Rocket launched at the Iraqi security forces northeast of Baqubah (Shabakat Shumukh, February 16, 2019). Left: Truck and tractor set on fire by ISIS operatives (Iraq Province – Diyala region, December 9, 2018).



Right: Breaking into an Iraqi police post in the region of Khanaqin (pastethis.to, January 7, 2019). Left: ISIS operatives pray before leaving to ambush fighters of the "popular mobilization" in Khanaqin (Nasher News Agency, April 19, 2019).



Right: Execution of an Iraqi government "agent" taken captive west of al-Ramadi in al-Anbar Province, on August 29, 2018 (rudaw.net, August 29, 2018).

During 2018 the Iraqi security forces carried out continuous security activities against ISIS networks, accompanied by a large number of detentions, but **they did not succeed in halting the increase of ISIS's activities**. In ITIC assessment, that was because first of all ISIS still has a power base within the Sunni population in Iraq, possibly the result of the built-in sectarian schism, the weakness of the Shi'ite Iraqi regime and the reduced influence of the Americans. **Thus it can be assumed that in the future ISIS will become more powerful in the Iraqi arena. Its military activities will become more intense and an effort will be made to carry out showcase attacks of the types that characterized the organization during the American occupation of the country.** That includes an increase in suicide bombing attacks, raids on camps of the Iraqi security forces, raids on jail cells² and mass-killing attacks on the Shi'ite population. **The American presence in Iraq may to turn into a preferred target** for ISIS in Iraq as it becomes more powerful and improves its operational capabilities.

² On August 22, 2018, ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi issued a recording encouraging ISIS operatives in Iraq and Syria. He called on the operatives in Iraq to carry out "one attack after another," and noted that the prisoners, male and female, in Iraqi jails had not been forgotten (al-Furqan Media Foundation), August 22, 2018)

Strategic asset number 2: ISIS's leader, ideology and the extensive media network

ISIS's charismatic leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi has apparently so far managed to survive all the blows ISIS received in recent years.³ Al-Baghdadi is dominant in the ISIS leadership which surrounds him. During all the years ISIS has been in existence, he has been the final arbiter on military, religious and governmental issues. The ISIS leadership is completely dependent on him. Killing or capturing him would hurt ISIS's functioning, while **his survival may make a significant contribution to ISIS's rehabilitation.**



Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi gives a sermon at the Great Mosque in Mosul (YouTube, July 5, 2014).

Ideology

► **ISIS is a global terrorist organization which adheres to the Islamic Salafist-jihadist ideology.** The ideology belongs to an extremist trend in Sunni Islam that seeks to restore what it considers the Golden Age of Islam in the 7th century AD (the era of the prophet Muhammad and the first four Caliphs who came after him). That is to be accomplished by jihad, a holy war targeting internal and external enemies, which is the personal duty of every Muslim. Al-Qaeda and ISIS grew out of that concept, but ISIS's interpretation is different from al-Qaeda's. The return to the Golden Age of Islam, according to ISIS's ideology, will be accomplished by the establishment of a supranational Islamic Caliphate, which negates the concept of the nation states that were carved out of the Middle East after the First World War.

³ Over the years al-Baghdadi's death has been reported many times. **The reports have never been verified.**

The Caliphate will be based on the model of the first four Caliphs and **conducted according to an extremist interpretation of Islamic religious law.**⁴

► **However, the fundamental societal, religious/sectarian and political conditions that initially led to the establishment of ISIS in Iraq and Syria have not changed. The nation states established in the past in Syria and Iraq were not rehabilitated, their sectarian schisms are still strong and the security situation continues to be chronically unstable.**

Even in other provinces in Asia and Africa, generally speaking the regimes have a low level of governance (or have collapsed, for instance in Libya, Yemen and Somalia), and have difficulties in providing an effective response to ISIS's activity. Thus **ISIS's Salafist-jihadist ideology may be a source of attraction for Muslims in those countries** who regard themselves as deprived, even when ISIS has been militarily weakened in its core countries and even after the Islamic Caliphate it established has collapsed.

