



The MENA region remains a hotbed of Islamist terrorism

The threat to Europe could grow again

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Abstract

With the demise of the self-declared Islamic State in 2019, Islamist terrorism in its core region – Iraq and Syria – has been considerably weakened, but by no means eliminated. In Syria in particular, there is a high potential for IS/ISIS or comparable groups to regain strength. A particularly delicate problem for European states is how to deal with their nationals among the Foreign Terrorist Fighters and their families, who are still being held in Kurdish camps today.

While it has been possible to push back Islamist terrorism in North Africa, the Sahel region has become a new hotbed of Islamist terrorism, which not only increases the fragility of this region, but could also cause the terrorist threat to Europe to grow again. Europe must respond to these challenges in a more comprehensive and targeted manner.

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Analysis

Introduction

Middle East and North Africa are Europe's immediate neighborhood. When the so-called Islamic State (IS/ISIS¹/Daesh) expanded into Syria in 2013, its ties to Europe also grew. From 2011 to 2015, around 5,000 Europeans travelled to Syria and Iraq to join ISIS. Several perpetrators of the November 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris (killing 150) and the March 2016 bombings in Brussels (killing 32) were Europeans who had trained or fought with ISIS in Syria and/or Iraq – in these as in other attacks, there were concrete links to the organization. However, the majority of attacks linked to ISIS were perpetrated by individuals inspired by ISIS propaganda and radicalized in small groups of like-minded people, mainly online or in European prisons. For propaganda purposes, ISIS also claims responsibility for attacks where security authorities could find no evidence of their involvement. Despite ISIS's diminished outreach capabilities since it lost control of its last territories, its ideological influence remains virulent in Europe today. For a variety of reasons, it is feared that young male migrants and asylum seekers in particular may turn to ISIS's Islamist ideology and become radicalized.

The Assad regime's reign of terror has driven millions of people to flee, a substantial number of whom have come to Europe. Due to the ongoing terrorist threat in the Middle East, the continued propaganda work of ISIS in relevant networks, as well as the growing activities of Islamist terrorist groups, especially in the Sahel region of Africa, both the migratory pressure on Europe and the threat of terrorist attacks in Europe are likely to remain high for the foreseeable future – and even to grow again.

The MENA region must therefore become an even stronger and permanent focus of German and European foreign policy.

Iraq and Syria remain the core regions of Islamist terrorism

With the fall of Baghuz, the last stronghold of the terrorist organization Islamic State on the Syrian-Iraqi border on 23 March 2019, the Islamist caliphate is, at least territorially, a part of the past. This was an important milestone in the four-year military and civilian fight against Islamist terrorism that led to the liberation of 7.7 million people who had suffered under the cruel regime of ISIS in Iraq and Syria. At the height of its territorial expansion, ISIS ruled over 110,000 square kilometers including several major cities in Iraq (including the metropolis of Mosul) and Syria. During this time, ISIS was able to attract over 40,000 foreign fighters (Foreign Terrorist Fighters/FTF), some of whom moved with their families to the proto-state and self-declared caliphate.

For more than two years now, this terrorist organization has held no territory, neither in Syria nor Iraq, but it is far from being eliminated. The challenges in the former core region of ISIS remain high for the international community. They can only be overcome through the joint action of the international anti-IS coalition, international and local partners, as well as the Iraqi government and with the support of the people on the ground.

¹ This article was first published in a longer version under the title: „Die MENA-Region bleibt Brutstätte des islamistischen Terrorismus. Die Bedrohung Europas könnte wieder wachsen.“ In: „Der Politische Islamismus als hybrider Akteur globaler Reichweite“, hrsg. von Thomas Jäger und Ralph Thiele, 2021, S. 30-49.



Defeated but not eliminated – Iraq's fight against ISIS

Since the recapture of Mosul and the subsequent complete loss of all controlled areas in 2017, ISIS has not been capable of any significant operations in Iraq. The fighters who remained in Iraq retreated to the mountains and inhospitable desert regions from where they carry out attacks against Iraqi security forces and infrastructure (power lines, oil fields) with small mobile task forces. The attacks are often filmed and disseminated for propaganda purposes via the Telegram platform to ISIS supporters and sympathizers worldwide.

