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THE ISLAMIC STATE FIVE YEARS LATER

edited by **Francesco Marone**



ISPI



On June 29th, 2014, after the Islamic State captured Mosul, the group's spokesman Abu Mohamed al-Adnani, shocked the world with the publishing of an audio message proclaiming the establishment of a "Caliphate". Five years later, much has changed, as a number of military offensives have managed to free the territories that had been conquered by the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. Despite losing its base and thousands of fighters, the threat posed by the jihadist group persists, as its affiliates and sympathizers around the globe continue to engage in propaganda and in violence.

How has the organization's ideology evolved over time and how has this affected internal dynamics? What has happened to its leadership? And what is to be done with the thousands of jihadists and their family members who are detained in Syria and Iraq?

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The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI)

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THE ISLAMIC STATE'S LEADERSHIP TODAY

Daniele Raineri
Il Foglio

At the height of the Islamic State's (IS) success, in 2013 and 2014, a constant flow of information emerged on social media about the group's leaders. Though not enough to endanger the group's leadership, it did give a general idea of its chain of command. At times IS actively contributed to this through its propaganda, while exercising care not to compromise security.

In 2014, it was simple: Abu Bakr al Baghdadi was the "Caliph", Abu Muhammad al Adnani was his spokesman and second in command, Abu Muslim al Turkmani (also known as Abu Mutaz al Qureshi) was the deputy in charge of Iraq, Abu Ali al Anbari was the deputy in charge of Syria, Umar al Shishani was the exotic commander from Georgia who was often shown in propaganda, and Turki al Binali and Abu Bakr al Qahtani were the group's most prominent preachers. The rest of the leadership was left in the shadows for understandable reasons.

Today Al Baghdadi is the only survivor of that group of leaders. After the collapse of the Islamic State as a territorial entity, that flow of information has been greatly diminished. Prisoner interrogations and internal dissidents' allegations fail to compensate. The Islamic State has decided to return to a regime of almost absolute secrecy – as was the case before 2013 – in which the names of the commanders are mostly hidden and eulogies are rare. Photos and videos no longer offer the same mass of information.

Today IS leaders are under pressure and disclosure is to be avoided. The structure of the organization has also probably changed compared to 2014, since many bodies dealing with governance and administration are no longer needed. Thus, drawing up a clear idea of IS leadership has become exceedingly difficult.

Spokesman Abul Hassan al Muhajir takes turns with Emir Abu Bakr al Baghdadi in spreading audio propaganda messages addressed to followers around the world. Al Muhajir is a foreign fighter and experts in Arabic accents posit that he is of either Saudi or Tunisian origins. Allegedly, he has been part of IS since it was called Tawhid wal Jihad (in 2003 and 2004) and operated under the command of Abu Musab al Zarqawi.

Daniele Raineri, journalist at Il Foglio



This is a standard procedure for choosing leaders: those that belonged to previous iterations are favored. According to “Mr Orange” (pseudonym used on Twitter), a jihadi expert, Muhajir’s voice appears in a 2004 video pledging solidarity “to the detainees in Cuba”, referring to the maximum security prison of Guantanamo Bay. We know neither the identity nor the nom de guerre of the wali (governor) of Iraq, probably one of the most prestigious roles in the group’s chain of command.

The wali of Syria could be “Haji Hamed” also known as “Abdel Qader”, who was alive as of 2018 according to statements by dissidents translated by IS expert Aymenn al Tamimi. The last time he was allegedly seen was in the Baghouz pocket, where many commanders were killed or captured before the liberation in March 2019.

The military emir of the Islamic State in Syria could be an Iraqi national in his fifties, Taha al Khuwayt also known as Haji Abd al Nasir, from Tal Afar, a town east of Mosul that was the birthplace of many senior leaders of the group. The man has been designated as a Special Global Terrorist by the US government. Syria is where the Islamic State is currently waging the most intense insurgency. We do not know the name of any other senior military commander in Iraq or Syria. One of the most prominent was Gulmorod Khalimov from Tajikistan, who was allegedly killed in action in 2017. No confirmation has yet been issued of his death.

We do not know the names of the current religious officers of the Islamic State Central (where Central means the original core of the group operating in Iraq and Syria). The current head of media is unknown, although we can list some of his predecessors killed between September 2016 and December 2018: Abu Mohammed al Furqan, Abu Hakeem al Urduni and Abu Abdullah al Australi.

The same can be said of the head of the Amniyat, the much feared security services, who had important prede-

cessors such as Adnani and Abu Ahmad al Iraqi and then, allegedly, Abu Luqman al Raqqawi until his unconfirmed death in April 2018.

Interestingly, there are two quite secretive leaders belonging to the old guard – when the group still called itself “The Islamic State of Iraq” – whose names still appear at times. One is Abu Ubaydah Abd al Hakim al Iraqi, mentioned in a dispute with al-Qaeda in 2011 and who also authored a letter to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in 2014.

The other is “Haji Abdullah”, described by a dissident as the deputy of Abu Bakr al Baghdadi in 2014. He could be the same Abu Abdullah al Hasani, cited as the new deputy of the group in the official statement released on May 16 2010, which announced the appointment of Abu Bakr al Baghdadi as leader of the Islamic State. There are reasons to believe they are still alive.

In 2014, Baghdadi tried to deploy some of his most trusted men abroad to create new divisions of the Islamic State. In Libya, the emir of the local branch could be one of his emissaries, Abu Muaz al Tikriti, also known as Abdul Qader al Najdi. He was sent there in the summer of 2014.

We also know that Abu Ali al Anbari was tasked to lead the group in Yemen, but getting him there was deemed too risky. Another top lieutenant of Baghdadi, Abu Muslim al Turkmani, was instrumental in the creation of the IS branch in Afghanistan (we do not know whether he actually traveled there and was killed in Iraq in August 2015), according to researcher Paweł Wójcik.

Today the trend is different. The leaders are locals and appointed by the Islamic State Central. In early March, Baghdadi allegedly named Abu Abdullah Ibn Umar al Barnawi (Barnawi, meaning from the Nigerian state of Borno) the new leader of the Islamic State in West Africa.