ISIS's broad media network

ISIS has a broad network of dozens of media outlets that enable it to conduct an effective battle for hearts and minds and to spread its ideology to Muslim communities around the globe. ISIS's media capabilities were damaged with the collapse of the Islamic Caliphate but survived. During 2018 the network showed its ability to remain firm and recover despite the strong pressure exerted on ISIS in Syria. In ITIC assessment, **its survival was primarily the result of the leadership's great awareness of the importance of the media. Therefore, high priority was given to allotting the necessary resources, with both funding and skilled manpower.**⁵

⁴ While the first four Caliphs were widely admired, a careful examination of the period of their rule shows that the idealization is exaggerated. The first three Caliphs were murdered and at that time the weakness of Islam was revealed, as was its lack of unity and lack of its ability to prevent a civil war and bloodshed.

⁵ For further information, see the February 10, 2019 bulletin, "ISIS's media network: Developments in 2018 and future courses of action."



ISIS notice stressing the importance of its media campaign. The Arabic reads, "Oh, man of the media, you are a real jihad fighter. The media campaign is no less important than the [campaign] waged on the battlefield. Each of you [the media operatives] must stand guard and [act] at every opportunity to renew the intention [to act for the sake of ISIS's Islamic State]" (archive.org, April 6, 2016).

► In ITIC assessment, ISIS's media empire will continue to be an important strategic asset, despite the damage it suffered in recent years. It will continue to disseminate the organization's ideology, including preserving the idea of establishing a Caliphate, the continuation of jihad against various enemies and encouraging terrorist attacks in the West. Besides its central position in the battle for hearts and minds, it will continue to fulfill operative functions as well, such as maintaining connections between the operatives around the globe and contacts between them and the ISIS leadership, as well as recruiting operatives and funds.

Strategic asset number 3: ISIS provinces in African and Asian countries

The importance of the asset rose during the past year, primarily in view of the strong pressure exerted on ISIS's strongholds in Syria and Iraq. The provinces abroad are subordinate to the ISIS leadership but they enjoy a great degree of autonomy. The blows suffered by ISIS in its core countries, the most recent of which was fall of the enclave in the lower Euphrates Valley, may disrupt (but not cut off) the connection between the leadership and the provinces abroad and **increase ISIS's decentralized nature**. In ITIC assessment **the activities of the provinces abroad will continue in 2019 and increase in some of them**. The highest level of danger is in **Afghanistan, West Africa, Nigeria and the sub-Saharan countries, and the Sinai Peninsula**. In addition, **ISIS has covert networks with the potential for subversion and terrorist activity in other countries, including Russia and several Arab states** (predominantly Jordan, Tunisia and Morocco).

Islamic State provinces around the world



► ISIS's provinces around the world are:⁶

◆ **The Khorasan Province (Afghanistan/Pakistan/Iran):** The province was established in 2014. The center of its activity is in Afghanistan, where there is ongoing instability and strengthening of the Taliban (which is hostile to ISIS). There has been a continuous rise over the years in the extent of the province's terrorist attacks. In 2018 there was intensive activity, mainly in Afghanistan. The most conspicuous targets were the institutions affiliated with the Afghan government; the Afghan army; the Afghan intelligence and security services; the Taliban; prominent individuals and institutions affiliated with the United States and the West. **In 2018 the Khorasan Province carried out showcase suicide bombing attacks in the capital city of Kabul and other cities. The attacks claimed a number of victims and were widely covered by the media.** The Khorasan Province recently demonstrated its operational capabilities with two suicide bombing attacks, one near the airport in Jalalabad and the other targeting a march in Kabul attended by senior figures in the Afghan government, **both carried out on March 6, 2019.**

Examples of Suicide Bombing Attacks Carried Out by ISIS in Kabul



Right: The two ISIS operatives who carried out the suicide bombing attack on a march in Kabul (Shabakat Shumukh, March 8, 2019). Left: The scene of the attack (Britain Today YouTube channel, March 7, 2019).

⁶ **Note:** After the publication of this study, a new ISIS province was apparently established in Tunisia.



Operatives of the Afghan security forces at the scene of the ISIS suicide bombing attack near the headquarters of the election committee in Kabul (Ariana News Twitter account, October 29, 2018).



