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| A REVIEW OF ISIS IN SYRIA 2016 – 2019

Regional Differences and an Enduring Legacy

The Carter Center Syria Project

March 2019

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1 | EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- It is clear from multiple assessments and continued recorded activity across Syria that the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), also known as by its Arabic acronym, Daesh, remains an influence on the security environment in Syria despite its loss of territorial control.

- While ISIS's capacity to launch attacks in Syria has significantly diminished, dropping from an average of 208 incidents per month in 2016 to just 121 incidents in January 2019 because of the loss of territorial control and operational capacity, the enduring activity of ISIS-affiliated groups and fighters around Syria is nonetheless significant.

- While there were fewer than 1,000 documented events related to ISIS throughout Syria in the past year—these are conflict events claimed by the group or by fighters who claim allegiance to the group—it is notable that groups and individuals continue to launch attacks in the violent extremist organization's name even though it no longer controls a "state" in Syria.

- Much of the ongoing ISIS-related activity is occurring in locations where local groups operate under the flag of ISIS but act in distinct ways, sometimes contradicting actions of ISIS elements elsewhere in the country.

- There is no doubt that ISIS's physical footprint and operational capacity in Syria has been significantly diminished by the military campaigns against it since 2016. The ongoing conflict activities in areas where local, ISIS-affiliated networks have historically operated indicates that currently, ISIS in Syria is not operating as a single, coordinated entity.

- Addressing ISIS in Syria now requires a more nuanced, localized analysis.

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2 | OVERVIEW

Since the height of the violent extremist armed group Islamic State in Iraq and Syria's (ISIS) territorial control in 2014, when it influenced an area some 34,000 square miles across Syria and Iraq, the group's territory in Syria has been nearly eliminated, particularly following the loss of its de facto capital, Raqqa City, to the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in October 2017.

With the group's current control now limited to a small pocket in the southeast corner of Deir Ez Zor Governorate, some have declared the group defeated and eliminated in Syria, including U.S. President Donald Trump in December 2018 and February 2019. However, this assumption is at odds with the Pentagon's assessment, which stated as recently as August 2018 that as many as 14,500 ISIS fighters remained around Syria. U.S. allies, including the UK and France, have also refuted the claim that ISIS has been defeated in Syria. On the ground, this violent extremist group, or fighters still claiming allegiance to it, still pose a threat to the security environment, with at least 209 attacks linked to ISIS recorded around the country since President Trump's December announcement.[1] What is clear from these continued activities is that ISIS remains an influence in the country, despite the loss of its territorial footprint.

While much of the public discussion concerning ISIS views the group in Syria as one entity, there are networks of local entities that continue to operate, in some instances acting in ways that are contradictory to affiliates in other parts of the country. Taking into consideration the local nuances of ISIS influence could help explain how the group, or fighters affiliated with the group, have remained present in some areas long after its territorial control has gone.

Using data collected by The Carter Center and by the Armed Conflict & Event Data (ACLED) Project, this report will provide a review of ISIS in Syria between 2016 and 2019.[2] The evidence-based approach will aim to create a more detailed understanding of ISIS, taking into consideration the varied regional operations of the group. This report also aims to contribute to the discussion about policy-level and local-level responses to ISIS in Syria.[3]

3 | LOSS OF TERRITORY: OCTOBER 2016 to JANUARY 2019

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[1] Until Jan. 31, 2019. The Carter Center continues to use the term "ISIS" in its conflict data to identify attacks carried out in Syria by groups and/or fighters continuing to claim allegiance to the organization, despite its territorial defeat in Syria.

[2] The exact dates covered in this study begin a year prior to ISIS's de-facto capital, Raqqa City, being recaptured by the SDF until the time of writing (Oct. 17, 2016, to Jan. 31, 2019).