THE EVOLUTION OF THE ISLAMIC STATE AND ITS INTERNAL FRAGMENTATION

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When groups are described as monoliths it is typically the result of lacking information on the true internal dynamics within the group. The same goes for the Islamic State, al-Qaeda and likeminded Jihadi groups. The general impression of the Islamic State is that of an ideologically stringent, organizationally coherent and hierarchically centralized group. As information slowly drops¹ from the inside a less rosy picture is emerging though.

On an ideological level the Islamic State and its predecessors were always in conflict with al-Qaeda on certain issues mainly related to how they viewed their operational context (*waqi'*) and the necessary strategy to reach their objectives. It is well known how the Iraqi group identified the Shia as the main threat, prioritized territorial consolidation² (*tamkin*) and perceived itself to be superior vis-à-vis rivalling Jihadi groups. Al-Qaeda in contrast adopted a population-centric approach. The group leadership attempted to institutionalize a pragmatic attitude to manage relations with local populations while seeking cooperation with other Jihadis. The state or the *caliphate* could wait.

That was the situation in 2014 when the two groups split and started to fight one another. Over the following five years, the Islamic State would largely continue on the same ideological path except changes in its enemy definition and its geographical scope: from mid-2014 the group began its campaign of terror in the West and some months later initiated an expansion process outside the Levant.

But, looking more closely it becomes clear that from the very beginning in 2014 the Islamic State faced internal challenges³ from elements within the rapidly growing group who differed on key issues of theology and leadership. The primary fault line concerned the conditions and scope of "excommunication" (*takfir*) which caused a division⁴ between the so-called *binaliyya* (or moderates) and *hazimiyya* (or extremists) named after the late Islamic State ideologue Turki al-Binali and the Saudi theologian Ahmad al-Hazimi, respectively. Boiled down, the rather complex issue raging between the two factions centered on two theological concepts:

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- *Udhur bi-l-jahl* (ignorance as an excuse); if somebody committing *shirk* (polytheism) or in critical ways breaks Islamic law due to ignorance should be considered a *murtadd* (apostate).
- *Takfir al-adhir* (takfir of the excuser); if one should excommunicate a person who refrains from or rejects excommunicating someone who commits *shirk* out of ignorance (those who accept *udhur bi-l-jahl*).

Obviously, differences in opinion on these matters were important for how the Islamic State would approach not just local populations but also other militant groups. Already in 2014 radical elements within the group began to cause problems internally because they did not accept ignorance as an excuse and even promoted endless excommunication of those who differed. Taken to its extreme that would imply excommunicating their own leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in case he did not concur with them. Early on, this internal factionalization remained a minor issue because the extreme position only gained support among fringe elements of the group. But, in 2016-18 the problem resurfaced with detrimental impact on internal cohesion taking the form of an open war involving discursive attacks, arrests and assassinations between leading figures from the opposing factions for control over powerful institutions and the support of al-Baghdadi.

Further aggravating the situation, in March 2019 the Islamic State would finally lose its last enclave of territorial control in the Levant albeit still controlling territory in other countries. The loss of territorial control entailed a return of its *modus operandi* to clandestine insurgency and guerrilla warfare initiating a "Battle of Attrition" (*ghazwat al-istinzaf*) against the Syrian and Iraqi regimes. Already in the Summer 2018 the group began restructuring⁵ its organizational system through merging its provinces (*wilayat*) in countries like Syria, Iraq and, later, Yemen. Despite al-Baghdadi's attempt in his second ever video appearance in April 2019 to transmit the image of a cohesive and centralized organization, his group is losing its center of gravity and organizational hierarchy. The remains are a fragmented⁶ but ever lethal group.

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THE ISLAMIC STATE IN THE WEST

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Jihadist mobilisation in the West is not a new phenomenon. However, it has witnessed a substantial increase in recent years – especially after the sudden rise of the so-called Islamic State (IS) or Daesh, which proclaimed its “Caliphate” on 29 June 2014.

In recent years, the threat posed by IS in the West has been manifested in at least two main ways: on the one hand, the increase of jihadist attacks in the region and, on the other hand, the unprecedented flow of foreign fighters heading to the territory of the Caliphate.

The most visible and dramatic dimension of jihadist radicalization concerns terrorist violence. Western countries have witnessed a boost in the number of jihadist attacks perpetrated on their soil in recent years, especially after 2014.

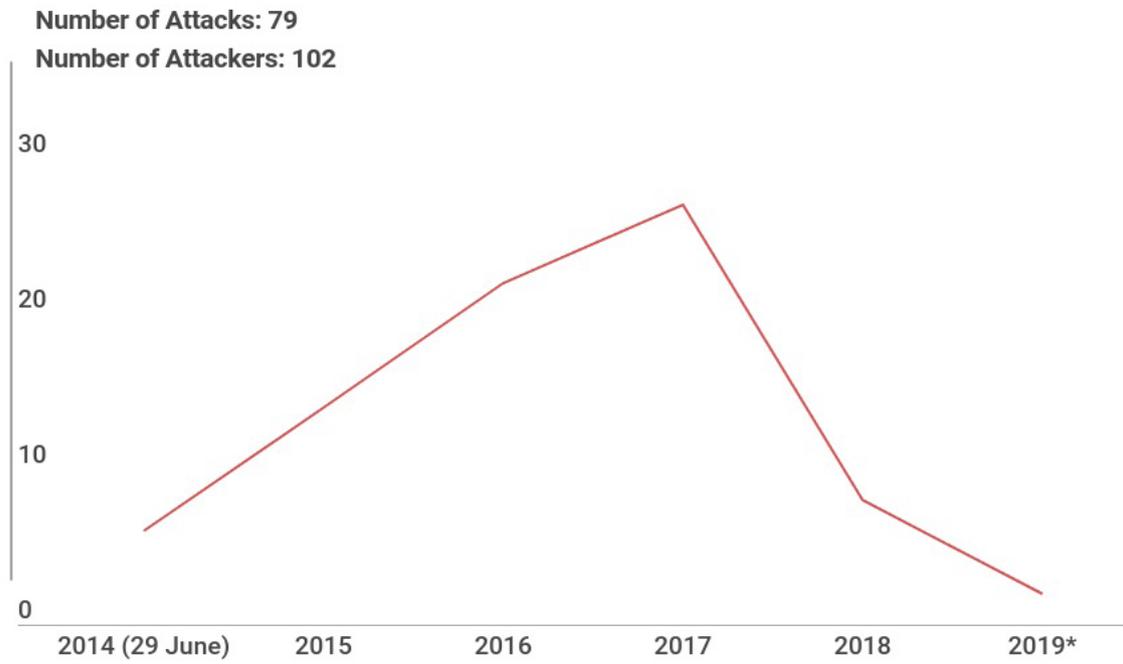
According to ISPI’s original database, 79 terrorist attacks inspired by jihadist ideology were carried out in the West, in five years, between June 2014 and June 2019¹: 8 attacks in 2018, 27 attacks in 2017, 22 in 2016, 14 in 2015 and 6 in 2014. In the first half of 2019, at least 2 jihadist attacks were carried out. In total, the attackers were 102.

