



**ISIS's current strategy:
Relinquishing territorial control and focusing on
intensifying local activity in the various provinces,
mainly in Iraq**

July 20, 2020

Overview¹

ISIS's activity in the past year has been marked by **efforts to recover from two severe blows that it suffered** (the collapse of the Islamic State and the killing of its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi). These blows damaged its military and financial capabilities, eroded the "ISIS brand" which had been cultivated for years, and forced it into a process of changing its operating methods and the goals that it had set for itself. **ISIS has managed to survive these blows**, reorganize its ranks and sometimes even rear its head and increase the scope of the attacks it carries out in a measured and careful manner (mainly in Iraq, ISIS's main area of activity).

- In light of this, ISIS has adopted a strategy that has transformed it from a **quasi-state entity into a terrorist and guerrilla organization that refrains from controlling territories and population**. Underlying ISIS's current conduct is a **temporary waiver of the establishment of an Islamic caliphate here and now**, a vision that sets ISIS apart from the other jihadi terrorist organizations. Instead, the organization has adopted a strategy based on the following principles: **continuing guerrilla and terrorist activity**, increasing and decreasing its scope depending on the prevailing circumstances; maintaining **the survival of the organization** (which has managed to withstand heavy pressure in the core countries of Iraq and Syria and in other provinces); **decentralizing the command and control system** over the various provinces; maintaining a **unity in its ranks** (preventing splits); and **upgrading the media system** (which has weakened, but has not collapsed). Among these principles, there are often contradictions and internal tension that ISIS must navigate, especially between the desire to "raise its head" and rehabilitate the brand and the need to behave with caution and preserve its survival.
- Changes in ISIS's strategic environment in Iraq and Syria will greatly affect its continued conduct. It appears that **ISIS is currently in the process of reorganizing towards the**

¹ This study was coordinated with the Research Division of the Israel Defense Forces Intelligence.

possibility of a future escalation inside Iraq. The departure of the American forces from Iraq, following pressure from Iran and the Shiite militias that it supports, may reduce the pressure exerted on ISIS and **spur it to rear its head again by escalating the fighting in this vital arena.** The strengthening of ISIS in Iraq **may raise the morale and increase the motivation of its operatives in the various provinces.**

► As for **Israel**, up to now the fighting against enemies from within and without has been **ISIS's top priority**, and the goal of “liberating” Palestine has been postponed to the more distant future. In the ITIC's assessment, this priority has not changed fundamentally, but developments in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, coupled with the reduced pressure on ISIS, the increased strength of its provinces that border with Israel, and the improvement in its capabilities – may all increase ISIS's motivation to **carry out a major showcase attack against Israel or the Jewish People**².

Overview

► In the past year and a half, ISIS suffered two severe blows:

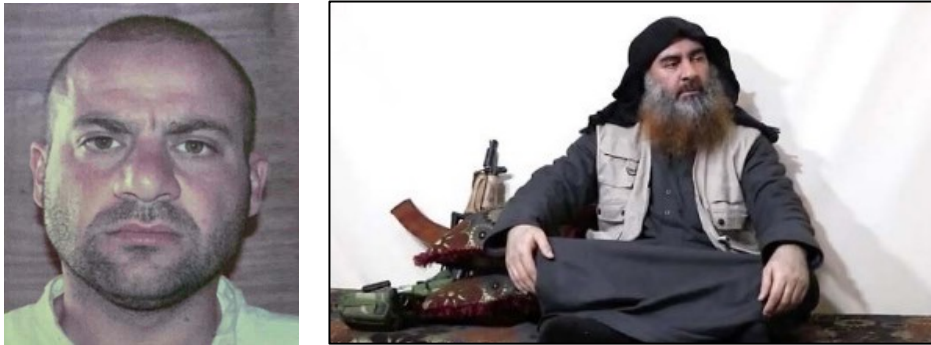
- ◆ **The fall of Al-Baghouz, its last stronghold in the lower Euphrates Valley in Syria (March 2019).** The fall of Al-Baghouz was the last in a series of defeats **that led to ISIS's loss of control over large areas of Iraq and Syria. Thus, the Islamic Caliphate collapsed about six years after its establishment was announced** (June 29, 2014).



The climax of the spread of the Caliphate State in Iraq and Syria. This map was disseminated on jihadi forums on August 18, 2014 (alplatformmedia.com; hanein.info).