[3] It is important to note that while The Carter Center strives to record all available information about the topic, given the restrictive reporting environment in Syria, some incidents may not have been recorded. Therefore, figures presented in this report should be viewed as a representation of the situation rather than a depiction of every single incident. Finally, it should be noted that the narrow focus of the report on the local nature of ISIS and its conflict activities should be combined with other studies, such as reports from The Carter Center's Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Extremism project, on the different aspects of the group, such as its ideological, recruitment, and media strategy, to provide a more holistic view.

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Between 2016 and 2019, ISIS's overall territorial control across Syria was nearly eliminated. At the start of October 2016, ISIS controlled territory in nine of the 14 provinces of Syria. In the north, ISIS held land between Al Bab town in northern Aleppo Governorate and the southern Shudadah District in the northeast governorate of Hassakah. The group continued to besiege Syrian government forces in Deir Ez Zor City while controlling large parts of the deserts in Homs governorate between Tadmor and Sokhneh towns, reaching as far west as Qaryatain town, some 50 kilometers east of the main M5 Highway between Damascus and Aleppo City (Figure 1).

To the west of the country, in the Qalamoun mountain range, ISIS maintained logistical networks with nodes in the border areas of Lebanon, while in the south of the country, the group controlled a pocket in the southwest corner of Daraa governorate through its affiliate, the Khalid Bin Walid Army. Further east, ISIS heavily influenced the eastern Badiyah desert areas of Rural Damascus governorate, reaching as far south as Ushaiyb town in northeast As Sweida governorate. In the capital of Damascus, the ISIS-controlled suburb of Hajar al Aswad allowed the group to make inroads to the neighboring Palestinian Yarmouk Camp, as well as periodically reach into the capital with high-profile suicide attacks.

However, in the following years, the sustained military campaign against the group by various actors significantly reduced its territorial control.[4] Throughout 2016 and 2017, these actors focused on reducing ISIS's presence in northern and eastern Syria. By the end of 2018, the remaining ISIS areas in southern Syria fell. At the time of this writing in February 2019, the group's last remaining area of control along the banks of the Euphrates River in southeast Deir Ez Zor Governorate—less than 1 percent of its 2014 size—looks set to come under SDF control after steady gains there in recent months (Figure 1).

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[4] Including the government of Syria and its international allies, Turkey and its local allies, the SDF and the U.S.-led coalition's Operation Inherent Resolve.
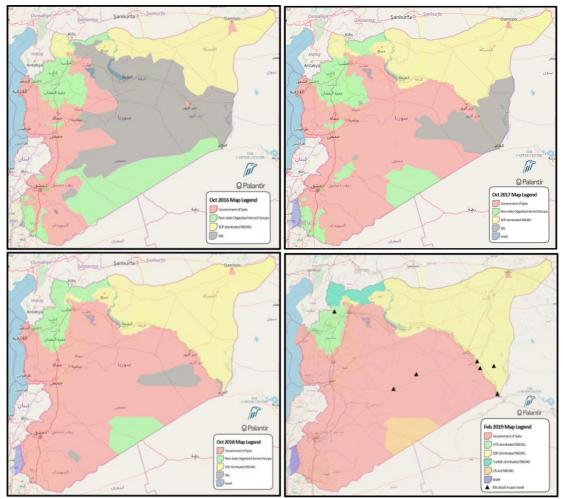
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Figure 1. ISIS Areas of Control and Influence: October 2016 (top left), October 2017 (top right), October 2018 (bottom left) and February 2019 (bottom right). The most recent map reflects updated designations of armed actors by The Carter Center.
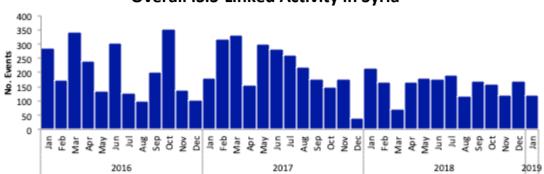
4 | CHANGES AND CONTINUATIONS IN ISIS CAPACITY AND ACTIVITY

Unsurprisingly, the loss in territory significantly affected the capacity of ISIS to launch attacks in Syria. In 2016, an average of 208 conflict-related incidents per month were linked to the group, according to collected data, ranging from force-on-force clashes to IEDs to shelling. However, by 2018, this figure had dropped to an average of 158 conflict events per month. In January 2019, just 121 conflict events linked to the group were recorded around Syria. This reduction in events correlates to the disintegration of ISIS' territorial control and "state" in Syria.

