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ISLAMIC STATE FROM THE PERIPHERIES

by Christopher Anzalone, PhD

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On 3 February 2022, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashemi al-Qurayshi, the self-proclaimed “caliph” (leader of the idealized Muslim state) and the *amir* (leader) of Islamic State (IS/ISIS/ISIL), was killed during a targeted nighttime raid by U.S. Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) in Atme, a small town in the northern Syrian governorate of Idlib on the Turkish border. This is the same governorate where al-Qurayshi’s predecessor, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, was killed in a similar JSOC raid on 26 October 2019.¹ The U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) reported that al-Qurayshi, like al-Baghdadi, chose to detonate a bomb rather than surrender, killing himself and 12 other people including children and other members of his family.² Al-Qurayshi’s death, the significant decline in both the number and scale of IS operations and attacks in Syria and Iraq since 2017–18, and the growth and expansion of IS affiliates in the “peripheries” outside the Middle East pose a new set of challenges for the United States as it transitions to—and continues to flesh out—over-the-horizon counterterrorism operations as attention shifts toward China as a strategic competitor and, to a lesser extent, Russia as a “disruptive power.”³

Death of a “Caliph”: The Status of Islamic State “Core” in Iraq and Syria

Al-Qurayshi, who was also known by his birth name of Amir Muhammad Said Abd al-Rahman al-Salbi al-Mawla and as Abdullah Qardash, was a key deputy of al-Baghdadi and a veteran jihadi. He had been active in Abu Musab al-Zarqawi’s jihadi group Jamaat al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad, which in late 2004 evolved into al-Qaeda in Iraq.⁴ Reported to be ideologically rigid even by IS standards, during al-Baghdadi’s tenure al-Qurayshi oversaw an institute based in Mosul, Iraq, to train judges and religious officials for the militant group. In this role, he interacted with senior IS officials including the late Abu Ali al-Anbari (killed in a March 2016 battle with U.S. troops), who heavily influenced the ideological trajectory of the organization.⁵ Al-Qurayshi lost a leg in a U.S. airstrike near Mosul in 2015, and he was later appointed by al-Baghdadi as a senior deputy shortly before the latter killed himself with an explosives-laden suicide vest.⁶

In late January 2021, IS detainees held by the U.S.-allied Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) coalition in Ghwayran prison in Syria’s northeastern al-Hasaka governorate participated in a major uprising there. Lasting for more than a week, the uprising resulted in the escape of dozens of IS members with high estimates saying that nearly 500 people were killed, including 374 prisoners (the majority of whom are believed to be IS militants), 40 SDF fighters, 77 prison guards and staff, and 4 civilians.⁷ The uprising and resulting protracted siege and battle to recapture the prison came after a steady decline in the number and magnitude of IS attacks in Syria and an uptick in the

number of attacks in neighboring Iraq, most of which were small- to medium-scale, including hit-and-run raids, mortar shelling, targeted assassinations, and roadside bomb attacks rather than mass assaults on cities and towns.⁸

Following the loss of its territorial rebel state and the collapse of its governance project in 2018, IS “Core” in Syria and Iraq has transitioned back into an underground insurgency, but it is one that has much-enhanced media operations and propaganda capabilities and fields fighters with significant battlefield and guerrilla experience. United Nations estimates put the number of IS fighters in Syria and Iraq at between 6,000 and 10,000, with most of the group’s operational leaders and administrators residing in Syria and neighboring countries.⁹ An attractive target for IS fighters will be the 10,000 prisoners, including 2,000 foreign fighters, held by the SDF.¹⁰ IS has a long history of planning and executing raids to free detained members and carrying out revenge attacks in their names. For example, in 2009 and 2010, the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), the precursor to IS, carried out a sophisticated campaign of suicide vehicle bombings on foreign embassies and Iraqi government buildings in the name of its detainees, dubbing the campaign the “Expedition of the Prisoner(s),” and in 2012–13, ISI carried out a series of raids to free members held in multiple Iraqi prisons.¹¹

The Islamic State–Khorasan Province’s Resurgence in Post-Taliban Afghanistan

Formed in 2014–15, Islamic State–Khorasan Province (IS-KP) was first led by former commanders from the Tehrik-i Taliban Pakistan (TTP) umbrella, including the late Hafiz Said Khan, who was head of the TTP in the Orakzai district of Pakistan’s Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province. Since its emergence, IS-KP has appealed to disgruntled members of the Afghan Taliban, regional Sunni militant Islamist groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and other critics of the Taliban who see it as a nationalist and not a truly Islamic movement.¹² In official IS and IS-KP media, the Afghan Taliban is referred to as the “apostate Taliban militia” and is accused of “selling out” Islam for international recognition by accepting the “unbelieving” nation-state global system. IS-KP has more recently expanded its recruitment audiences to include middle-class youth from Afghanistan’s cities and other urban centers.¹³

In 2021, IS-KP carried out or claimed in official statements issued by the centralized IS media department to have perpetrated hundreds of various types of attacks across Afghanistan. The vast majority of these claimed attacks occurred in the eastern province of Nangarhar, long an IS-KP stronghold; in or around Kabul city; in Parwan Province to

the north of Kabul; and in Kunar Province to the north of Nangarhar. They tended to be hit-and-run or ambush-style attacks using firearms, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), and suicide bombings by militants wearing explosives-laden vests or by suicide vehicle-borne IEDs (SVBIEDs). This marked an increase in the number of attacks in Afghanistan, following a decline that coincided with major offensives against IS-KP in 2019 that were launched by the Afghan government and the Afghan Taliban. The deadliest IS-KP attack in 2021 was the 26 August suicide bombing carried out by a single militant, according to the DOD, outside Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul, which killed at least 183 people, most of whom were Afghans, and included 13 U.S. servicemembers.¹⁴