During the 2014-2019 wave, the most affected country was France (which saw 27 attacks on its territory) followed by the United States (20 attacks), the United Kingdom (9), Germany (8), Belgium (5), Canada (4), Austria, Denmark, Finland, Spain, and Sweden and the Netherlands (one attack each). These acts of violence resulted in a death toll of over 450 victims and about 2,000 injured. The decline of the jihadist terrorist threat in the West after 2017 is even more evident in terms of lethality. In fact, the last incident that killed more than 5 people took place in October 2017 (with the Manhattan ramming attack).

If it is true that few attacks were carried out by full-fledged IS members who were acting under direct orders from the organization’s leadership, it is also true that, according to available information, the other attacks were perpetrated by individuals who had some form of connection to the Islamic State (or marginally to other jihadist groups) or, less often, were at least inspired by its extremist message.

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Attack Frequency June 2014 - June 2019



Even if there is not always a close correspondence between claims and reality, it is worth mentioning that, according to the ISPI database, the Islamic State officially claimed responsibility for 28 attacks out of 79 (35%), while 50 attackers out of 102 (49%) expressly pledged allegiance to the organization.

In addition to these “completed” attacks, a significant number of plots have been thwarted by authorities. For example, according to recent research,² over the 2014-2018 period, at least 41 “well-documented” jihadist terrorist plots (and an even greater number of vague plans) were foiled in Western Europe alone. Interestingly,³ “even though the number of attacks decreased in Europe in 2018, there was higher plot activity by jihadis in Europe last year than any given year before 2015, and several foiled plots were potentially very lethal”. Nearly all plots have been linked to IS. Ultimately, terrorist attacks and, more generally, terrorist plots since 2014 confirm that the Islamic State has clearly been the protagonist of jihadist terrorism in the West.

As is well-known, another key phenomenon of the jihadist mobilisation in the West is the large wave of foreign fighters heading to IS-controlled territories. At a worldwide level, more than 40,000 individuals may have joined insur-

gent groups in the Caliphate in Syria and Iraq. Over 5,000 foreign fighters are estimated to hail from the West.

Departures of foreign fighters affected Western and, in particular, European countries in an uneven fashion. According to available estimates,⁴ France saw the largest number of “travellers” (around 1,900), followed by Germany (over 900), the United Kingdom (around 900), and Belgium (around 500).

In contrast, Southern European countries such as Italy⁵ and Spain⁶ have relatively modest national contingents, with 139 and 230/235 foreign fighters respectively (including a minority of non-IS affiliates), which means about 2 and 5 jihadist emigrants per one million people – compared to approximately 43 in Belgium).

A common fear relating to foreign fighters has to do with the so-called “blowback effect”: namely, the risk that a number of combatants may return to their home countries to conduct or at least support a terrorist attack; mujahidin may take advantage of the training, the experience, the knowledge, the connections and the social status acquired at the front to strike at home.



Among the 102 jihadists who carried out attacks in the West since 29 June 2014, 14 were former foreign fighters – 11 of them with the Islamic State. While representing a minority among perpetrators, many of them participated in particularly lethal attacks, such as the November 2015 massacre in Paris. Additionally, returnees may also be involved in support activities (indoctrination, logistical and/or financial assistance, etc.).

In general, the role of the Islamic State is less visible today in the West compared to a few years ago. However, the jihadist threat throughout the region is still serious.

In terms of organizational pull factors, the self-proclaimed Caliphate is no longer a powerful magnet in Syria and Iraq, but other armed conflicts in the Muslim world could have an impact, even more in places that may feature a Western military presence. Furthermore, the loss of IS's territorial dimension (and its benefits) can reinforce its interest in the use of terrorism.

The jihadist message continues to be spread. The Islamic State has already proved that it can skillfully transform failures in the field into "successes" in propaganda. For example, the organization can develop the theme of "nostalgia" towards the lost utopia⁷ of the Caliphate. Probably great attention will still be devoted to evoking the many enemies of the organization, including precisely the Western "infidels", in order to motivate and mobilize sympathizers and militants. Communication and propaganda on the web, including encrypted platforms,⁸ is once again essential. In fact the internet remains, along with prison,⁹ a crucial environment for jihadist radicalization in the West, even in a phase of apparent decline.

On the other hand, several pathways of radicalization, at least at an advanced stage, are based on offline social ties associated with offline clusters. The formation of these territorial hubs¹⁰ may take place around organized structures (militant Salafist groups, radical mosques, etc.), charismatic personalities or tight-knit groups of friends and/or relatives and can explain the uneven geographical distribution of radicalization levels both among countries among areas or cities within the same country.

In conclusion, some important pull factors appear to be less relevant nowadays, especially after the fall of the Caliphate in the "Syraq"¹¹ area, but, in any case, many push factors are still at work and will hardly disappear soon.¹² Furthermore, jihadism in the West has already shown a cyclical nature. For all these reasons, despite the strengthening of counter-terrorism measures, the jihadist threat in the West is probably destined to remain significant in the years to come.