Despite this decline, the methods or tactics used by the violent extremist group remained relatively consistent between 2016 and 2018. Conventional methods of fighting, such as force-on-force clashes and shelling, consistently accounted for around 93 percent of recorded events each year, while asymmetrical attacks involving IEDs, suicide attacks, and landmine events regularly accounted for around 7 percent of activity. This consistent use of asymmetrical tactics is

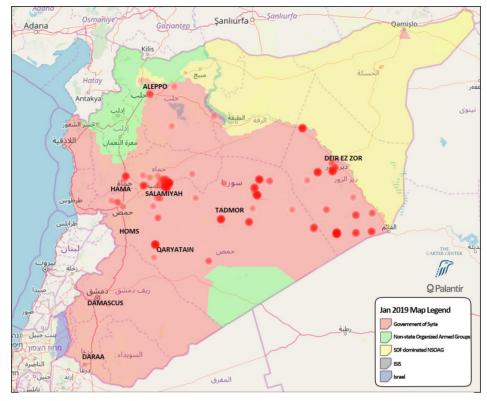remarkable considering ISIS's loss of territory and capacity between 2016 and 2019 (Figure 2).

Overall ISIS-Linked Activity in Syria

Figure 2. Overall ISIS-linked activity in Syria from January 2016 to January 2019. Data from The Carter Center and ACLED.

ISIS or affiliated fighters continue to affect the security environment in areas formerly controlled by the group. This includes the central desert areas of Hama, Homs, Aleppo, and Deir Ez Zor governorates, where steady, low-level activity continued to be recorded after Syrian forces became dominant in the area in mid-2017.

Between September 2017 and January 2019, at least 270 incidents linked to ISIS were recorded in areas under government control, especially in rural areas close to Salamiyah town and the desert between Tadmor and Deir Ez Zor cities. In one of the more high-profile incidents, ISIS captured Qaryatain town and its environs for some three weeks after a sustained assault on the area in October 2017, almost one year after the group had been expelled from the area. Most recently, in early February 2019, Syrian government forces launched a robust clearance operation against ISIS elements in the Heil area, southwest of Sokhneh town, that also involved close aerial support (Figure 3).

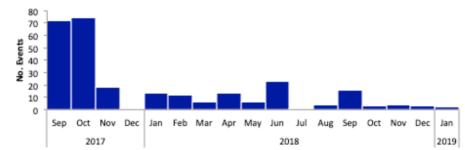## ISIS-Linked Activity in Central Syria

Figure 3. Documented ISIS-linked activity in central Syria from September 2017 to January 2019 (top) and timeline (bottom). Area of influence and control map is from Jan. 30, 2019.

Further south, in the government-controlled Badiyah areas of Rural Damascus and northeast As Sweida governorates, ISIS has operated since October 2017, with at least 135 incidents recorded to date. This ISIS activity culminated in a high-profile, complex attack-and-kidnap operation against civilians in several towns and villages in government-held northeast As Sweida Governorate in July 2018.[5]

Although government forces re-focused on this area, particularly around the Safaa hills, for the remainder of 2018, low levels of ISIS-related activity continued to be recorded throughout the rest of the year. The most recent activity occurred on 30

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[5] Taking advantage of the diversion of Syrian troops from this area to the Daraa offensive in the summer of 2018.

