

Alternative Futures Analysis

Syria: ISIS Resurgence

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Key Judgments

A resurgence of ISIS in Syria in the next 6-12 months depends heavily on the effectiveness of the Syrian government and the structure of ISIS' leadership. An Alternative Futures Analysis shows that four scenarios could occur in the next 6-12 months regarding whether or not ISIS is able to make a resurgence in Syria. Given the civil war in Syria, the spread of the coronavirus, and recent counterterrorism efforts against ISIS leaders, an ISIS resurgence in Syria could be driven by the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of the Syrian government and unified or fragmented ISIS leadership.

- In October 2019, ISIS publicly announced Abu Ibrahim al-Hashemi al-Qurayshi as its new leader.
- In the scenario, *So Long ISIS*, ISIS fades into non-existence due to an effective Syrian government and fragmented ISIS leadership.
- In the scenario, *Stronger Apart*, ISIS splits into multiple factions due to an ineffective Syrian government and fragmented ISIS leadership.
- In the scenario, *Guess Who's Back*, ISIS is able to make a full resurgence in Syria due to an ineffective Syrian government and unified ISIS leadership.
- In the scenario, *Clinging to Life*, ISIS still exists as a terrorist organization, but fails to make a significant resurgence in Syria due to an effective Syrian government and unified ISIS leadership.

Background

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is a Sunni jihadist group with a violent ideology based on creating an Islamic caliphate. The group is also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), and as Daesh in Arabic.¹ It originally spawned as an al-Qaeda split-off led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and quickly grew into a powerful force, capturing territory in Iraq and Syria and committing global terrorist attacks.² In 2019, U.S. and international counterterrorism efforts stripped ISIS of its acquired territory and ISIS' leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, was killed during a raid by U.S. Special Operations Forces.³

Days after Baghdadi's death, ISIS publicly announced its new leader as Abu Ibrahim al-Hashemi al-Qurayshi, whom the group calls "caliph."⁴ On 24 March 2020, the U.S. declared al-Qurayshi a specially designated global terrorist, referring to him by his real name of Amir Mohammed Abdul Rahmad al-Mawli. Al-Mawli was one of Baghdadi's most trusted deputies and was chosen as ISIS' new leader by its leadership council. Intelligence suggests that al-Mawli is currently hiding in north Syria or in Turkey.⁵

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is a respiratory illness that can spread from person to person. COVID-19 first emerged in Wuhan, China in December 2019, but has since become a global pandemic, killing 118,459 people worldwide as of 13 April 2020. In Syria, there are 25 confirmed cases of coronavirus in Syria, with 2 deaths.⁶

Analysis

To forecast an ISIS resurgence in Syria in the next 6-12 months, an Alternative Futures Analysis was conducted to show four potential scenarios that could occur. The scenarios generated were based on two drivers and their endpoints: Syrian government effectiveness or ineffectiveness and unified or fragmented ISIS leadership.

So Long, ISIS

In the first scenario, *So Long, ISIS*, ISIS fades into non-existence due to an effective Syrian government and fragmented ISIS leadership. In this scenario, the Syrian government is able

¹ "The Islamic State," *RAND Corporation*, accessed on April 9, 2020, <https://www.rand.org/topics/the-islamic-state-terrorist-organization.html>

² Missy Ryan, "What is ISIS - Rise of Islamic State," *The Washington Post*, June 3, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/national/obama-legacy/rise-of-isis-terrorist-attacks.html>

³ Ryan Pickrell, "Killing ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi hasn't hurt the terror group's operations, Pentagon warns," *Business Insider*, February 4, 2020, <https://www.businessinsider.com/killing-isis-leader-hasnt-hurt-its-operations-dod-ig-finds-2020-2>

⁴ Rukmini Callimachi and Eric Schmitt, "ISIS Names New Leader and Confirms al-Baghdadi's Death," *The New York Times*, October 31, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/31/world/middleeast/isis-al-baghdadi-dead.html>