Right: The ruins of the building after an ISIS suicide bombing attack in an educational center in Kabul (Khaama Press, August 16, 2018). Left: The ISIS suicide bombers who carried out the attack. It killed 34 people and wounded 56 (ISIS-affiliated www.k1falh.ga, August 16, 2018).



The scene of the June 4, 2018, ISIS suicide bombing attack at a conference where more than 2,000 religious figures participated. About 70 people were killed and wounded, including religious figures and operatives of the Afghan security forces (barsh.ir, June 4, 2018)



The scene of the April 20, 2018 ISIS double suicide bombing attack at a compound of the Afghanistan national directorate of security. Thirty people were killed (from a video posted to the Facebook page of Ahmad Ahmadi, April 30, 2018).

► **The Sinai Province and Egypt proper:**

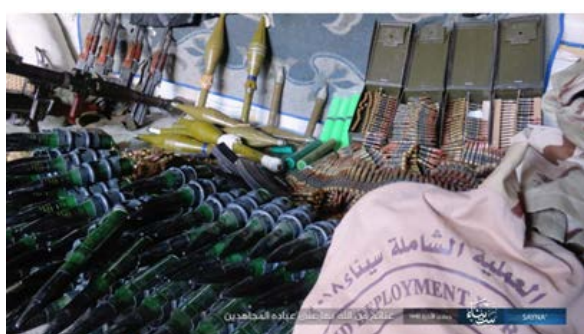
◆ The year 2018 was characterized by violence in the Sinai Province, **during which the Egyptian security forces exerted strong pressure in an extensive anti-ISIS campaign ("Sinai 2018")**. According to the Egyptian army, during the first 11 months of 2018, 530 "terrorist operatives" (i.e., ISIS operatives) were killed. The Egyptian security forces reported that they hit ISIS's infrastructure and located weapons, explosives, motorcycles and drugs that financed the organization's activity (Bawabat al-Ayn, December 28, 2018). Nevertheless, **the Sinai Province survived the blows and maintained a low but continuous level of offensive initiatives against the Egyptian security forces, especially in the northern Sinai Peninsula. The province is currently in the process of recovery.**

◆ One example of the Sinai Province's ability to carry out a complex attack was the attack on an Egyptian military post near the el-Arish airport. Fifteen Egyptian soldiers were killed and ISIS operatives seized Egyptian army weapons (February 16, 2019). The ongoing activity of ISIS operatives in the Sinai Province indicates **ISIS has operational capabilities which should not be underestimated**, it has a hold on part of the local population and the logistic capability necessary to maintain contact with the ISIS leadership.

◆ In addition, ISIS carried out showcase terrorist attacks in Egypt proper, the most prominent of which was the attack on two buses carrying Coptic Christians returning from a visit the monastery of Saint Samuel the Confessor, north of al-Minya (eight dead and 20 wounded, November 2, 2018).



ISIS attack on the Egyptian military post at the el-Arish airport (Shabakat Shumukh, February 19, 2019).



Egyptian army munitions that fell into the hands of ISIS during the attack on the post at the el-Arish airport (Shabakat Shumukh, February 19, 2019).



The attack on the Coptic Christians. Right: A tent used by some of the ISIS operatives who carried out the attack (Egyptian ministry of the interior Facebook page, November 4, 2018). Left: One of the buses shot at during the attack (al-Masry al-Youm YouTube channel, November 2, 2018).

◆ **West Africa Province:** During 2018 there was a rise in the number and quality of the activities of the West Africa Province. The center of its military activity is **Nigeria**, but its activities leaked into neighboring **Chad** and **Niger**. The basis for ISIS's success in West Africa and the sub-Saharan countries is the weakness of the local governments and the support the province receives from certain sectors within the Muslim population. **During the last months of the year the intensity of ISIS's**

activities in Nigeria and the sub-Saharan countries increased and in all probably will continue to increase in 2019.



Right: ISIS attack on a camp of the Nigerian army (Shabakat Shumukh, December 28, 2018). Left: ISIS attack on a post of the Nigerian army (Shabakat Shumukh, January 17, 2019).