Dec. 30, 2018, in Tlul Al Safaa, where residual ISIS members and Syrian military units were involved in prolonged armed clashes (Figure 4).[6]
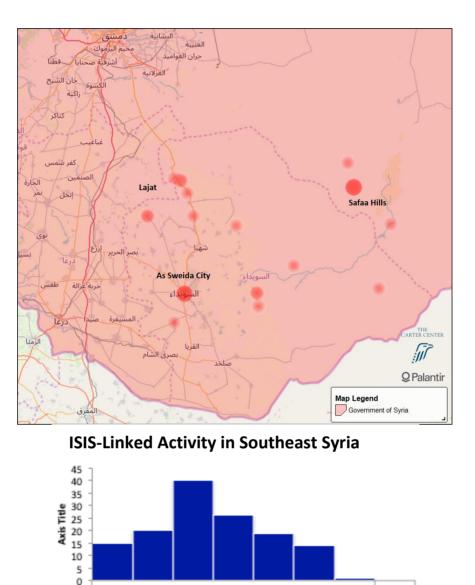

ISIS-Linked Activity in Southeast Syria

Figure 4. Documented ISIS-linked activity in southeast Syria from June 2018 to January 2019 (top), and timeline (bottom).
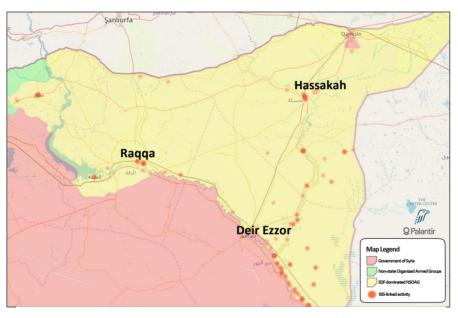
In Syrian Democratic Forces-controlled areas in northeast Syria, ISIS-affiliated activity continues. Mainly, this has taken the form of IEDs and assassinations, which have been routinely recorded long after SDF has taken control of territory. At least 172 ISIS-linked events were recorded between June 2018 and January

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[6] Although ISIS also had a presence in southwest Daraa Governorate, and violence has continued in this area (see Section 4), none of the incidents have yet been linked to the ISIS local affiliate there since the area was taken over by government forces in 2018.

2019 across the northeast of the country, from Menbej District in the west to Hassakah Governorate in the east, excluding ISIS's remaining pocket in the southeast of Deir Ez Zor Governorate between Hajin town and Baghuz Faqani village.

The majority of ISIS-related events in areas previously controlled by the group occurred between Raqqa City and Hajin town, with at least 95 incidents between June 2018 and January 2019. Outside of this area, the Menbej district near the border with Turkey recorded at least 11 IED events linked to ISIS in the same period, while in core SDF areas north of Deir Ez Zor city, at least 29 events involved ISIS were recorded. This included two high-profile suicide attacks impacting U.S. forces in Shudadah and Menbej districts in January 2019. [7] In Hassakeh governorate, at least 45 events have been linked to ISIS in the past 12 months, with the most recent in January 2019 (Figure 5). Nonviolent signs of the group's presence have also been seen in Raqqa, such as new graffiti emerging in 2019 that reads "remaining in spite of you."[8]
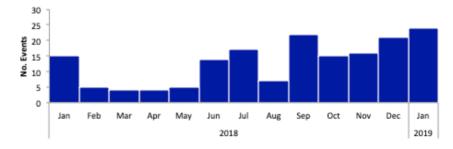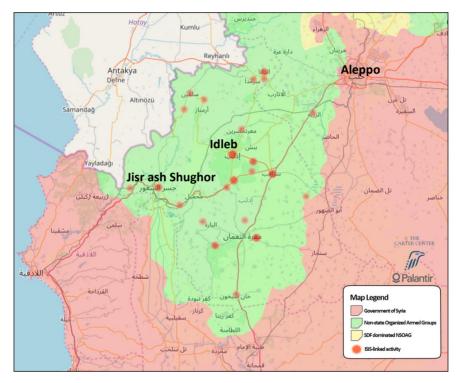

ISIS-Linked Activity in Northeast Syria

Figure 5. ISIS-linked activity in northeast Syria from January 2018 to January 2019 (top) and timeline (bottom).