The activities are concentrated in the former ISIS "strongholds" in the western and northwestern provinces of the country. In the areas disputed between the central government and the autonomous region of Kurdistan – especially Kirkuk and Diyala – it uses the vacuum thus created for targeted attacks on security forces – Kurdish peshmerga, Iraqi army (ISF) and Shiite militias (PMF). The attacks (hit-and-run) are mostly no more than pinpricks, major terrorist acts such as the suicide attack on 21 January in Baghdad (the day after the inauguration of US President Biden) with 32 dead and over 100 injured are the exception.

The number of active ISIS fighters in Iraq (including women and children) is currently estimated at 3,500 to 5,000 and the number of inactive fighters, who can be mobilized at any time, at 8,000. The active fighters are regularly paid the equivalent of about 30 euros a month. ISIS can fall back on money reserves from the time of the caliphate, when large amounts of money from local banks came under their control, especially in Mosul. Today, ISIS's main source of income is protection rackets, ransom payments for kidnappings, as well as robberies and smuggling activities – which further undermines their support among the population.

The pressure of persecution by the Iraqi security forces supported by the international anti-IS coalition as well as by Shiite militias (PMF) remains high. Hardly a week goes by without the Iraqi security forces reporting successes (including the arrest or killing of IS fighters and the excavation of weapons caches) in the fight against ISIS. An important role is played by the militias (PMF), which are predominantly formed by Shiites and are at best only partially controlled by the Iraqi government. The PMF, which were set up as a result of a fatwa by Grand Ayatollah Sistani to push back the IS, have made a decisive contribution to defeating the IS, paying a considerable toll in blood. This founding myth celebrated by the PMF and their initially strong support among the population have increasingly turned the PMF into a state within a state, which is accompanied by activities that are difficult to control and increasingly illegal. Coordination between the Iraqi security forces and the PMF as well as the Kurdish Peshmerga is also in need of improvement. This is now to be improved, especially in the disputed regions, through the establishment of new joint coordination centers. The implementation has been accelerated after recent clashes between ISIS and the Peshmerga, in which the Kurds also lost numerous fighters. Joint "operation headquarters" had already been established in Baghdad and Erbil in November 2020.

The IS has lost its appeal among Sunni Iraqis after losing its last territories and also due to its cruel regime. Nevertheless, ISIS continues to recruit young men through coercion, intimidation but also via financial incentives, thus at least compensating for its own considerable losses. This is mainly due to the current economic situation in the country. The state institutions are marked by corruption and dysfunctionality and are perceived as such by the population. The state structures that were dismantled in the aftermath of the US intervention in 2003 have not yet been replaced by new functioning units. Mismanagement, the low oil price and the Covid 19 pandemic have further aggravated the economic situation. According to the United Nations, 4.1 million Iraqis are currently dependent on humanitarian aid. The World Bank estimates that 12.4 million residents are at risk of poverty. Macroeconomic data paints a dramatic picture. The country's economy collapsed by 10 per cent in 2020 and the national debt has reached a new high. Sixty per cent of the population is under 25 and youth



unemployment stands at 25 per cent. The 700,000 young Iraqis who enter the labor market every year further aggravate the situation. At the same time, the education system is underfunded and does not reach many children, resulting in growing illiteracy. One third of Iraqis between 15 and 29 are now either completely illiterate or have insufficient basic skills. More than 1.4 million Iraqis remain internally displaced for various reasons and have not returned home. This also includes the so-called "IS families", who do not dare to return home for fear of reprisals.

A combination of political nepotism, economic decline, a collapsing social system, and insufficient reconstruction efforts, especially – but not only – in the areas liberated from ISIS, threaten the foundational stability of the country.

Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that the IS remains attractive to young Sunnis less for ideological reasons than for economic ones. ISIS membership means paid work, is identity-forming and an alternative to the Iraqi armed forces – which are dominated by the Shiite majority. The main incentives for recruitment are therefore neither religion as such nor the radical Islamist ideology, but economic incentives as well as power and influence. Another IS recruitment reservoir are the children and young people who have grown up and been indoctrinated under its rule – the so-called "Fourth Generation". In the Al-Hol camp on the Syrian-Iraqi border, 30,000 Iraqi families of former ISIS supporters live together in a tightly congested area. In the camp itself, radical Islamic law is said to be enforced by the henchmen among the internees by means of oppression and extortion, up to and including cruel murders – by beheading – of those who oppose it. It is also believed that internees regularly flee the camp to join local ISIS groups in Iraq and Syria.

However, Iraq's stability is not currently threatened by ISIS, but rather by the numerous militias, some of which were founded explicitly to fight the IS and some of which operate illegally under the umbrella of the PMF. With about 150,000 fighters, they are far stronger than the IS and are attractive to young Shiites for similar reasons (regular pay, power, and influence). The PMF militias are increasingly acting like a state within a state and are increasingly perceived by the population, whose Shiite majority once hailed them as liberators from the IS threat, as bloodsuckers who collect road tolls and extort protection money at the checkpoints they control. The PMF's reputation has also been greatly diminished by their bloody role in the crackdown on demonstrations in 2019, which claimed the lives of over 600 Iraqis, mostly youths, and by the intimidation of and murders of activists, journalists, and other critics of the government. The PMF are therefore now perceived by the general population as a far greater threat than the sporadic attacks by ISIS in the outskirts of the country, outside the cities.

For a lasting pacification of Iraq and the improvement of the security and human rights situation, it is therefore not only necessary to fight the IS and prevent its resurgence, but it is also important to remove the PMF from power. With its attacks and the real danger of its resurgence, the IS is slowing down reconstruction and stabilization, especially in the liberated areas. The smoldering, currently rather abstract danger from the IS is in turn used by the militias as a *raison d'être* to increasingly increase their own position of power and access to the resources of the state through violence and repression. This could lead to the collapse of the fragile state, which in turn would favor a resurgence of the IS. To escape this vicious circle, Iraq continues to need massive international support.



Defeated in Syria too, but high potential for a new IS resurgence

Even though IS no longer holds any territory in Syria, the terrorist organization is still active in the country. It has even expanded its activities in recent months and carried out numerous attacks. Obviously, the IS has succeeded in adapting and consolidating its underground structures to the new situation. Highly radicalized fighters continue to adhere to the inhuman radical Islamist ideology and try to spread it beyond Syria.

Syria's catastrophic situation after ten years of civil war provides fertile ground for a resurgence of ISIS and other terrorist groups (including the emergence of new groups). The United Nations counts 13.5 million people in need, including 6 million internally displaced persons (IDPs). 12 million are at permanent risk of hunger. In the north-east of the country, the former main IS operating area around Raqqa, there are 600,000 IDPs and in Idlib, in the north-west of Syria, 2.7 million IDPs are crammed into a small space and completely dependent on humanitarian aid, which is repeatedly obstructed by the Assad regime. Idlib is held by anti-Assad militias, including the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Hai'at Tahrir ash-Sham (HTS) (Committee for the Liberation of the Levant). After clashes between government forces supported by the Russian air force and Turkish units, which resulted in the deaths of 34 soldiers on the Turkish side, and the Turkish military offensive "Spring Shield", Russia and Turkey agreed on a ceasefire on 5 March 2020, which has largely held until today.

Today, Syria is de facto divided into four parts. Thanks to Russian and Iranian support, the Assad regime once again rules over about 60 percent of the country, where President Assad recently allowed himself to be re-elected in a massively rigged election. In the northwest, opposition militias rule Idlib under the protection of Turkey, which also controls the Afrin region together with militias close to it, as well as a border strip between Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ayn (120x30 km), from which the Kurdish militia YPG/Democratic Forces of Syria (SDF) have been ousted. These in turn, with US support and other forces of the international anti-IS coalition, have borne the brunt of successfully defeating the radical Islamist terrorist group. Thanks to the presence of the US, the Turkish army's action against the Kurdish YPG, which is close to the PKK, which is fought as a terrorist organization in Turkey, was limited to the border region. This prevented the YPG from having to defend itself against overwhelming Turkish forces. This would almost certainly have meant that they would have been forced to give up securing the areas taken from IS and possibly even guarding the IS supporters (including well over 10,000 non-Iraqis and non-Syrians), who number between 40 and 60,000, especially in Camp Al-Hol. Nevertheless, a larger number of ISIS supporters, including some Europeans – also Germans – were able to flee during this period.

