



Regional Threat Outlook: Daesh, Iraq and Syria

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Key Judgements

- Post territorial defeat, Daesh has transitioned into a clandestine insurgency within Iraq and Syria, focused on destabilising local security structures and undermining governance.
- Islamist terrorist groups such as Daesh and Al Qaeda (AQ) play an important role in driving the terrorist threat to the UK; this role is primarily limited to attempts to inspire would-be attackers.
- In response to the threat of Daesh across Iraq, Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) continue to conduct counter-terrorism operations across the country, including within Iraqi Kurdistan.
- Counter-Daesh operations in Syria remain a low priority for the Syrian/Russian/Iranian Forces.
- The Western response to the threat posed by Daesh remains at risk because Iran views any Western presence in the region as a direct threat towards its own interests; this is particularly manifested in Iraq.

REGIONAL THREAT OUTLOOK: DAESH, IRAQ AND SYRIA

1. **The Threat from Daesh Globally and Regionally.** Regional and Coalition forces ended Daesh's control of territory across Iraq and Syria in March 2019. Since then, regular counter-Daesh operations have continued, but Daesh has displayed a resilience which remains a potent threat to the future stability of Iraq and Syria. Daesh has transitioned into a clandestine insurgency, resulting in the conduct of less sophisticated attacks, albeit at much lower levels than at its peak. At present, Daesh largely operate in ungoverned spaces where it benefits from greater freedom of movement permitting them to plan, prepare and facilitate attacks in Iraq and Syria. In both countries, Daesh's current activities are focused on destabilising local security structures, undermining governance, stoking sectarian tensions, polarising communities and generating revenue. Daesh will almost certainly aim to exacerbate and manage the deterioration in social, political, economic and ethnic conditions to project themselves as a credible alternative to current governance. The group remains ideologically driven and will continue to employ violence to support its long-term objective of re-establishing a Caliphate.

2. Elsewhere, Daesh still maintains a global network of affiliates and branches, to which it provides high-level strategic guidance and media and financial support. Affiliates in West Africa, South-east Asia and Egypt's Sinai Peninsula have been particularly active during the last twelve months, ensuring that Daesh continues to maintain momentum as a global insurgency. Reliance on these efforts enables Daesh to maintain its leading position within the global Salafi-jihadist movement. Although local affiliates and branches are deeply rooted in local conflicts, Daesh aspires to establish cohesive interlinked pockets of Islamic governance. However, competition with other extremist actors (such as al-Qaeda) and state counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism operations likely continue to serve as a limiting factor on further Daesh expansion.

3. **The Threat to the UK.** The threat to the UK continues to be driven by Islamist terrorism and emanates from individuals inspired by Islamist terrorism rhetoric. Since November 2019, there have been four terrorist attacks in the UK, all of which are assessed to have been motivated and inspired by Islamist terrorism. Despite the growth in the threat from individuals inspired by Islamist terrorism and the corresponding decline in the number of plots which are directed or enabled by terrorist groups overseas, Islamist terrorist groups overseas, such as Daesh and AQ, continue to play an important role in driving the terrorist threat to the UK. At present this role is primarily limited to attempts to inspire would-be attackers.

4. **Role of Iraqi and Kurdish Armed Forces.** In response to the threat of Daesh across Iraq, ISF continue to conduct counter-Daesh operations across the country, including within Iraqi Kurdistan, aiming to deny a resurgent Daesh the time and space to proliferate in areas such as Kirkuk, Salah ad Din, Anbar and Diyala provinces. On 13 September 2020, Iraq announced that the



ISF and Kurdish Peshmerga plan to increase their co-operation in the fight against Daesh, which will include the security of Iraq's border with Syria, the sharing of intelligence and the creation of Co-ordination Centres. The ISF have proven themselves effective, but, in common with many other armed forces, are circumscribed by COVID-19.

5. **Counter-Daesh Activity in Syria.** In Syria, Syrian/Russian/Iranian forces almost certainly continue to prioritise the protection of core territory in western Syria against AQ-affiliated groups over carrying out counter-Daesh operations in eastern Syria; this is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. As these Syrian/Russian/Iranian forces have been unable to provide security over the large expanse of open territory across central Syria, Daesh maintains the freedom of movement to enable a continued presence, including training camps, in the central desert area of the Badiyah and in Dayr-az-Zawr province. Renewed offensive operations by Syrian/Russian/Iranian forces in Idlib would highly likely refocus military capability from eastern Syria back into Idlib, almost certainly to the advantage of Daesh within central Syria.

6. **The threat from Shia Militia Groups (SMG).** The Western response to the threat posed by Daesh remains at risk because of the threat posed by SMG, who vehemently oppose the Coalition presence. This was demonstrated when three people were killed, a US soldier, US contractor and L/Cpl Brodie Gillon, a UK soldier, on 12 March 2020 at the Taji military camp, north of Baghdad. Iran also perceives Western presence in Iraq, and the wider region, as a direct threat towards its own interests and are able to exert influence over several of the SMG in its efforts to remove Western forces, including through violent means.

7. Whilst Coalition assets and locations remain the key priority, Iraq's own organisations or institutions that oppose the Iranian-facing Shia Militia, have also been targeted. SMG are likely to continue to directly oppose Iraqi Security Forces to protect their own interests, directly undermining both the authority and capability of Iraq's legitimate security apparatus. For example, on June 25 2020, troops from Iraq's Counter Terrorism Service arrested fourteen members of the Iranian leaning Kataib Hezbollah Shia Militia group as they set up rocket attacks on Baghdad airport and the U.S. Embassy. In response, the leadership of Kataib Hezbollah demanded that the Iraqi Government release the men into their custody.

8. More broadly, Iran almost certainly continues to maintain the capability to threaten UK interests and personnel across the region through its extensive security apparatus, including its conventional military capability and a network of partners and proxies. In a complex and congested operating area, the risks of miscalculation remain high.



Probability Yardstick

| Probability range | Judgement terms | Fraction range |
|-------------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|
| $\leq \approx 5\%$ | Remote chance | $\leq \approx 1/20$ |
| $\approx 10\% - \approx 20\%$ | Highly unlikely | $\approx 1/10 - \approx 1/5$ |
| $\approx 25\% - \approx 35\%$ | Unlikely | $\approx 1/4 - \approx 1/3$ |
| $\approx 40\% - < 50\%$ | Realistic possibility | $\approx 4/10 - < 1/2$ |
| $\approx 55\% - \approx 75\%$ | Likely or Probably | $\approx 4/7 - \approx 3/4$ |
| $\approx 80\% - \approx 90\%$ | Highly likely | $\approx 4/5 - \approx 9/10$ |
| $\geq \approx 95\%$ | Almost certain | $\geq \approx 19/20$ |

\approx approximately equal to \geq is greater than or equal to \leq is less than or equal to $<$ is less than