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[7] For more information on the ISIS attacks against U.S. forces in January 2019, see here and here.
[8] A reference to a previous ISIS slogan used by the group in 2016 – 2018.

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Lastly, in northwest Syria, there has been limited ISIS-related activity since the group was militarily defeated by Haya'at Tahrir ash Sham (HTS)[9] and Syrian government offensives in early 2018. From February 2018 to January 2019, at least 36 conflict events related to ISIS have been recorded, composed primarily of force-on-force clashes. There were also 32 cases of arrest operations of ISIS members around Idleb recorded in the past year (Figure 6).
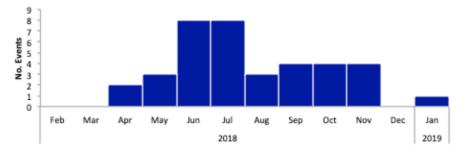

ISIS-Linked Activity in Northwest Syria

Figure 6. ISIS-linked activity in northwest Syria from February 2018 to January 2019 (top), and timeline (bottom).

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[9] Haya'at Tahrir ash Sham is the unification of several non-state organized armed groups, though it is composed largely of the Al Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al Nusra. HTS is therefore officially classified as the Al Qaeda affiliate in Syria.

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In addition, the group's activity in the northwest of Syria was highlighted in a public presentation by the Lebanese Interior Ministry in late 2018, which detailed a foiled ISIS plot in Lebanon that had strong operational direction from local ISIS members in Idleb Governorate. Most recently, ISIS's official media channel warned its supporters in Idleb not to travel in groups for fear of arrest by HTS.

As the next section will show, there is some correlation between the areas where ISIS has been able to continue to operate and where the group had strong local links with a variety of affiliates, despite having lost territorial control.

5 | REGIONAL DIFFERENCES OF ISIS

When exploring ISIS' presence in Syria, notable and distinct regional characteristics become apparent. While under the umbrella of ISIS, various affiliated groups comprised a large proportion of ISIS fighters around the country. In some cases, these local affiliates were allowed to retain their own identity and even contradict the actions of ISIS elements elsewhere in Syria. The following section will outline these regional differences.

Idleb, Hama, and Aleppo Governorates
In 2016 and 2017, when ISIS held large parts of Idleb and Aleppo governorates, they cooperated with at least two local entities in these governorates: Liwa Dawoud and Liwa Allahu Akbar. Notably, Liwa Dawoud played a key role in linking ISIS indirectly to three other entities (Figure 7).
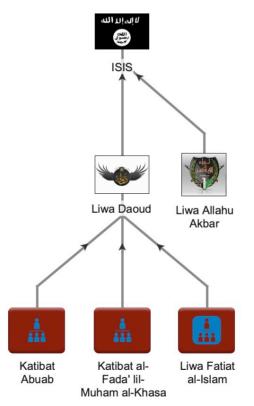

Figure 7. Diagram of different ISIS entities in Idleb, Aleppo, & Hama governorates.

Many of these entities had been engaged in longstanding rivalries with Al Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat Fatah al Sham (JFS[10]) in the north of the country since 2015. These tensions continued into 2016 and 2017, with at least 1,350 conflict events recorded between Jabhat Fatah al Sham and ISIS and ISIS-affiliated entities, building on the 1,610 events recorded between the two sides in 2015. While this activity was largely focused on defending areas lost to Syrian and Turkish forces outside of the current Idleb pocket, ISIS activity since 2017does correlate to some areas where ISIS had operated in the past, in particular, Idleb city, Saraqb, Sarmin, Maraban, Al Dana, Al Zarba, and Salqin towns (Figure 8).
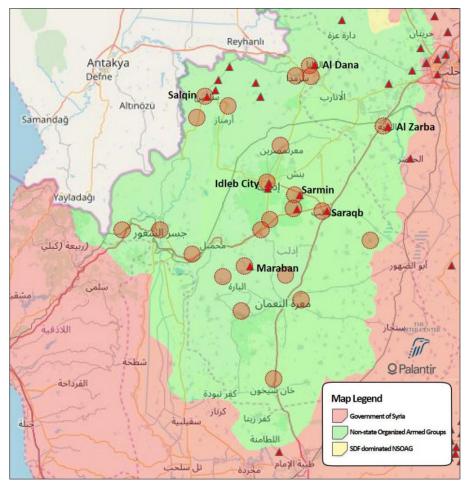