⁵ "U.S. Designates ISIS Leader As Specially Designated Global Terrorist," *Counter Extremism Project*, March 30, 2020, <https://www.counterextremism.com/press/us-designates-isis-leader-specially-designated-global-terrorist>

⁶ "Coronavirus Disease 2019," *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, accessed April 9, 2020, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/cases-updates/summary.html>

to provide security and other social services, such as healthcare and education, to its people. The Syrian government is also able to protect its people from the coronavirus, maintain control over its infrastructure, and strengthen its economy. As a result, citizen unrest decreases and the civil war begins to draw to a close. This prevents ISIS from having a wide pool from which to recruit new members, as less citizens would turn to terrorism. Further, fragmented ISIS leadership creates confusion among ISIS followers due to a lack of centralized direction. ISIS' purpose loses value and members abandon the organization to return to their normal lives under a more stable government. As a result, ISIS' leaders go into hiding.

An opportunity presented by this scenario includes increasing diplomatic relations between the U.S., international forces, and the Syrian government in order to end the civil war. As dangerous conditions subside, humanitarian resources could also be augmented to help refugees return to a normal standard of living.

Stronger Apart

In the second scenario, *Stronger Apart*, ISIS splits into multiple factions due to an ineffective Syrian government and fragmented ISIS leadership. In this scenario, the Syrian government is unable to provide security and basic social services to its people. The civil war rages on and the coronavirus spreads in Syria, leaving many without proper medical care, killing thousands, and increasing civil unrest. The government's inability to control the situation or to provide necessary rights and services to its people increases ISIS' ability to recruit. However, due to fragmented ISIS leadership, the group splits into multiple factions, each with a different leader. This gives ISIS a wider area of attack, as smaller-scale terrorist operations are planned and executed across Syria.

Ways to mitigate the risks of this scenario include sending humanitarian and medical resources into Syria to try and curb the coronavirus. In addition, involved countries, such as the U.S., Russia, and Turkey, could work together to call a ceasefire in fighting and broaden their counterterrorism efforts against ISIS. The U.S. could also direct intelligence efforts toward finding out who the various leaders of ISIS' factions are and if their missions or goals differ from faction to faction.

Guess Who's Back

In the third scenario, *Guess Who's Back*, ISIS is able to make a full resurgence in Syria due to an ineffective Syrian government and unified ISIS leadership. In this scenario, ISIS heavily recruits new members, especially given the social unrest caused by a failed coronavirus response. Under unified leadership, ISIS regains territory it once held in Syria, taking advantage of the continuing civil war. As ISIS' membership and resources grow, it also conducts large-scale terrorist attacks in Syria and abroad.

Ways to mitigate the risks of this scenario include forming an international counterterrorism coalition to fight ISIS. Intelligence efforts could also be expanded to find and kill ISIS' current leader, al-Mawli. Attempts to aid the Syrian government's response to the coronavirus could also soften the blow that the virus has on the population, decreasing civil unrest and potentially lessening the number of new recruits ISIS can pull.

Clinging to Life

In the fourth scenario, *Clinging to Life*, ISIS still exists as a terrorist organization, but fails to make a significant resurgence in Syria due to an effective Syrian government and unified ISIS leadership. In this scenario, an effective Syrian government is able to provide its people with basic civil rights and social services. Coupled with diplomatic efforts to bring the Syrian civil war to an end, less people become refugees and less people turn to extremism as a way to make a living or fulfill a purpose. This prevents ISIS from recruiting new members; the Syrian government's control over infrastructure and security also prevents ISIS from regaining territory. Although ISIS' leadership is unified, ISIS' leader plays more of a symbolic role and the terrorist organization conducts more defensive, rather than offensive, operations.