A particular problem is posed by the Foreign Terrorist Fighters, who have been interned in camps by SDF forces and are guarded by them to the best of their ability.

All existing relevant actors rely on armies and militias and thus constitute state/quasi-state/non-state armed groups at the same time. Violence, arbitrariness and political persecution are the order of the day; the very things against which the popular uprising 10 years ago was directed, and which were brutally put down by Assad's dictatorial, neo-patrimonial regime (ranked 164 out of 167 in the Economist's Democracy Index). Against this background, the negotiation of a new, nationwide social contract remains hopeless for a long time to come. Syria thus remains a fertile breeding ground for terrorist groups such as the IS and others, which not only threaten the long-suffering local population, but also expand into other regions of the world, especially Africa, and threaten us in Europe.



The specific problem of the Foreign Terrorist Fighters and their families

By mid-2021, several tens of thousands of Islamists are in prison because of the collapse of jihadism and political Islam in the MENA region – mainly in Syria, Iraq, Egypt and Tunisia.

Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTF) in Syria, interned in various camps by the Kurdish-dominated SDF, pose a particular problem. About 13,500 non-Syrian and non-Iraqi women and children are interned in various camps, mainly in al-Hol on the border with Iraq. The number of male FTF is estimated at around 2,000, with the largest group held in a temporary prison in Hasakah. The numbers vary greatly, as in many cases the identity of the inmates is not clear to the Kurdish authorities.

German authorities believe that a total of more than 1070 people travelled from Germany to Iraq and Syria to join the terrorist organization during the heyday of the IS. The main recruiter – Abu Walaa, head of the IS network in Germany – was sentenced to 10 ½ years in prison in 2020 after a three-year trial. In the first quarter of 2021 alone, the Attorney General opened nine cases for membership of or financing a foreign terrorist group and preparing terrorist attacks.

The number of Germans held in Syria and Iraq is currently still estimated at around 80 to 100 – of whom around 30 are men and 50 women. In addition, there are about 150 children.

Although almost all governments have spoken out in favor of the repatriation of the more than 600 children, this is proceeding very slowly. Germany has repatriated a few very recently. It is likely that this reluctance will soon be a matter for national courts and the European Court of Human Rights.

The issue of repatriation of FTF is a highly delicate matter in all countries. In Norway, such repatriation led to the fall of the government.

If repatriation of at least the adults or the male FTF is not wanted for (security) political reasons, the question arises of what to do with them in Syria. A years-long detention outside any legality – a kind of European Guantanamo – is out of the question.

Most governments have argued that the FTF should be tried where they have committed crimes, i.e., either in Syria or Iraq. The idea of an international tribunal has already been rejected as unfeasible and too expensive. Prosecution in Iraqi courts or before bodies of the internationally unrecognized Kurdish autonomous authorities in Syria also faces major legal and practical concerns.

Even if the FTF were convicted in Syria and Iraq and served their sentences there, this would at best postpone the problem for their European countries of origin.

It is well known that many Islamists have become radicalized in European prisons. This danger is many times greater in Syria and Iraq, where they would serve their sentences under much harsher conditions, but above all because they would be sitting with some of the most dangerous terrorists in the world.

Moreover, there is a great danger that some will be released prematurely through prison escapes, liberation operations, through corruption or through their political instrumentalization.

Therefore, European governments must ask themselves whether Syria and Iraq are the right places to hold the "most dangerous" European individuals. Once free again, many might succeed in returning to Europe. Or whether it is not better to take law enforcement and deradicalization into one's own hands – for reasons of security as well as for legal and ethical reasons.



The metastases of Islamist terrorism

From its epicenter in the Middle East, Islamism and Islamist terrorism spread to almost the entire Islamic world, with attacks in the US, Europe, South Asia, Australia and New Zealand.