Right: An operative calls on Muslims to join the Islamic State, in this case, Muslims in Somalia (ISIS's West Africa Province, January 15, 2019). Left: Operatives of ISIS's West Africa Province in an exchange of fire in Nigeria (ISIS's West Africa Province, August 12, 2018).

► In 2018 other ISIS provinces continued their operations, showing themselves as relatively weaker than their various rivals (al-Qaeda and the local authorities):

- ◆ **Somalia Province:** It is a relatively new ISIS province with little activity in recent months. They have attacked **operatives of the security forces and members of the Somali administration** (intelligence personnel, police, officials). In addition, the province also operates against the al-Qaeda-affiliated **al-Shabab** (to which ISIS is in a position of inferiority).

- ◆ **Libya Province:** During the two years since the fall of ISIS's stronghold in the region of Sirte (December 6, 2016), **there has been a serious decline in the activities of the Libya Province**. The main targets for its attacks in 2018 were **the Libyan security forces**. ISIS also carried out a combined showcase attack on the Libyan foreign ministry in Tripoli (December 25, 2018). The attack was carried out by three terrorist operatives, two of them suicide bombers. The attack began with the detonation of a car bomb. The Libyan ministry of health reported that at least three people were killed,

one of them a department manager in the foreign ministry, and ten people were wounded (Akhbar Libya, France 24, December 25, 2018).



Right: Smoke rises from the Libyan foreign ministry in Tripoli (Akhbar Libya, December 25, 2018). Left: Cars set on fire in the area of the attack (Akhbar Libya, December 25, 2019).

◆ **Yemen Province:** During 2018 the province continued activities against a number of targets, including the Iranian-supported Houthi rebels, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the Yemeni administration. During 2016 six provinces were active: Sanaa, Aden-Abyan, Shabwah, Bayda, Hadrawmat, and the Taiz and Bab regions (Haqq, July 7, 2016). Since then there has apparently been an organizational change. The entire country is now called the Yemen Province and is divided into secondary regions. In 2018 its military activity decreased and focused on the regions of Bayada and Aden-Abyan.



Right: The Yemeni security forces, which exchanged fire with the emir of the Aden region and his men (al-A'an TV YouTube channel, April 28, 2018). Left: The body of the emir of ISIS's Aden region, Saleh Nasr Fadhel al-Bahshi, killed in the exchange of fire (al-Arabiya, April 28, 2018).

◆ **East Asia:** ISIS's activities in the East Asia Province are based on the Filipino Abu Sayyaf organization, which joined the Islamic State four and a half years ago. The activities of the province focus on the Southern Philippines islands (Mindanao and Sulu). The province is also active in Indonesia, but mainly carrying out attacks in the

Philippines. ISIS operatives have been waging ongoing terrorist and guerrilla warfare against the Filipino army and security forces. Prominent most recently was the attack carried out during mass at the Cathedral of Our Lady of Mount. Carmel on the island of Jolo in the Southern Philippines (January 27, 2019). It killed 23 people, civilians and operatives of the security forces, and wounded about 110. According to **Rommel Banlaoi**, Chairman of the Philippine Institute for Peace, Violence and Terrorism Research, "ISIS is the most complicated, evolving problem for the Philippines today, and we should not pretend that it doesn't exist because we don't want it to exist" (New York Times, March 9, 2019).



Right: The island of Jolo in the Philippines (Google Maps). Left: The entrance to the cathedral after two explosions (West Mindanao Command, January 28, 2019).

◆ **North Caucasus:** During 2018 ISIS increased its activity in the North Caucasus (Dagestan, Ingushetia, Chechnya, and Kabardino-Balkaria). However, ISIS is still weak in those areas. It may be a temporary weakness and ISIS in the Caucasus is liable to reemerge (especially if its operatives who fought in Syria return home). At the end of 2018 the Russian federal security service (FSB) announced that it had exposed a network of ISIS operatives who had collected donations in Russia for operatives in the Islamic State and the Jabhat al-Nusra [i.e., the Headquarters for the Liberation of al-Sham]. **The network operated in the region of Moscow, as well as in Chechnya, Dagestan and Ingushetia.** According to the announcement, **two charitable associations, Muhadjiron and Salsabil, raised donations allegedly for building a mosque in Moscow and for supporting needy Muslims** (TASS, December 13, 2018).

