



ISIS gaining in strength in the Iraqi arena

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Overview¹

Following the collapse of the Islamic caliphate, **ISIS is undergoing a process of change, being transformed from a state-like entity**, which in its heyday (2014) controlled vast territories in Iraq and Syria, **to a terrorist and guerrilla organization**. In the ITIC's assessment, **about 5,000-6,000 operatives** are active in ISIS's Iraq Province **furthering processes of rehabilitation and reorganization** (which are still ongoing). Apart from that, they **carry out intensive guerrilla and terror activities** against the Iraqi security forces and Shiite population **in the Sunni provinces of western and northern Iraq**.

- ▶ During 2020, **a sharp increase has been evident in the scope of ISIS's activity in Iraq** (within several months, the number of attacks rose from several dozen to over a hundred). **At the same time, there has been improvement in the "quality" of the attacks**. Apart from routine attacks (detonating IEDs, firing at Iraqi facilities, sniper shooting, and targeted killing of local opponents), **ISIS has carried out deadlier and more "painful" operations** (such as the elimination of senior Iraqi army officers, detonating car bombs against checkpoints and convoys, and even attacks in Baghdad, directed against the Shiite population). However, **ISIS still refrains from carrying out combined attacks, carried out by large-scale forces or mass-killing suicide bombing attacks** (a salient characteristic of ISIS's attacks when the organization was at the peak of its power).
- ▶ The Iraqi security forces, with the advice and support of the US and coalition countries, carry out ongoing counterterrorism activities against ISIS in the various provinces. **The Iraqi forces operating against ISIS are heterogeneous**, including the Iraqi army, Special Forces, Shiite militias operating as part of the Popular Mobilization (some of them supported by Iran), local Sunni militias affiliated with the Iraqi regime (the Tribal Mobilization), and Kurdish forces. During the last year, it seems that **the military activity of these forces**

¹ The Hebrew version of this document is available on the ITIC website. A complete English translation will soon be available.

against ISIS has weakened and the organization started to rear its head and gradually regain its operational capabilities.

► US CENTCOM Commander General Kenneth F. McKenzie recently announced that **the United States had decided to reduce its military presence in Iraq from about 5,200 soldiers to only 3,000.** According to Gen. McKenzie, the remaining soldiers will assist the Iraqi security forces to uproot the remnants of ISIS and secure the organization's defeat. In the ITIC's assessment, this description by Gen. McKenzie is **too optimistic and mainly stems from internal American political considerations.** An analysis of ISIS's presence and activity in Iraq indicates that ISIS operatives are not "remnants" but **rather an established terror organization, the strongest among ISIS's provinces in Asia and Africa. Furthermore, it is now undergoing a process of military buildup and improving its operational capabilities.**

► In the ITIC's assessment, if the US presence in Iraq is reduced, **this will mainly have a negative impact, in terms of morale and political effect, on the Iraqi regime and security forces.** Reducing US troop presence may be construed as abandoning the US commitment to maintain the campaign against ISIS, which began with the announcement of US President Barack Obama on September 10, 2014. Furthermore, the reduction of the US presence **may increase ISIS's morale and motivation to break forward in the Iraqi arena and increase its boldness,** as it did in the years following the withdrawal of US forces from Iraq in December 2011.

► In this context, Al-Hurra TV (a US channel in Arabic) reported that **according to ISIS operatives imprisoned in Iraq, at the present time, ISIS focuses its efforts on regrouping itself; however, after the withdrawal of the US and international coalition forces, ISIS will once again carry out showcase attacks and increase the scope of its activity** (Al-Hurra, July 8, 2020).

The structure of the study

► **Chapter One: ISIS's new strategy**

► **Chapter Two: The Iraqi arena**

- ◆ Overview
- ◆ Increase in the scope of ISIS's attacks
- ◆ Breakdown of attacks by provinces
- ◆ Improvement in the "quality" of the attacks

▶ **Chapter Three: Counterterrorism activity**

- ◆ Iraqi security forces counterterrorism activity
- ◆ Significance of the US announcement on the reduction of its presence in Iraq

▶ **Appendix:** Historical background: Milestones in ISIS's activity in Iraq