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THE REPATRIATION OF WESTERN FOREIGN FIGHTERS AND THEIR FAMILIES

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In June 2018, I co-authored an Op-Ed¹ in the Dutch newspaper *de Volkskrant* appealing to the Dutch government to take back the children of Dutch Islamic State (IS) fighters for legal and long-term security considerations. Now, one year later, the Caliphate as we once knew it has collapsed, and the discussion on what to do with the former IS “residents” now being detained in Syrian camps has broadened to the children’s fathers and mothers. At this moment, the camps reportedly² host, along with tens of thousands of Syrians and Iraqis, some 12.000 foreign women and children, as well as 8.000 fighters, including 1.000 foreigners. Behind those vast numbers are individual and often tragic stories, with the most famous one probably being that of Shamima Begum, who, at the age of 15 and together with two school friends, left the UK in February 2015 to join IS. She has lost all her three children, has been deprived of her nationality and has pled for her repatriation back to the UK.

Whereas Western states were reluctant to take responsibility for the products of their own society, the pressure from the side of, among other things, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF),³ the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC),⁴ the United Nations (UN)⁵ and US President Donald Trump⁶ has become such that States were forced to reconsider their policies. Slowly, a few states started repatriating, mostly women and children, but sometimes also male fighters.⁷ Occasionally, governments were forced by court orders⁸ to bring back children or specific adults so that they could be tried for alleged crimes.

Nonetheless, doubts remained, also in view of the fact that repatriation of the children may lead to the repatriation of the mothers as well,⁹ or because of a lack of evidence,¹⁰ or no laws at all,¹¹ to prosecute suspects upon return,¹² making some states and commentators suggest it would be better to prosecute the foreign fighters and the families in the region, either by national courts¹³ or an international tribunal.¹⁴

There does not seem to be a strict obligation under international law to repatriate. Indeed, states have a relative discretion to decide upon the scope of their consular assistance. Nonetheless, there are several obligations under

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international law that would argue in favour of repatriation, especially in the case of children. One such obligation is the obligation, under UN Security Council Resolution 1373,¹⁵ to bring terrorists to justice. In more recent resolutions such as Resolution 2178,¹⁶ this obligation has been reiterated, now also in the more specific context of foreign terrorist fighters. Such an obligation would argue against the decision to just leave people – many of whom joined a terrorist organisation – in camps, hoping that other entities will do something about it. In other words: non-repatriation and prosecution constitutes a bar to accountability and the obligation to fight impunity. Very understandably, also the victims of IS' crimes have stressed the importance of alleged crimes being properly investigated and prosecuted so that justice can be done.

In addition, the specific position and needs of children must be taken into account. According to Article 3 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC),¹⁷ states “undertake to ensure the child such protection and care as is necessary for his or her well-being” and “the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration”. Other provisions of the CRC are also relevant, such as the rights to education and especially health that are not (sufficiently) being provided in the camps. Indeed, and unfortunately, many children have already died because of the poor conditions in the camps. Even though the CRC stipulates that “States Parties shall respect and ensure the rights set forth in the present Convention to each child within their jurisdiction [emphasis added]”, all of the above strongly suggests that states should repatriate and take care of the children having a link with the state of origin, rather than leaving them in the misery of the camps, especially now that the temporary guardians of the children (the SDF and relief organisations) have asked the states of the foreign fighters several times to take their responsibility.

Of course, it should be stressed¹⁸ that the discussion of repatriation and possible prosecution in the states from where the parents had left for Syria and Iraq is no negation of the sovereign right of each state to prosecute crimes that have been committed on their territory (territoriality principle). However, since there is a considerable risk that this would lead to people being tortured (Syria¹⁹) or tried

after proceedings which do not respect human rights (Iraq²⁰), this is not a serious option for countries that claim to uphold the rule of law or further the international legal order.

Also from a security dimension, repatriation and possible prosecution of the foreign fighters and their families is arguably the best solution. Admittedly, bringing back people who have spent time with IS is not without risks. If not properly monitored, they could be involved in attacks, thereby using their combat skills acquired in the Levant. Nonetheless, the risks are arguably even greater – and this has also been established empirically²¹ – when nothing is done with these people at all, as is currently the case.

The camps are overcrowded and its detainees prone to further radicalisation and recruitment while being in legal limbo. Countries must be very careful not to create a Camp Bucca 2.0, the infamous Iraqi detention centre which played an important role in the establishment of IS in the first place. In addition, persons may disappear off the radar or may be set free after questionable trials,²² thus not only escaping (true) justice but also creating a direct security problem for the countries and people in the region and an indirect security problem for other countries (and their people) to which they may relocate unseen at a later stage.

As regards children: now that many of them are still of very young age,²³ child care specialists have indicated that the security risks are minimal and that they are still able to treat them.²⁴ However, they have also warned that the longer we wait and the older they get, the more difficult this task will become. Instead of looking away from what has been described as “ticking time bombs”, the longer we wait and the more trauma these children will have to endure, the more realistic it will be that ticking time bombs are actually being created by the current state passivity.

Therefore, controlled²⁵ repatriation, prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration (and further monitoring if needed) would be a bolder but also – as argued elsewhere – a far wiser approach²⁶ from a long-term security perspective, for all countries and people involved. This is an international problem that should be responded to in an equally

international manner, characterised by solidarity and with states (by taking care of their foreign fighters and their families), sharing and dividing responsibility, thus making the bigger and seemingly insurmountable problem smaller and thus more manageable. It is time to act now!

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THE ISLAMIC STATE IN SYRIA AND IRAQ

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Five years ago, speaking from the pulpit of the ancient al-Nuri mosque in Mosul, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi proclaimed the rise of the “Islamic State” (IS). Under his personal guidance, the group was set to take control and expand its territories across Iraq and Syria, to establish a transnational “Caliphate” that was meant to be the home for all Muslims in the region and beyond. IS thus spread like wildfire all over the Middle East attracting foreign fighters from all over the world. In 2015, the moment of largest territorial expansion, the group controlled over one third of Iraq and Syria, with provinces proclaimed within an arch of crisis stretching from North Africa to South East Asia.