Covert ISIS networks in Arab countries

► The following were the main activities of ISIS's covert networks and the counterterrorist activities of the Arab security forces during 2018:

◆ Jordan:

- On August 10, 2018, an IED was detonated attacking a security patrol southeast of **the city of Salt** in the southern part of the country. One Jordanian security operative was killed and six were injured. The squad that carried out the attack (probably ISIS operatives) fled to a building in Salt from which they exchanged fire with the Jordanian security forces. During the exchange of fire ten Jordanian security force operatives were killed and 20 were wounded. The event occurred after almost two years of security calm in the country.



The building where the terrorists operatives barricaded themselves in Salt



The building after its collapse (aboodrss' Twitter account, August 11, 2018)

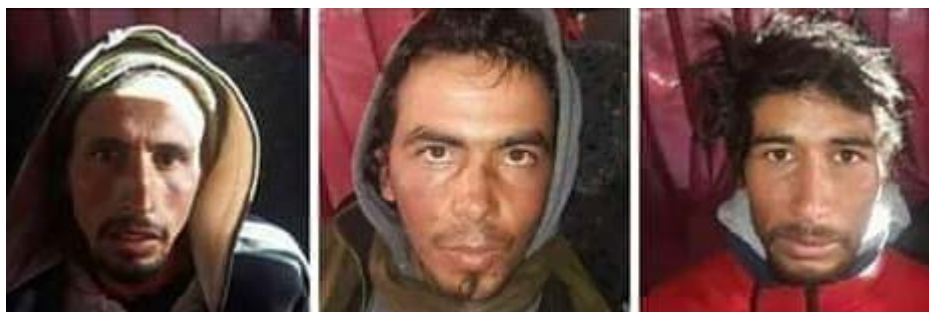
- **The Jordanian minister of the interior** said at a press conference that **there were other plans to attack security targets and public assemblies**. He said the terrorists who carried out the attack [in Salt] had a Salafist-jihadist ideology

and were supported by ISIS (from a press conference in Amman, August 13, 2018). According to a France24 TV report, **on August 8, 2018, Jordanian intelligence detained 17 ISIS operatives who planned to carry out attacks against security, military and commercial centers, as well as against the media.** Some of the attacks were supposed to be carried out simultaneously to sow confusion and chaos.

◆ **Morocco:** The most prominent terrorist attack carried out by ISIS-affiliated operatives was the murder of two Scandinavian tourists, one from Denmark and the other from Norway, who were touring the Atlas Mountains. They were raped and killed on December 17, 2018. The Moroccan authorities announced that **four suspects, detained on suspicion of having committed the murders, had sworn allegiance to ISIS. A video of the ceremony in which they swore allegiance was posted to the social networks before they committed the murders.** On December 21, 2018 the Moroccan Central Bureau for Judicial Investigations announced that nine more people had been arrested in Morocco on suspicion of being connected to the murderers (Reuters, December 21, 2018).



Right: Louisa Vesterager Jespersen, from Denmark (Louisa Vesterager Jespersen Facebook page, opened in her memory, December 20, 2018). Left: Maren Ueland from Norway (Maren Ueland Facebook page, opened in her memory, December 19, 2019).



Three ISIS operatives suspected of murdering the two Scandinavian tourists in Morocco (el@hamdulf, December 20, 2018).

◆ **Tunisia:** The most prominent terrorist attack in 2018 was carried out by a **female suicide bomber who blew herself up with an IED in front of the Tunis city theatre**. Nine operatives of the security forces and a civilian were injured. ISIS did not claim responsibility for the attack but in all probability was behind it. Another notable attack was **the explosion in eastern Tunisia of a natural gas pipeline that connected the al-Dawlab oilfield to the city of Sfax on the Mediterranean coast** (June 2, 2018). ISIS claimed responsibility for the explosion. **Note:** Recently the military activities of ISIS in northeastern Tunisia increased, and Tunisia may have become a new ISIS province.