² About six months ago, ISIS's spokesman called on the organization's operatives in the Sinai Peninsula and Syria to attack communities in Israel. The spokesman also called on Muslims around the globe to spearhead the struggle to thwart US President Trump's Deal of the Century. The spokesman's call has not yet led to results on the ground but, in the ITIC's assessment, **it reflects an aspiration that exists among ISIS's leadership.**

◆ **The targeted killing of ISIS’s charismatic leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi by a US elite force.** Al-Baghdadi **was a dominant figure in ISIS’s leadership**, the final arbiter on military, religious and governmental issues. The dependence of ISIS’s leadership on Al-Baghdadi was absolute, and the organization operated without significant schisms or internal conflicts. His successor **Haji Abdullah**, a Sunni Iraqi and one of the founders of ISIS, still has to prove his leadership capabilities in the ideological and military fields and his ability to step into the shoes of his predecessor³.



**Right: The last photo of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in a video produced after the blow suffered by ISIS in Al-Baghouz. He looks tired and exhausted in the video (Akhbar al-Muslimeen, April 29, 2019).
Left: Photo of Haji Abdullah, distributed by the US Department of State (Al-Jazeera Channel, October 28, 2019). This photo was probably taken in Camp Bucca, the American detention facility in southern Iraq.**

- ▶ These defeats affected both **ISIS’s military capabilities** in Iraq and Syria and the **financial system** that financed the organization’s operations (its revenues from oil and from marketing oil products in 2014 were estimated at \$100 million per month). In addition, these defeats **eroded the ISIS brand**, which has been cultivated for years among Muslim communities around the world, including in the West. The image that it created enabled ISIS to enjoy a stream of volunteers to its ranks, which was **greatly weakened by the defeats** (many of the foreign fighters were killed in battle, some are in detention in Iraq and Syria, and some have returned to their home countries).
- ▶ **As a result, ISIS must undergo a process of change in its operating methods and in the goals that it set for itself**, as milestones for advancing the goal of establishing the Islamic Caliphate here and now. **This goal**, which distinguishes ISIS from Al-Qaeda and the other jihad organizations, **has not disappeared in the wake of the defeats**. However, ISIS’s pragmatic and prudent conduct has led it to **relinquish this vision for the time being and**

³ See the ITIC’s Information Bulletin from January 30, 2020: “Profile of Haji Abdullah, who succeeded Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as ISIS’s new leader”

focus on intensifying local and global activity in its core countries (Iraq and Syria) and the other provinces in Africa and Asia. An analysis of ISIS's activity over the past year indicates that **the organization has managed to survive the blows dealt to it, reorganize its ranks,** and sometimes even rear its head and (cautiously and measuredly) increase the scope of its guerrilla and terrorist activity.

► The challenges facing ISIS require the new leader, Haji Abdullah, **to strike a balance between the various approaches** in relation to the strategic road to realizing the vision of bringing back the caliphate. **Haji Abdullah and ISIS as a whole are trying to maneuver through the tension between ISIS's desire to survive** (including by avoiding escalation and showcase attacks at a time when the circumstances are not yet ripe) **and the need to strengthen the ISIS brand and mobilize resources and manpower** (which can be achieved through success on the battlefield and increased intensity and daring of ISIS's operations). **So far, ISIS has succeeded in this.**

Main developments since the fall of Al-Baghouz

► In the wake of the fall of Al-Baghouz (March 2019), ISIS lost all the areas under its control. As a result, the Islamic Caliphate turned from a **state-like entity into a terrorist and guerrilla organization**. As a result of this major change, ISIS was forced to relinquish its elements of civil governance and control, **and focus on terrorist and guerrilla attacks, accompanied by media and propaganda activity.**

► Despite the loss of territories and resources, **ISIS's activity as a terrorist and guerrilla organization affords it considerable advantages.** The main advantage is **flexibility in deploying its forces without any obligation to manage the life of the population in the areas under its control.** Another advantage enjoyed by ISIS is **its reduced vulnerability to attacks by the United States** and the International Coalition and local armies, **since its operatives maintain a low profile and are not obligated to retain and defend territory.** All of this enables ISIS to **maintain its survival and organize itself in advance of escalating the attack in Iraq, the center of its activity, when circumstances change.**

► Another important characteristic of ISIS in its new format is **decentralization of control, which means increasing the freedom of action of its provinces throughout Africa and Asia.** ISIS provinces outside the core countries (Iraq and Syria) are based primarily on **local groups** (sometimes reinforced by foreign operatives), which fight primarily for the

advancement of local goals, but have pledged allegiance to ISIS's leader out of ideological identification, economic interests (receiving aid) and attraction to the "ISIS brand." These groups have even achieved success in the fighting against the armies of local regimes (**ISIS's Sinai Province** and its **West Africa Province** are prominent examples of this).