However, the Caliphate’s dream of statehood did not last long. Under the aegis of the US led international coalition, military campaigns for the liberation of IS-held cities began to bear fruit already in early 2015, when IS militants were driven away from key cities like Tikrit and Tal Abyad. 2016 was then marked by continuous battles and successes of the international coalition both on the Iraqi and Syrian ground. Eventually, the announcement of the liberation of Mosul in July 2017 and the following liberation of Raqqa, in October, respectively the Iraqi and Syrian strongholds of IS, were met with celebrations and the desire to turn the page on one of the darkest chapters of these countries’ recent history.

The rapid succession of liberation campaigns, however, and especially the final, most recent successes that have been so much acclaimed by the international community, have diverted the attention from what was remaining.

In Syria, for instance, while Baghouz (the very last IS stronghold in Syria, across the crucial zone alongside the Iraqi border) was liberated in March 2019, it is absolutely premature to claim that the terrorist organization has been obliterated in the country. Despite the fact that its state apparatus has been destroyed, thousands of IS sympathisers are said to have moved underground and will likely continue to have an impact on the future of the country.

Similarly, in Iraq IS has not disappeared. Despite having lost control of major cities and oilfields, and despite having lost much of its military capability, especially in Central-Northern Iraq,¹ the terrorist organization still carries on

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guerrilla activities, demonstrating itself more than able to carry out an aggressive insurgent activity.² Moreover, while the average number of IS attacks by month has actually decreased, attacks have increased.³

In other words, victory might have been celebrated too soon. Today, although the IS military capacity seems nothing compared to five years ago, its threat is far from being neutralized, as its territorial defeat over the Iraqi and Syrian ground has not coincided with the end of the organization, rather with a transformation of it.

How is this transformation taking shape? The Islamic State's new phase seems to be characterized by a shift from heavy battle on the "mother front", Iraq and Syria, to smaller/lighter activities in a multitude of local fronts all over the world. On the one side, this is an unavoidable choice, as little remains to be done in Iraq and Syria, as room for manoeuvre has dramatically shrunk; on the other, expanding outwards is also instrumental in assuring new followers. The numerous attacks claimed by IS all over the world (Saudi Arabia, Congo, Libya, Sri Lanka, etc.) are a clear sign of this.

Some insights on the new tactics to be adopted have even been made clear by the IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in a video released by the IS media network on April 29, 2019. For the very first time since July 2014, the self-proclaimed Caliph made a public appearance in an 18-minute video, himself looking as firm and steady as in his previous public show up, but in a definitely much less triumphant setting. The video was released with a clear objective in mind: demonstrating that neither the Caliphate nor its leader can be written off as dead. A month after losing Baghouz, al-Baghdadi's words sounded like a desperate attempt to divert attention from the decline of the organization following its territorial losses, to re-launch the jihad, which must continue. Addressing IS franchise groups and supporters all over the world, the leader's words also wanted to remind the public that the Caliphate is a global organization, and that its territorial defeat in Iraq and Syria will not stop it.

The new strategy that the terrorist group has adopted is that of a "war of attrition": terrorist activities in Iraq and Syr-

ia should be continuously carried on, however the Islamic State's reach must be expanded as much as possible, in order to connect with distant militant groups and attract them into its orbit. Enemies must be exhausted with unpredictable, dislocated attacks of any nature (suicide bombings, roadside bombings, targeted assassinations, starting fires, sniper attacks), which are difficult to be traced and prevented.

Five years later, the devastation left behind and the continuous security operations remind of the near past. The shadows hanging over the future of IS are essentially twofold. First of all, while the IS no longer possesses any territory under its administration, the counting of deadly attacks has not stopped. In Iraq, numerous security incidents allegedly orchestrated by IS have affected areas stretching from Sinjar (on the border with Syria) to villages south of Mosul and other provinces to the north and east of Baghdad. The group has also set fire to agricultural areas that have devastated crops in multiple parts of Syria and Iraq⁴ representing a clear manifestation of the group remaining capabilities and will.

Second, and probably most importantly, while the Caliphate's ambition to establish a State for the whole umma has not been met, and its state apparatus have been entirely destroyed, the message that it brought has not been cancelled and will hardly be. Unless its message is eradicated at its very root, the risk that it might encounter the support (or, at least, the non-opposition) of populations – as it once did – will always remain.

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THE ISLAMIC STATE IN KHORASAN

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The Islamic State in Khorasan (IS-K) expanded rapidly in Afghanistan in 2015-17, but during 2018 the crisis of the Caliphate in Syria and Iraq started eventually to affect it. Although the number of IS members moving to Khorasan from Syria and Pakistan was at this stage still small, news of the state of near terminal crisis inevitably spread to the ranks of IS-K, affecting morale negatively. Even greater was the inability of the Caliphate to transfer funds to IS-K. Although funds continued accruing to IS-K from the Gulf countries, the organisation did not manage to increase its revenue collection in Afghanistan (the only part of Khorasan where it controlled significant portions of territory) and its overall funding was declined during 2018.

By the summer of 2018 IS-K was losing the ability to sustain its operations effectively in the areas more remote from its centre of gravity in eastern Afghanistan. In other words, it started appearing over-stretched. In August of that year IS-Khorasan suffered its first serious defeat on the battlefield, with the loss of its base in Derzab (North-western Afghanistan) to the Taliban. IS-K sources were admitting in September 2018 that their numbers were going down.

During the second half of 2018 IS-K activities declined markedly. IS-K did not launch any new major offensive against the Taliban in the east, and kept a low profile elsewhere (north-east and south). In Kabul IS-K remained active with a string on indiscriminate bombings in the second half of 2018, but in the first half of 2019 the pace of its operations there decreased considerably.

Doubts about IS-K's viability started growing. But IS-K was not doomed yet. It took time for the leadership of IS-K to take the decisions that it needed to take in order to secure the funding required to expand its operations again. Efforts to raise that revenue from the mining sector in Afghanistan failed to produce the desired results. In early 2019, however, the leadership of IS-K agreed to partially lift the ban on the narcotics trade, in exchange for hefty payments by a group of smugglers who had approached it.