Exposure of ISIS networks in Russia, 2018

► During 2018 the Russian security services exposed **a number of networks of ISIS operatives, thereby preventing many terrorist attacks, including showcase attacks in Moscow**. The most important were the following:

◆ **The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB)** announced it had killed a man suspected of belonging to ISIS who planned to carry out a terrorist attack in the city of Nizhny Novgorod (lying on the Volga River, it is the fourth largest city in Russia). The attack was planned for the day the Russian presidential elections were held (March 18, 2018). At the home of the suspect, who came from one of the countries on the Russian border, **a powerful IED was found, along with components for making other explosive devices, weapons and ammunition** (FSB website, February 1, 2018).

◆ The FSB detained four operatives of an ISIS squad from the Kaluga Province (about 150 kilometers (93 miles) southwest of Moscow). The squad leader was an ISIS operative who had been in Syria and had undergone training in the Islamic State. He arrived in Russia to organize terrorist attacks. **During interrogation the operatives admitted to having planned a terrorist attack** (FSB website, March 15, 2018).

- ◆ The FSB and the Russian ministry of the interior prevented the activities of a terrorist squad **in the Moscow area that recruited operatives and sent them to Syria and Iraq to fight in the ranks of ISIS**. In addition, the squad supported giving legal status to immigrants who came from Central Asia. While thwarting the activity of the squad, the FSB raided houses at 17 addresses which were searched, and sixty foreign residents were detained. In addition, three laboratories for forging documents were found (FSB website, March 13, 2018).
- ◆ In March 2018 the FSB prevented the activities of **four operatives who belonged to a covert ISIS network**. They came from the city of Novy Urengoy, about 2,300 kilometers (about 1,430 miles) northeast of the region of Moscow. **They planned a series of terrorist attacks in the Moscow area, directed by ISIS operatives in Syria (through the Telegram phone application)**. The investigation revealed connections between the network and a number of extremist residents from the same city. As a result, on April 26, 2018, the FSB and the Russian ministry of the interior detained 20 people in Novy Urengoy. They found ISIS propaganda materials, communications equipment and radical religious literature (FSB website, April 27, 2018)..
- ◆ On May 3 and 4, 2018, **the FSB detained five operatives who belonged to an ISIS squad in Yaroslavl**, a city about 250 kilometers (about 155 miles) northeast of Moscow. They planned to carry out terrorist attacks in a number of regions in Russia. Coordinating preparations for the attacks was carried out through closed communities on Telegram, some of which were "groups abroad." **Searches revealed IEDs, explosives, weapons and ammunition** (FSB website, May 4, 2018).
- ◆ On October 26, 2018, the FSB and operatives from the Russian ministry of the interior **detained six operatives of an ISIS terrorist squad** in Moscow. **The operatives planned to carry out large terrorist attacks in Moscow using chemical substances and IEDs**. Searches revealed automatic weapons, money, communications equipment, instructions for carrying out terrorist attacks and manuals for making IEDs. The squad was financed by bank transfers from abroad and local criminal activities, **and was handled by operatives from Central Asia who were staying in Syria** (Sputnik, TASS, Russia Today, October 26, 2019).