► The control of the new leadership, led by Haji Abdullah, through a supervisory committee in charge of the provinces, **continues to exist**, but **it has weakened compared to the rise in the freedom of action of the provinces outside Iraq and Syria**. This is not only because of the geographical distance, but also because **Haji Abdullah has yet to prove himself, ISIS's branding has been damaged, its operational and logistical capabilities have weakened, and ISIS's ability to assist the provinces outside the core countries has decreased**.

Changes in ISIS's strategic environment

► The past year has been marked by a **reduction in forces and a shift in the attention and priority of the US and the International Coalition from the campaign against ISIS to the confrontation with Iran and its proxy Shiite militias operating in Iraq**. The priority given to the campaign against Iran **stems from the Americans' perception of Iran as the main threat and possibly also from underestimation of ISIS's military capabilities and the high risk potential of its resurgence and rearing its head**.

► The exchange of blows between the United States and Iran, and the ongoing rocket fire at US bases and facilities in Iraq (mainly by Kataeb Hezbollah⁴, the prominent Iranian proxy), **led to a number of bases in Iraq being vacated and transferred to the Iraqi army** (March-April 2020). The official reason given for this was the success in the campaign against ISIS. In the ITIC's assessment, however, it stemmed from the need to strengthen the security of the forces in Iraq in view of the threats against them. In the ITIC's assessment, **this marked a turning point in the campaign against ISIS by the US-led International Coalition: from an offensive strategy against ISIS to an operating method that also includes transferring resources to defend the forces**.

► These developments are in addition to the **COVID-19 outbreak in Iraq**. As a result, a number of International Coalition countries (including Germany, Britain, France, the Netherlands, Spain and Canada) **pulled their forces out of Iraq** (March-April). These

⁴ See the ITIC's Information Bulletin from July 14, 2020: "Kataeb Hezbollah: Profile of a Shiite-Iraqi militia handled by the Qods Force to promote Iranian interests in Iraq"

countries have stated that their pullout from Iraq is temporary but it appears that even at the end of the COVID-19 crisis, at least some of the forces will not return to Iraq.

► Nevertheless, **the activity of the US and International Coalition in Iraq, the center of ISIS's activity, is still ongoing, albeit at a lower profile.** From time to time, they have been successful, although they have not been able to prevent an increase in the intensity of ISIS's attacks in recent months. At this stage, most of these attacks are mostly routine (mainly planting IEDs, targeted killings, shooting attacks), with a small number of high-profile attacks, **but they will apparently increase.**

It appears that ISIS is well aware of the change that is taking place in the strategic environment in Iraq, the most important arena of its activity. Therefore, at this stage, it prefers to act cautiously and increase the scope of its activity gradually, while avoiding showcase attacks that may lead to retaliation. While under interrogation, ISIS's detainees stated that **the organization is concentrating its efforts on reorganizing its forces in Iraq and expects the International Coalition forces to leave Iraq, at which time it will increase the scope of its activity and will carry out more significant attacks** (Al-Hurra Channel, July 8, 2020).

Where is ISIS headed?

In the ITIC's assessment, despite the blows that it has suffered, ISIS's main vision remains intact: **the establishment of an Islamic caliphate.** However, on the way to realizing the vision, **ISIS is displaying a great deal of pragmatism and realism and is refraining from returning to extensive territorial control for the time being.** Another aspect of its pragmatic conduct is the prudent and cautious **management of its guerrilla and terror activity** in a way that does not endanger its forces.

► In the ITIC's assessment, ISIS's strategy throughout 2020 **will continue to be based on the following components:**

- ◆ **Continued ongoing guerrilla and terror activity in the core countries (Iraq and Syria), concurrently with the reorganization of its forces.** This is until ISIS feels that **the changes in the strategic environment allow it to increase the scope of its activities and the scale of its showcase attacks.** In the ITIC's assessment, showcase attacks that may be carried out consist of deadly suicide bombing attacks; freeing

prisoners from jail; attacking symbols of the regime; and deadly attacks among populations that “deviate” from ISIS’s version of Islam (the Shiites, for example).

◆ **Maintaining survival: in the ITIC’s assessment, ISIS will continue to attach major importance to maintaining its survival over other competing considerations** (such as the desire to spread and to carry out showcase attacks, which will strengthen the “ISIS brand”). Over the past year, ISIS has managed to maintain its survival in Syria, gradually increase its power in Iraq, and maintain the survival of the various provinces. ISIS has also survived the extensive campaigns conducted by the Egyptian security forces against its Sinai Province in recent years and the severe blows that it suffered in the Khorasan Province. **The tactics of guerrilla warfare and the observance of rules of caution and secrecy help it maintain its survival.**

◆ **Effort to expand its presence and improve its operating methods in the various provinces of Africa and Asia**⁵. In the ITIC’s assessment, ISIS attaches special importance to the activity of the **Sinai Province** (which displays considerable resilience against the Egyptian security forces); and the **Khorasan Province** (which has demonstrated its ability to recover from the severe blows suffered by its operatives in Afghanistan).