In 2022, IS-KP continues to target the new Afghan Taliban government, which seized control of Afghanistan in August 2021, as well as Afghan and Pakistani minority communities including Shi’ite Muslims, Sikhs, and Hindus.¹⁵ In October 2021, IS’s central media department stopped referencing “Pakistan Province” (whose formation it proclaimed in May 2019) to claim attacks carried out in Pakistan and instead issued claims of responsibility for attacks carried out in both Afghanistan and Pakistan as being perpetrated by IS-KP. Current estimates place the number of IS-KP members at between 2,200 and 4,000, following the release of thousands of prisoners during the Afghan Taliban’s takeover of Afghanistan. This number dwarfs the 200 to 400 fighters that al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) is believed to have spread across the Afghan provinces of Ghazni, Helmand, Kandahar, Nimroz, Paktika, and Zabol.¹⁶ In June 2016, the U.S. Department of State (DOS) designated AQIS as a foreign terrorist organization, with its leadership connected but distinct from that of al-Qaeda “Central,” which is led by Ayman al-Zawahiri and active in Afghanistan, India, and Bangladesh.¹⁷

The resurgence of IS-KP poses security challenges to the United States, particularly after its August 2021 withdrawal from Afghanistan, as well as to Afghanistan’s neighbors including Iran, China, and Pakistan.¹⁸ In early February 2022, the DOS announced a \$10 million reward for information leading to Sanaullah Ghafari (a.k.a. Shahab al-Muhajir), the *amir* of IS-KP since his appointment by the IS “Core” leadership in June 2020.¹⁹

Islamic State Affiliate Expansion in Africa

The resurgence of IS-KP and the growth of IS affiliate groups in Africa will be a major test for U.S. over-the-horizon counterterrorism capabilities. In addition to new challenges to U.S. efforts to gather on-the-ground intelligence, these

groups, though connected to IS “Core” in Iraq and the Levant, retain the ability to strategically and operationally adjust according to local and regional factors.²⁰

In testimony before the U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services on 22 April 2021, U.S. Army general Stephen J. Townsend, commander of U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM), stated that militant Islamist organizations including al-Qaeda and IS “are expanding in Africa at a rapid pace, taking advantage of weak governance and disenfranchised populations” and noted that their expansion threatens the security of U.S. regional allies as well as U.S. interests in Africa.²¹ During the past several years, IS affiliate branches in West Africa and the Sahel (Islamic State–West Africa Province, or IS-WAP) and in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and northern Mozambique (IS–Central Africa Province, or IS-CAP) maintain or have expanded both the frequency and lethality of their operations.²² Though IS–Somalia Province has consistently failed to surpass its markedly larger and more powerful militant Islamist rival, the al-Qaeda-affiliated Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen (a.k.a. al-Shabaab) and continues to be ruthlessly pursued by the latter’s security apparatus, the Amniyat, it has nonetheless succeeded in projecting power and fear far outside its core territorial base in the mountains of Somalia’s northern Puntland region, extorting money from merchants and businesspeople in the federal capital of Mogadishu.²³

In Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin, IS-WAP continues to be one of IS’s most lethal affiliates, regularly carrying out mass infantry and mobile “technical” artillery vehicle attacks and expanding its scope of operations via a subgroup, Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (IS-GS).²⁴ In Mali and other parts of the Sahel, the al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)-affiliated Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wa-l-Muslimeen (JNIM) remains very active, drawing on preexisting local conflicts between farmer-herder communities to recruit.²⁵ France’s decision in February 2022 to withdraw its troops from Mali, where it has been conducting counterterrorism operations with mixed results since January 2013, amidst souring relations with the Malian military government may prove a boon to IS- and al-Qaeda-affiliated militant groups, at least in the short term.²⁶

The groups that the DOS considers to form the core of IS’s “Central African” affiliates—the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) in the DRC and Uganda and the Ahlu Sunna Wal Jamaah (ASWJ; known locally as al-Shabaab) in northern Mozambique—originally emerged due to local dynamics and grievances.²⁷ The extent to which IS’s core leadership based in Syria and Iraq exercises direct control over IS-CAP and what the IS administrative system dubs “external prov-

inces” is debated and unclear, though there is a definitive connection between these regional affiliates and, at the very least, the central IS media apparatus, which regularly publishes regional affiliate/branch attack claims, video footage, and photographs.²⁸

Conclusion

The death of IS’s latest *amir*, the shrinking cadre of veteran leaders from which the surviving senior leadership can choose his successor, and the end of the self-proclaimed “caliphate’s” insurgent proto-state governing project in the Middle East pose major challenges to the IS leadership. While IS “Core” has experienced significant setbacks, several of the organization’s regional affiliates outside the Middle East, including IS-KP, IS-WAP, and IS-CAP, have either maintained a steady pace of operations or even expanded territorially and operationally in the last two years, bolstering the IS “brand” in the transnational jihadi space.

The growth of these affiliates suggests that the survival of IS as a brand and, to a certain extent, as a viable umbrella organization is as much or even more so tied to the trajectories of its external affiliates, the so-called “provinces,” as it is to the future of the core group in Syria and Iraq. Addressing the security challenges posed by these groups will involve not only kinetic counterterrorism, over-the-horizon and otherwise, but also nonkinetic engagement in areas such as governance reform, the building and provision of systems of justice, and humanitarian assistance programs.²⁹

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