By mid-2021, however, the jihadist movement is again as fragmented as it was 20 years ago, when Al-Qaeda was just one of many jihadi groups. And the threat posed by global jihadism to Western states is also currently rather low. Despite all the fragmentation, the movement currently has three essential poles: Al-Qaeda with its six offshoots from Afghanistan to West Africa; the Islamic State with its diverse provinces from East and South Asia to North Africa; and the HTS in north-west Syria, which used to be linked to Al-Qaeda.

Al-Qaeda and ISIS have by no means abandoned global jihadism, but are currently involved in numerous regional conflicts (and local politics) and face permanent pressure from the US-led anti-IS coalition.

Of particular relevance for Europe is the expansion of Islamist terrorism in Africa.

Pushing back Islamism and Islamist terrorism in Northern Africa

With the so-called Arab Spring, political Islam came to power in Egypt with the Muslim Brotherhood through democratic elections and was ousted from there again by the military in 2013. Since then, more than 22,000 Brotherhood supporters have been imprisoned in the country. The military was able to contain the threat posed by Islamist terrorist groups linked to Al-Qaeda and ISIS in the Sinai with successful operations, without eliminating them completely.

In Tunisia, moderate political Islam plays a state-supporting role and was also involved in the government until the recent de-facto coup. About 1,000 Islamist terrorists, including returnees from Syria and Iraq, are in prison.

In Libya, where representatives of political Islam were also instrumental in the overthrow of Gaddafi, ISIS was able to gain the strongest foothold and at times take control of a larger territory.

In Algeria, "al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb" (AQIM) emerged from the Salafist "Group for Preaching and Combat" and initially benefited from the overthrows in Tunisia and Libya in 2011. The leadership is still in Algeria but has moved its main activities to the Sahel.

The Sahel region as a new hotbed of Islamist terrorism

In North-West Africa, jihadism is advancing further and further from north to south – like the desert.

The Sahel region – from Mauritania on the Atlantic to Chad – is the poorhouse of Africa, with extremely fragile states and large areas without effective state control. All states are plagued to a greater or lesser extent by ethnic conflicts and separatism and increasingly threatened by the advance of Islamist terrorist groups, against which armed militias have formed, some of which in turn contribute to the escalation of violence.

Mali has been in crisis since 2012, when the state almost collapsed in the face of a separatist rebellion in the north, a military coup, and a regional drought. Islamist insurgents allied with the separatists in the north, equipped with modern weapons from Libyan stocks, were prevented just in time by the courageous intervention of France from advancing on the capital Bamako and the other main settlement areas of the country.



To stabilize the country, the UN Security Council deployed the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) in 2013, in which Germany is participating with up to 1100 soldiers. In parallel, France has established the anti-terrorism operation Barkhane (formerly Operation Serval) and is leading the counterterrorism mission Takuba, formed by various European countries from special forces. For its part, the EU launched the EUTM training mission in 2013 – also with German participation – to train the Malian armed forces, which has since been extended to all Sahel 5 states.

However, renewed military coups in August 2020 and most recently in May 2021 show that the stabilization of the country has not yet succeeded despite considerable foreign aid and the substantial presence of foreign – including German – security forces. Thanks to the West African regional organization ECOWAS and its mediator, Goodluck Jonathan, the path of transition to new elections in 2022, which has received substantial support from the international community, can probably be continued.

The security situation remains extremely tense: On 12 June 2021, 12 German and one Belgian soldier were injured, some seriously, by a suicide bomber during a patrol operation.

The advance of armed Islamist groups can also be observed in the eastern neighboring country of Niger, a key partner of the West in the region. The Niger-Malian border area is now considered the heartland of the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), where they have long harassed the local population and attacked Nigerian and Malian security forces. The attacks are mostly carried out on motorbikes, which gives them a mobility advantage over the armed forces in the prevailing terrain.

In neighboring Burkina Faso, attacks by Islamist terrorist groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda or ISIS have also steadily increased since 2016, including bloody attacks in the capital Ouagadougou. Large parts of the country are de facto under the control of these groups. The country is fighting Islamist terror on three fronts. On 4/5 June 2021, the worst terrorist attack in decades occurred in the north, with 160 civilians killed, marking the peak (so far) of a new wave of terrorist violence.