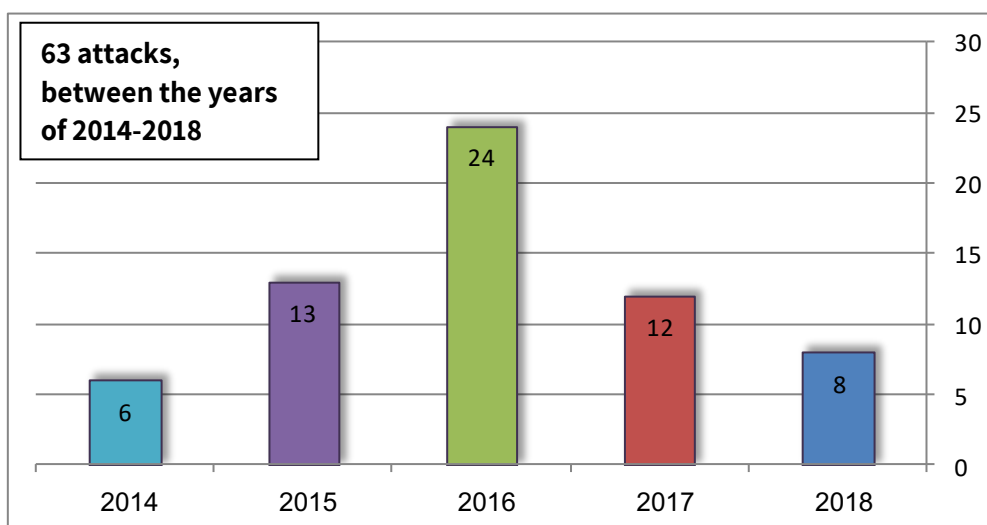
**Picture from the video, showing operatives of the squad immediately after their detention
(Russia Today YouTube page, October 26, 2018)**

ISIS published an infographic in the March 14, 2019 issue of the magazine *al-Nabā'*, entitled, "**Do you think we will disappear?**" Behind the notice was the battle being fought in al-Baghuz Fawqani. The notice had a quote from Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, ISIS's official spokesman, who was killed in 2016: "**Do you think we will disappear? Do you think we will become weak or tired? No, and again no**, we will remain, with the help of Allah, until the dead rise and the last among us fights the false prophet [who will come before the arrival of the Messiah, the Mahdi]..." **The notice showed the military activity carried out by ISIS the previous week in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, the Philippines and Niger.** It ends with words from ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, "**The sons of Islam decided that they would not lay down their arms**, and that the Crusaders and their satellites will not live a life of pleasure and comfort, till Allah decides between them and their enemies, and Allah will determine their fate..."

reasons are explained by Michael Milstein in an article examining ISIS as a social, cultural phenomenon [ITIC translation and emphasis]:⁷

"ISIS provides meaning not only for youths in the Arab-Muslim space, **but also for many young Arabs living in the West. For them, ISIS is an escape from the mounting frustration caused by the difficulties of integration and sometimes even by rejection of the environment where his parents' generation settled.** Often it is the way to release frustration and to 'avenge' their alienated childhoods. Thousands of young Muslims from Germany, Britain, France and Belgium who joined the ranks of ISIS in recent years **express the deeper cultural phenomenon that characterizes the Muslim communities in the West, and which poses a serious problem for European countries today.** The loathing felt by some of the Muslim youths for the entity where they were born and raised **reflects the attraction of ISIS as presenting a very powerful solution.** It also gives witness to the limitations of the influence of the education system in the West where those young Muslims went to school."

Distribution of terrorist attacks carried out in the West (most of them ISIS-inspired)⁸

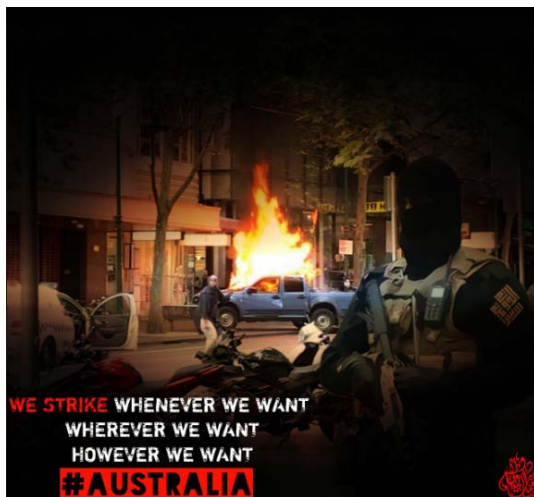


⁷ Middle East Crossroads (Hebrew), Volume 9, February 19, 2019, ed. Dr. Esti Webman. Michael Milstein, "Apocalypse [Middle East] Now: ISIS as a Social and Cultural Phenomenon," (Hebrew only).

⁸ Sixty-three of the attacks were ISIS-inspired and 14 were "handled directly by ISIS." **All the attacks carried out in 2018 were ISIS-inspired.** The statistics include Western countries with the addition of Turkey.