◆ **Maintaining unity within the ranks and preventing splits:** the blows suffered by ISIS, the weakening of the central control over the provinces outside Iraq and Syria, and the bitter ideological struggle between ISIS and Al-Qaeda, all **have the potential to lead to internal splits** (a common phenomenon in jihadi organizations). Up to now, ISIS has managed to maintain unity within the ranks and prevent splits and divisions even after the severe blows that it suffered. This is an important challenge that ISIS is trying to address by stressing its differentiation from Al-Qaeda, strengthening its local and global media activity and tightening its internal security control.

◆ **Increasing efforts in the war on hearts and minds:** ISIS had an extensive media network that played an important role in the organization’s heyday, at the time of the

⁵ On January 27, 2020, ISIS’s spokesman released an audiotape boasting, inter alia, that **ISIS had spread throughout the world**. In his announcement, the spokesman enumerated **14 provinces in which ISIS operates:** Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Sinai, Libya, Somalia, Khorasan (Afghanistan), Pakistan, India, the Caucasus, West Africa (Nigeria), Central Africa (the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Mozambique), Tunisia and Algeria (Turkey and East Asia can be added to these provinces, while the scope of activity of the provinces of Tunisia and Algeria is extremely low). According to a report in Al-Hurra (July 8, 2020) based on Iraqi and American sources, **ISIS comprises 14 provinces that are subordinate to the Appointed Committee, which is subordinate to ISIS’s leadership.**

Islamic Caliphate⁶. **The media network was damaged as a result of the blows suffered by ISIS, but it has survived** and continues to function with **ups and downs in the scope and quality of its activity** (as a result of a lack of resources and skilled manpower, coupled with external pressure against it). In the ITIC's assessment, **ISIS will strive to upgrade the media network by allocating funds and recruiting professionals**. This is because it perceives its media capability as an important tool for raising the morale of its operatives, recruiting new operatives from abroad, fundraising, strengthening the link between the leadership and the provinces, addressing the war on hearts and minds against Al-Qaeda, and cultivating the image of the new caliph.

In the ITIC's assessment, changes in ISIS's strategic environment in Iraq and Syria **will greatly affect its conduct in the coming year**. The Iranian strategy of removing the American forces from Iraq **serves ISIS well**, because the US army's departure **may weaken the pressure exerted on it and undermine the fighting capabilities of the Iraqi security forces**. However, should ISIS feel that the strategic circumstances have changed and a security vacuum has been created, **it may once again rear its head by escalating the fighting in Iraq** (making efforts that it spills over into Syria as well). In the ITIC's assessment, **the possible strengthening of ISIS in Iraq will increase the motivation of ISIS's operatives in the various provinces, and possibly elsewhere as well**.

Terrorist attacks against Israel and the Jewish People

- ▶ Since ISIS's establishment, **fighting against enemies from within and without has been its top priority**. The campaign against them overcame the desire to "liberate" Palestine and bring it back to the fold of Islam, whose implementation was postponed to the more distant future. **This priority has not changed fundamentally**, but in view of possible developments in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (increased Palestinian terrorism following the annexation of territory), **ISIS may devote some attention to carrying out attacks on Israeli and Jewish targets than it did in the past**.
- ▶ On January 27, 2020, ISIS's new spokesman called on the organization's operatives in the Sinai Peninsula and Syria to attack Israeli communities. The spokesman also called on

⁶See the ITIC's study from February 21, 2019: "ISIS's media network: Developments in 2018 and future courses of action"

Muslims in Palestine and around the globe to spearhead the struggle to thwart US President Trump’s Deal of the Century. **So far, the spokesman’s call has not yet led to results on the ground** because ISIS has diverted its attention and capabilities to its struggle for survival in Syria and Sinai. In the ITIC’s assessment, **reducing pressure on ISIS may increase the likelihood of it carrying out an attack or attacks against Israel and the Jewish People.** From ISIS’s perspective, this will afford it considerable prestige and will promote the goal of rehabilitating the brand.



Right: Poster with an inscription reading: “O Muslim, O slave of Allah! There is a Jew behind me, come and kill him.” This is based on an Islamic tradition relating to the Day of Judgment. Left: Poster showing a bomb about to land, with the English inscription: “O Jew, be careful, this is a chemical [weapon].” The word “soon” appears next to the falling bomb (Telegram, January 28, 2019)