While the government focuses on the threats in the north and east, in the southwest the Hamza group, formed by nomadic Peulh (Fulbe) and linked to the IS-affiliated Groupe de Soutien à l'Islam et aux Musulman (GSIM), is expanding its activities to the north of Côte d'Ivoire. Here, the huge Comoe National Park on the Ivorian side is an ideal retreat. The border regions in the triangle of countries – Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana, as well as Burkina Faso, Benin and Niger – also form traditionally insecure regions and are the sites of (lucrative) illegal activities and thus ideal breeding grounds for jihadist groups.

To counter cross-border terrorism more effectively, the G5 Sahel (Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad) was established in 2017, which agreed to coordinate military operations in border areas – albeit with little success.

The second major area of operation for Islamist terrorist groups is the Lake Chad region, which includes not only Chad but also parts of the neighboring states of Nigeria, Niger and Cameroon. This region has been terrorized for years by the Islamist insurgency Boko Haram and a splinter group affiliated with IS – the "Islamic State West Africa Province" (ISWAP). In Nigeria alone, some 40,000 people have already fallen victim to this conflict, which has also driven many out of their ancestral homeland.

The death of Chadian President Idriss Déby on 19 April 2021 as a result of injuries sustained during a visit to fight FACT militias threatens the stability of a country that is central to the fight against terrorism in the region and the Sahel. Chad has the most powerful armed forces in the region, providing significant troop contingents both



for MINUSMA (1800 soldiers) and within the framework of G5 Sahel. In addition, Chad is the base of the French operation Barkhane, from which France could at least partially withdraw for domestic political reasons in view of the presidential elections in 2022 due to the high costs.

If Chad fails as an actor in the Sahel and the Lake Chad region and as a "firewall" between the conflicts from Libya via (South) Sudan and the Central African Republic to the Sahel region, destabilizing forces threaten to gain the upper hand in the entire large region, which could lead to the collapse of entire states.

But Islamist terrorism has also been rooted or on the rise in other parts of Africa for some time.

In Somalia, the al-Qaida-linked al Shabaab is fighting the country's government and the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) and has also carried out several bloody attacks in Kenya. A small IS-linked terrorist group has also established itself in the north of the country.

In southern Africa, Mozambique is particularly at risk, threatened since 2017 by a widening domestic insurgency in Cabo Delgado province along the border with Tanzania. The group, which claims to be part of the Central African ISIS province, has carried out numerous attacks on villages and state institutions, killing over 3,000 people already.

Conclusion and recommendations for action

- Islamist terrorism has been significantly weakened by the anti-IS coalition and other measures, especially the strengthening of Iraqi state institutions, but not eliminated. The danger of a renewed strengthening of ISIS is great, especially in Syria. The anti-IS coalition should be held together and the extensive reconstruction work in Iraq should be continued despite setbacks.
- The problem of the Foreign Terrorist Fighters held by the Kurdish-dominated SDF, especially in Syria, urgently needs to be solved. In particular, the politically delicate repatriation of the European FTFs must be addressed for lack of other acceptable options. The repatriation of the more than 600 children should be a top priority.
- Cooperation with the North African Mediterranean states should be further expanded. Important goals here are reestablishing democracy in Tunisia as well as the pacification and stabilization of Libya, for which there is (finally) new hope thanks to the "Berlin Process" initiated by Germany.
- The Sahel and the Lake Chad region have developed into a new hub for Islamist terror, mainly due to state dysfunctionality and fragility with large state-free spaces, the great poverty and lack of prospects of the young population and numerous unresolved, mainly ethnic conflicts, which now also threaten the states of the Gulf of Guinea from there. The Sahel must become even more of a focus of European cooperation. Together with the effects of climate change, the growing Islamist terror could lead to even greater migration flows towards Europe in the future. The Council Conclusions adopted in April 2021 represent the long overdue new EU Sahel Strategy. This must now be implemented swiftly with national action plans and concrete projects for each country.

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.



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