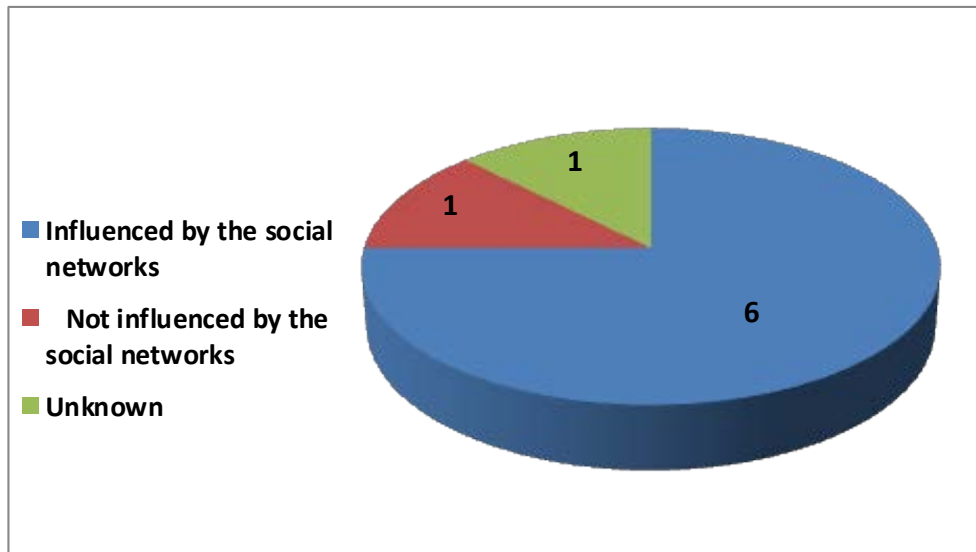
► In ITIC assessment **ISIS-inspired attacks will continue into the coming year, despite the blows suffered by ISIS in various locations in Syria.** On the other hand, because of the loss of its ability to direct and support attacks from Syria, **ISIS will find it hard, as it did in 2018,** to carry out planned attacks preceded by an orderly process of collecting intelligence, preparing weapons and training the terrorist/s.

► **ISIS's global propaganda network (and of other jihadist institutions) will continue to motivate ISIS supporters in Western countries to carry out ISIS-inspired attacks.** An analysis of ISIS-inspired attacks in 2018 shows that **most of the terrorists who carried them out had been influenced by ISIS propaganda** (and by the propaganda of other jihadist institutions) spread by the social networks and websites. Some of them were not only exposed to ISIS propaganda, but were active on the social networks that disseminated the materials.



Encouragement for terrorist attacks in Western countries. Right: Notice posted to Telegram by ISIS supporters. The Arabic reads, "Just terrorism – your holidays are coming, so are [the dates for] your funerals" (al-Abd al-Faqir Media Foundation, December 24, 2018). Left: The notice showing a terrorist who carried out a stabbing attack in Melbourne. The English reads, "We strike whenever we want, wherever we want, however we want, #Australia" (Twitter account of Mahmut Aytekin@maytekin91, November 9, 2018. It was originally uploaded to ISIS's Telegram channels).

Influence of the Social Networks on ISIS Supporters Who Carried Out Terrorist Attacks in Western Countries



► Another potential threat is liable to be **the return of the foreign fighters and their families to their countries of origin**. Britain, France and Belgium, the countries most hit by jihadist terrorism, announced they would not permit ISIS operatives to return. Germany and Canada, on the other hand, announced that in principle they had to allow the operatives (and their families) to return, subject to criminal processes that would be initiated against them if necessary.⁹ In ITIC assessment, in principle, ISIS operatives with military experience and who were brainwashed with ISIS's ideology **may encourage Islamic radicalization and terrorism within local Muslim communities. They may liable join local ISIS supporters and improve the supporters' capability to carry out terrorist attacks in Western countries.**

⁹ For further information, see the February 20, 2019 bulletin, "The dilemma of ISIS captives held by SDF forces (and an analysis of possible solutions) ."