With funding up again, IS-K was able to resume activities on a larger scale. In April it went on the offensive in Kunar,

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kicking the Taliban out of several districts, and later in the spring of 2019 went on the offensive in Nangarhar province. Its ranks were expanding again, not only with new recruits, but also thanks to new arrivals from Syria (mostly Central Asians) and a new wave of defections from the Taliban and jihadist groups orbiting around al-Qaeda, such as the TTP (Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan), the remnants of the IMU (Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan) and similar groups. This is important because it brought into IS-K hundreds of experienced fighters. IS-K's leaders believe that there is great potential for attracting many more, as opposition to peace talks is widespread even among the Taliban's ranks.

The defections were motivated by the fear, in jihadist circles, that the Taliban would end the war through a peace agreement and would agree to sever relations with the jihadists, and possibly even collaborate in keeping them out of Afghanistan. IS-K then started appearing as the only organisation that could act as the main pillar of a jihadist alliance, intent to maintaining a safe haven in eastern Afghanistan. That in turn might in the future re-direct certain streams of funding from al-Qaeda affiliates, to IS/IS-K.

As of mid-2019, it seems clear that IS-K still considers the Taliban its primary enemy. In a sense, during 2019 the Taliban have become even more so the primary target of IS, as the terror campaign in Kabul had not resumed yet on a significant scale. Destroying the influence of the Taliban

in eastern Afghanistan is now an absolute priority for IS-K, which has to seize the opportunity for seizing complete dominance of Afghanistan-based global jihadism.

For the same reason, IS-K today concentrates more of its presence than ever in eastern and north-eastern Afghanistan (in Nangarhar, Kunar, Nuristan, Badakhshan). In this way, the problem of overstretching is resolved. At the moment the Taliban do not have the capacity in eastern Afghanistan to contrast IS-K effectively.

There is also a sense that after seeing its control over IS-K loosen in 2018, the central leadership of IS is trying to reassert itself; it has now nominated for the first time an Arab as governor of Wilayat Khorasan, so far only known with his nom de guerre, Abu Zar. Among the ranks of IS-K circulate insistent rumours that after much delay some senior figures of the Caliphate might be making their way to Afghanistan soon. This is not implausible, given that for any "senior figure" of IS, staying put in Syria does not seem a safer option.

It remains to be seen whether the IS and IS-K leaderships will demonstrate sufficient flexibility to affectively reach agreements with other jihadist groups, which would fall short of mergers into IS-K. In Syria, IS did not manage to form alliances with other jihadist groups even as the situation looked increasingly desperate.



THE ISLAMIC STATE IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

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The military defeats of Islamic State's (IS) fighters in Iraq and Syria led many to believe that the threat represented by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's organization was on the verge of extinction. The video-message¹ by the "Caliph" in April 2019, however, denied the persistent rumors that circulated about his death and proved above all his growing attention to sub-Saharan Africa. Addressing the mujahidin in the Sahel, al-Baghdadi urged them to carry on with the jihad being fought against Western armies and avenge the attacks suffered by the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. In the same public statement, the leader of the jihadist organization confirmed formal acceptance of the pledge of allegiance by Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, emir of Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), and the establishment of a *wilaya* ("province") in Central Africa (Islamic State in Central Africa Province). A few days before, he had claimed responsibility for an attack in the north-eastern region of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

The Islamic State's presence in sub-Saharan Africa reflects the need of the organization's leadership to respond to the loss of territories in the Middle East, giving wide appeal to the global expansion of the "Caliphate" through the multiplication of regional franchises willing to recognize the political and religious authority of the Caliph. The nature of the relations between IS and local organizations² in the African continent mainly concerns a symbolic dimension and the capacity of the IS "brand" to lure adherents and encourage the recruitment of new fighters, as well as the claim of an alleged doctrinal authenticity through which to legitimate its own actions in the perception of Islamic communities. The affiliation of radical African groups with the global jihadist network allowed them to obtain technical support, mostly in the field of media content production, and training, by receiving IS' trainers on the ground. It is difficult to agree on whether IS has contributed to financing its African regional franchises, and to what extent: it is possible, however, that financing lines, although existent, have been interrupted following the start of the dissolution process of the Islamic State in the Middle East.

The Sahel emerged as the geopolitical area where the activism of organizations affiliated with IS has unfolded with more forcefulness, occasionally establishing political and

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administrative systems or jihadist proto-states,³ grounded on services delivery to the benefit of neglected local communities, marginalized by state authorities. The Islamic State in the Greater Sahara⁴ emerged some years ago as a particularly important actor in the framework of (in)security balances in the “three frontiers” region bordering Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. The bay’a (“oath of allegiance”) of al-Sahrawi, leader of the Salafi-jihadist armed group, to al-Baghdadi, dates back to 2015. The then spokesperson of al-Murabitun, a jihadist organization operating in the Sahara-Sahel region, pledged allegiance to the Caliph. Mukhtar Bilmukhtar, a former al-Qaeda member in the Islamic Maghreb region, distanced himself from al-Sahrawi’s initiative, reaffirming his organization’s solid adherence to the Qaidist field. The conflict between the two factions triggered an internal split and gave birth to the new jihadist group, led by al-Sahrawi, while Bilmukhtar was appointed emir of al-Qaeda in West Africa.

The affiliation of ISGS to the Islamic State⁵ was formally accepted by al-Baghdadi in October 2016, several months after its establishment. It has launched many armed attacks against security forces and civilian populations in the Liptako-Gourma region so far. The ambush conducted by some militants of the organization on a US and Nigerian patrol on 4 October 2017 in Tongo Tongo, in the Tillabéri region of Niger, had worldwide resonance, having caused the death of four American soldiers. Attacks have increased in number and intensified in the last few months; simultaneously, the Caliphate’s attention to the region has been growing: in a recent al-Naba newsletter, the Islamic State claimed responsibility for the attacks conducted by the Sahelian mujahidin against *tawaghit* (transgressor of Allah’s will) governments, foreign “crusader” armies and *murtad-din* (apostate) tribal militias.⁶

In the Lake Chad basin area, the presence of the Islamic State is ensured by the activism of a jihadist organization, namely the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWA). The activities of ISGS and ISWA seem to be interconnected⁷ in most cases, and many of ISGS’ violent attacks have been generically attributed to ISWA by the Islamic State, although it is not clear whether an operational convergence does effectively exist between them.

