



GLOBAL EYE
INTELLIGENCE

ISIS in WEST ASIA & NORTH AFRICA

CONFLICT STUDIES REPORT



Executive Summary

The Islamic State (IS), commonly known as ISIS, has played a pivotal role in fueling instability across West Asia and North Africa (WANA). Despite losing significant territory in recent years, the group's persistent influence continues to threaten regional and global security. This report explores IS's origins, its enduring impact in WANA, and the evolving humanitarian crisis resulting from its activities.





Origins and Development of the Islamic State

IS traces its roots to the early 2000s, emerging from the violent aftermath of the Iraq War. Initially an offshoot of al-Qaeda, IS rebranded itself as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and declared a self-styled caliphate in 2014. At the height of its power, IS controlled vast swathes of territory in Iraq and Syria, proclaiming its authority over these regions.

The declaration of the caliphate attracted thousands of foreign fighters, transforming localized conflicts into a global jihadist movement. This transnational ideology spread into Libya, Yemen, and Egypt, where IS affiliates established strongholds and amplified the group's presence in the broader WANA region.

The Islamic State in West Asia: A Persistent Threat

In West Asia, IS's influence, particularly in Iraq and Syria, has caused unparalleled destruction. Although the group has been largely dismantled as a territorial entity, it remains a potent force, reverting to insurgent tactics such as guerrilla warfare and terrorist attacks. The ongoing instability in Iraq and the civil war in Syria provide fertile ground for IS to regroup and continue its operations.

IS has masterfully exploited sectarian tensions to deepen divisions between communities. By fueling internal strife and employing brutal tactics like mass executions and using civilians as human shields, the group has inflicted long-lasting psychological trauma on the populations of these regions.



The Islamic State in North Africa: Expanding Influence

IS's footprint in North Africa, although diminished, is still considerable. Libya, in particular, has become a crucial base of operations for IS. The group has taken advantage of the political fragmentation, especially in the southern Fezzan region, to establish a foothold. There, it engages in smuggling, human trafficking, and illegal trade, often in collaboration with local tribes.

In Egypt's Sinai Peninsula, IS's local affiliate, Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, continues to wage an insurgency against the Egyptian government. Despite ongoing counterterrorism efforts, the group persists, particularly targeting Egyptian security forces. Tunisia and Algeria also face IS-linked jihadist groups operating in mountainous border regions. These cells conduct sporadic guerrilla attacks, ensuring the continued presence of the terrorist threat across North Africa.



The Human Cost of IS's Activities

The humanitarian toll of IS's operations in WANA is staggering. Tens of thousands have been killed, with millions more displaced. Entire communities in Iraq and Syria have been decimated, leaving survivors traumatized and uncertain about their futures.

In North Africa, the violence unleashed by IS has torn families apart and destabilized societies. The massive displacement of people has overwhelmed neighboring countries, contributing to a refugee crisis of unprecedented scale, which has strained humanitarian resources and fostered instability beyond the region.





Global Implications and Future Risk

The reach of IS extends far beyond WANA. The group has inspired terrorist attacks across Europe, the United States, and other parts of the world. As a result, the threat posed by IS is not limited to its immediate sphere of influence but carries global ramifications.

A concerted international counterterrorism effort is urgently required to contain IS. However, military action alone will not suffice. Addressing the root causes of IS's rise—such as political instability, economic despair, and social fragmentation—is essential to achieving long-term stability.





Current Dynamics and the Jihadi Resurgence

The recent Hamas-led assault on Israel on October 7, 2024, has rekindled the global jihadi threat, with Iran-sponsored groups like Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Hezbollah, and the Houthis vowing to target Israeli, US, and Western interests. This assault signals an alarming new phase of collaboration between Iran and al-Qaeda, uniting former sectarian rivals against common foes.

Al-Qaeda's renewed call for jihadis to train in Afghanistan and revive Open-Source Jihad is particularly concerning for countries like India, where groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba are active. Meanwhile, the Houthis' cooperation with Al-Shabaab in the Gulf of Aden poses significant risks to India's maritime security and trade routes, further complicating the regional security landscape.

In Africa, IS and al-Qaeda continue to compete for influence, turning the continent into a battleground for proxy wars. These extremist groups exploit local conflicts and resources, with their actions having far-reaching geopolitical consequences.



Conclusion

The Islamic State remains a potent force despite suffering significant territorial losses. Its ability to exploit regional instability and social divisions ensures its continued relevance in both West Asia and North Africa. The recent escalation in jihadi activities, sparked by the Hamas-led attack on Israel, underlines the persistent threat extremist groups pose on a global scale.

Efforts to combat IS and similar organizations must go beyond military campaigns. A multifaceted approach, addressing political instability, economic inequality, and social fractures, is critical to reducing the influence of extremist groups and restoring long-term stability in WANA.

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