An opportunity presented by this scenario includes the potential to shut down ISIS completely and prevent it from making future gains. Since ISIS mostly conducts defensive operations in this scenario, counterterrorism efforts could become more offensive and could include removing ISIS' leader, al-Mawli, from power, as well as taking any significant strongholds the group has left.

Figure 1. Scenario Indicators

So Long, ISIS	Stronger Apart	Guess Who's Back	Clinging to Life
Syrian government increases medical resources to combat COVID-19	Thousands of civilians die in Syria due to the coronavirus	Syrian government fails to protect its infrastructure	Syrian government joins international counterterrorism coalition
Syrian government invites humanitarian organizations in to help refugees	The ceasefire is broken and fighting rages on	Syrian government is unable to prevent ISIS prisoners from escaping	Syrian government protects infrastructure & citizens
Syrian government begins diplomatic talks to end the civil war	Syrian government is unable to prevent ISIS prisoners from escaping	Protests against the Syrian government allow ISIS to recruit & radicalize	Security on ISIS prisons is increased
ISIS stops making public announcements	ISIS announces multiple new leaders	Intelligence shows a growth in ISIS' members	ISIS reduces its announcements & social media activity
Intelligence on ISIS activity decreases significantly	ISIS conducts multiple terrorist attacks simultaneously	ISIS conducts large-scale terrorist attacks on major cities	ISIS no longer conducts offensive terrorist attacks

Context

The Syrian Civil War, which began in 2011 and created a massive refugee crisis, was paused for a moment when Russia and Turkey crafted a ceasefire agreement on 5 March 2020.⁷ Since then, Russia and Turkey have conducted joint patrols of Syria's borders in an attempt to maintain peace, and Syria's president, Bashar al-Assad, has regained control of the country. However, combatting the coronavirus has taken priority in Syria, as Syria's fragmented and limited health services are unable to prevent the spread of the disease.⁸ The public health situation in northeastern Syria is precarious, as Turkey's 2019 invasion already took out two hospitals and clinics, as well as water station sites. Further, the U.S. military is concerned that ISIS may be able to make a resurgence given the lack of resources available to deal with the outbreak. ISIS prisoners in Syria are especially at risk, not only of getting the virus, but of breaking out due to lack of security. Further, refugees in Syria are vulnerable to getting the virus and the COVID-19 crisis could allow ISIS to radicalize refugees and recruit new members.⁹

Conclusion

In the next 6-12 months, ISIS may or may not make a resurgence in Syria. To determine what would lead to one outcome or another, an Alternative Futures Analysis was conducted to outline four possible scenarios. The drivers used to develop the scenarios include the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of the Syrian government and unified or fragmented ISIS leadership. It is likely that ISIS will make a resurgence in Syria if the Syrian government is unable to lessen the impact of COVID-19, if civil war fighting continues, and if citizens continue to be deprived of basic social services. However, if the Syrian government is effective at combating these issues, ISIS is less likely to make a resurgence in Syria, regardless of whether it has fragmented or unified leadership.

⁷ "Syria war: Russia and Turkey agree Idlib ceasefire," *BBC News*, March 5, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-51747592>

⁸ Jesse Marks, "Syria's civil war will make fighting coronavirus particularly difficult," *The Washington Post*, April 2, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/04/02/syrias-civil-war-will-make-fighting-coronavirus-particularly-difficult/>

⁹ Lara Seligman, "U.S. military fears pandemic could lead to ISIS resurgence in Syria," *Politico*, April 2, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/04/02/us-military-fears-isis-resurgence-coronavirus-pandemic-162046>

Key Assumptions Check

Assumptions	Supported	Supported w/ Caveats	Unsupported
ISIS has enough power to make a resurgence		✓	
The coronavirus will allow ISIS to recruit new members		✓	
ISIS members are at risk of getting the coronavirus	✓		
The refugee camps in Syria are at risk of getting radicalized		✓	
Syria does not have enough medical resources	✓		
ISIS will take advantage of the pandemic		✓	

Scenario Matrix