Shortly after the proclamation of the Caliphate in Iraq and Syria in 2014, an armed group active in the northern region of Nigeria, Jamaat Ahl al-Sunnah li-l-Daawah wa al-Jihad (JAS), commonly known as Boko Haram and led by Abu Bakr Shekau, swore an oath of allegiance⁸ to the Caliph. Following the *bay’a*, the armed group renamed itself ISWA, and offered the Islamic State a stronghold on the continent, counterbalancing al-Qaeda’s influence, largely prevailing in sub-Saharan Africa, in the context of a strategic competition on the global jihadist battlefield. The break-up of a group of mujahidin led by Mamman Nur and Abu Musab al-Barnawi, was triggered by some disagreements over the organization’s strategies. The pledge of allegiance to IS by dissident militants urged al-Baghdadi to settle the leadership dispute between the two organizations: al-Barnawi’s group was officially embraced as the Islamic State’s province in West Africa, keeping the ISWA denomination. JAS was instead deprived of formal recognition from IS.

ISWA replaced a logic of indiscriminate violence against civil populations, carried out by Shekau’s militia, with a tactic of focused attacks against government and military targets – in the extreme north of Cameroon, the Diffa region in Niger, north-eastern Nigeria and south-western Chad – developing socialization processes⁹ with local communities and filling the states’ gaps in governance and services delivery. In the last few months, ISWA – counting on an estimated 3.500-5.000 members¹⁰ – went through a leadership change¹¹ backed by al-Baghdadi. An internal¹² rift related to the strategies of action and the prospects for negotiation with the Abuja government led to the killing of Mamman Nur by his own fighters and Abu Mus’ab al-Barnawi’s replacement at the head of the organization. ISWA’s current emir is Abu Abd Allah ibn Umar al-Barnawi.

The jihadist activities in the Horn of Africa – and particularly Somalia – rotate around the activism of Harakat al-Shabab al-Mujahidin, an armed organization established following the break-up of the Islamic Courts Union government experience in the country. The affiliation of al-Shabab to al-Qaeda’s network makes the region a Qaidist stronghold on the continent. Nevertheless, IS can count on the embeddedness of a rival organization, Abnaa ul-Calipha or Islamic State in Somalia (ISS), born as an outcome of a split



within al-Shabab, promoting an agenda markedly grounded on a global struggle prospect. In October 2015, Abd al-Qadir Mumin, military commander and ideologist of al-Shabab, leading some 300 mujahidin in the Puntland region, swore an oath of allegiance¹³ to al-Baghdadi, establishing a new organization. Though less important than al-Shabab in terms of numbers of members – around 200 fighters estimated – ISS contributed to enlarging the presence of IS in eastern Africa, gradually moving into southern Somalia by carrying out an increasing number of armed attacks.

The relationship between al-Shabab and ISS is openly hostile: in December 2018, al-Shabab accused ISS in a public statement,¹⁴ of dividing the mujahidin and jeopardizing the jihad in Somalia, inciting its own fighters to “attack and eliminate the deadly ‘disease’ of IS”. Several armed clashes¹⁵ between the two organizations have been observed recently, mostly in the Bari mountain region, in the north-east of the country. The formal acceptance of ISS as an Islamic State province has been discussed a lot; in December 2017 an IS video message mentioned an Islamic State province in Somalia, while following references to the presence of affiliated groups in the region have been very general. It seems, however, that IS granted the group some sort of material support at least until 2016.

In April 2016, Islamic State in Somalia, Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda (ISISSKTU) or Jahba East Africa made a bay’a to the Caliph. ISISSKTU is a transnational jihadist organization probably established¹⁶ as a result of the initiative of some of al-Shabab’s foreign fighters, critical of the group’s leadership, who decided to leave the organization due to the discrimination suffered by Kenyan, Ugandan and Tanzanian mujahidin. The effective capacity of the group is not clear but, according to analysts, Jahba East Africa is not operational.

On 18 April 2019, the Islamic State claimed responsibility for a terrorist attack in northern Kivu, Democratic Republic of Congo, while announcing the establishment of a new province in the region: the Islamic State in Central Africa. Actually, the same violent attack had already been ascribed to another local armed group, created in Uganda in the mid- 1990s and operational in the north-eastern region of the DRC. Allied Democratic Forces (ADF)¹⁷ or

Madinat Tawid wal-Muwahidin (MTM), has been deemed guilty of indiscriminate attacks against national army garrisons, international stabilization forces, civil populations and humanitarian actors.¹⁸ This circumstance,¹⁹ along with adoption of a rhetoric²⁰ rooted in a misleading use of Islamic religion and jihad aimed at establishing a Caliphate in Congo and Uganda, encouraged several experts to speculate on a re-branding operation of the ADF, for the purpose of obtaining stronger international consideration of their claims. According to other interpretations of the security dynamics in the region, the creation of an organization affiliated with IS would be the outcome of internal divides within the ADF. However, the most likely scenario refers to the existence of operational relations and apparent financial connections²¹ between the ADF and IS.²²

In Mozambique, the activism of a Salafi-jihadist armed group – al-Sunnah wal-Jamaah (ASWJ) or Swahili Sunna, led by Nuro Adremane and Jafar Alawi – with connections in coastal East Africa (Somalia, Kenya, Tanzania) dates back to October 2017. Bloody attacks,²³ mostly concentrated in the Cabo Delgado area bordering Tanzania, regularly came in succession in the following months. Violent and indiscriminate repression by Mozambican security forces worsened the insurgency: the death toll is of around 200 victims so far. ASWJ’s activities are directly related to a local dimension of socio-economic marginalization²⁴ and political exclusion²⁵ of Muslim communities in the coastal north, worn out by high youth unemployment rates²⁶ and excluded from the dividends of offshore oil exploitation. However, the media coverage of the insurgency over the last few weeks refers to the Islamic State’s claim of responsibility²⁷ for an attack in the Mocimboa area where, according to IS propaganda, the Mozambican army²⁸ had been repelled by the Caliphate’s mujahidin. Some analysts hypothesized²⁹ a spread of ADF’s activities in northern Mozambique, collecting evidence through the confessions of presumed jihadists found guilty and arrested. Nonetheless, a direct involvement of IS or its Central African franchise in Mozambique has been denied by the local authorities.

What seems to be a strengthening of the relationships between IS and armed groups in sub-Saharan Africa creates a situation of mutual benefit. On the one hand, it allows

the central organization to prove an unchanged capacity for action, diverting attention from the failures and severe defeats suffered in the Middle East that caused the dissolution of the so-called State. On the other hand, the affiliation with IS gives armed groups' claims, at the root of local insurgencies, a wider appeal and some sort of legitimacy. The local dimension³⁰ of armed groups' actions and political-economic claims mostly drives jihadist insurrections in sub-Saharan Africa. At a policy-making level, the affiliation of armed groups – deeply rooted in local ethnic,

political, economic and social dynamics – to global jihadist networks urges the adoption of counterterrorist strategies, through the implementation of security measures restricting individual rights and freedoms, under the “state of emergency” narrative. This policy orientation, rather than addressing the root causes of insurgencies, contributes to creating a social fabric potentially favorable to the insurgents and hostile to government forces, triggering radicalization processes and feeding the same security threats meant to be eradicated.

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THE ISLAMIC STATE IN SOUTH AND SOUTHEAST ASIA

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The heinous terrorist attacks against churches and hotels that killed 258 people and injured at least 500 in Sri Lanka on Easter Day, caused political turmoil and confirmed a worrying trend already on the rise in the last years: for Islamic State (IS), South and Southeast Asia are the next hotbeds of jihadism, and are an area where the terrorist organisation can sponsor local groups and merge its brand with local guerrillas.

After the attacks, the semi-official Amaq News outlet of the Islamic State took credit for the bombings, releasing pictures and videos of the attackers: their profiles – they all came from local, wealthy Muslim families – increased the jingoistic propaganda spread in several Southeast Asian countries, depicting the Muslim minorities as part of a wider conspiracy led by Middle Eastern powers to eradicate Buddhism and Hinduism, and finally convert the whole area to Islam.

In the aftermath of the attacks the Sri Lankan government found itself on the brink of a larger crisis, and eventually had to suspend the access to social medias for weeks, to prevent religious clashes and the spread of fake news. A closer investigation, however, showed that the attackers were part of *National Thowheed Jamath*, a splinter cell of a local radical group, and, according to the available information, they were not directly connected to the 32 alleged foreign fighters that had returned to Sri Lanka from Syria and Iraq, but the strategy deployed by IS in several other occasions proved successful once again: smaller groups were gathered under the Islamic State flag in a mutual exchange that was useful for both, with the previous gaining prestige and international attention, and the latter proving to be alive, active, and ready to spread its tentacles to the other side of the planet.

This process has already been occurring for years in the Philippines: in 2016, IS propaganda videos invited militants that were unable to reach the self-proclaimed caliphate in Syria and Iraq to travel to the southern islands of Mindanao. There, an odd coalition of local insurgent groups that had claimed allegiance to Daesh – Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters, Abu Sayyaf, Ansar al-Khilafah, Maute group – managed to take control of Marawi (a city with a population of 200,000 people), and keep it for months.

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When the battle for Mindanao between terrorists and Filipino troops was over, in October 2017, (after leaving 1,200 people dead), president Rodrigo Duterte declared victory over the Islamic State, however, further attacks soon proved him wrong: in July 2018 a suicide bomber from Morocco killed 11 people in Lamitan City in an attack that Islamic State media labeled as a "martyrdom" operation; last January IS claimed another operation, when two suicide bombers destroyed the Jolo Cathedral during Sunday mass, killing 23 people. An illustration circulated days after on Islamic State chat groups that showed Duterte kneeling on a pile of skulls and a militant with a dagger behind him, while the audio echoed a warning: "The fighting has just begun".

Militants from the Philippines share the dream of founding a Caliphate that spans among the many islands of the area with their Indonesian and Malaysian counterparts. While in these two nations Muslims represent the vast majority of the population – and Islamic State propaganda therefore can not play the card of the "oppressed minority", which is often employed in other contexts –, Indonesia and Malaysia have been facing their heavy share of attacks.

In Indonesia – the most populated Islamic country in the world, and with a constitution that recognizes five different official religions – jihadism is on the rise: its 477 prisons, meant to house 125,000 inmates, are overcrowded with 254,000 prisoners, and these facilities have turned into a dangerous recruitment pool of radicalisation. Radical clerics, such as the infamous Abu Bakar Bashir, convert inmates to jihadism on a daily basis, but this radicalisation has also spilled into day-to-day politics.

Extremist groups are in fact becoming increasingly vocal, gaining momentum after the incarceration of Ahok, Jakarta's former mayor and possible future president, who was indicted for blasphemy in 2017.

The country is still shaken after the 2018 Surabaya attacks, where three entire families – including 9-year-old-children – carried out suicide bombings against Christian churches and police stations. The attacks were again claimed by the Islamic State through Amaq News claimed, and Indonesia is now facing the heavy burden of a high number of foreign fighters coming back from Syria and Iraq.

Malaysia is seen more as a financial hub for planning attacks in the region, due to its porous borders and its capacity to attract foreign investments, however – according to local media – since 2013 the authorities have thwarted 23 planned attacks, including an assault against the closing ceremony of the Southeast Asian Games held in Kuala Lumpur in 2017.

Due to the Islamic State's influence, the whole region is experiencing a second wave of terrorism, after the first that spread through Southeast Asia between 2002 and 2008, starting with the 2002 Bali bombings. Between 2016 and 2017, Southeast Asia saw a 36 percent increase in the number of deaths caused by terrorism, and in 2017 alone jihadist groups supporting separatist and insurgent causes committed 348 terrorist acts, killing 292 people. The militants responsible for these attacks came from Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines and Thailand: while all these groups had different agendas, most of them are now converging on the Islamic State brand, that provides them a wider perspective, a stern ideology and an effective military training from terrorists already experienced on the battlefields of Syria and Iraq.

The Caliphate of the Archipelago is the old dream of bitter, radical ideologues from the area; it could be renewed by the meeting with IS forces, turning Southeast Asia into a nightmare.