Figure 8. ISIS-linked activity in northwest Syria from 2016 / 2017 (red triangles) and ongoing ISIS activity between February 2018 to January 2019 (light red circles).

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[10] Formally Jabhat al Nusra and now named Haya'at Tahrir ash Sham (HTS).

Raqqa, Deir Ez Zor, and Hassakah Governorates

In the northeast of Syria, ISIS also worked through local networks similar to those in Idleb and Aleppo governorates during its tenure of territorial control. At least 39 local entities linked to ISIS have been recorded in Deir Ez Zor, Raqqa, and Hassakah governorates. Five groups in particular played a key role in linking many of these entities together: Kaitib Bisha'r Al Nasr, Liwa al Ikhlas, Liwa Allah Akbar, Liwa Daraa Al Ansar, and Jaish Mo'ata al Islami (Figure 9).
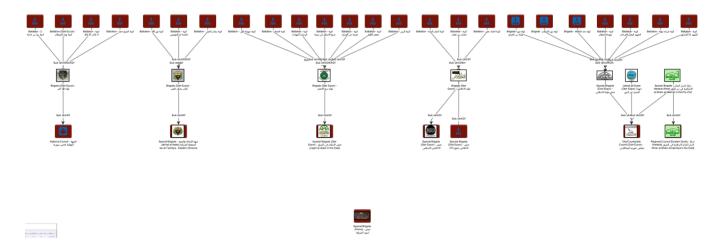

Figure 9. ISIS entities in Deir Ez Zor, Raqqa, and Hassakeh governorates. Please see page 27 for a larger, more legible image.

ISIS-affiliated groups in this region were highly active against the SDF and Syrian military, accounting for a third of documented conflict activities between 2016 and 2017. There are notable correlations between the locations of some of the heaviest fighting involving these groups and the locations of ongoing, residual ISIS attacks throughout 2018 and 2019. In particular, these correlations can be seen in Tabqa City, Raqqa City, and the stretch between al Basirah and Danaj towns south of Deir Ez Zor City. The group's ongoing activities in the deserts between Al Shuhadah and Deir Ez Zor City have increased in the past year, with more attacks recorded in these locations than in previous years (Figure 10).
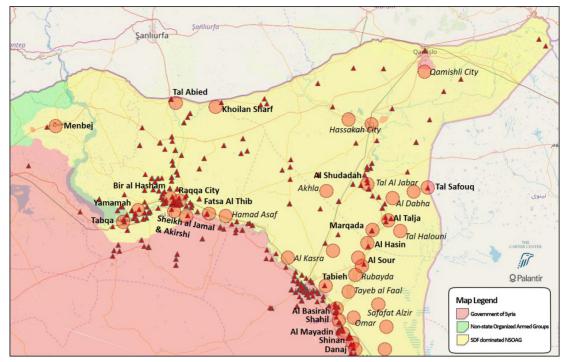
Figure 10. ISIS-linked activity in northwest Syria from 2016 / 2017 (red triangles) and ongoing ISIS activity between January 2018 to January 2019 (light red circles).

Homs Governorate

In the Badiyah area or Rural Damascus and deserts around Sokhneh town in Homs Governorate, ISIS groups attacked a wide variety of military actors in the region in 2016 and 2017.[11] The 270 ISIS activities recorded in the past 12 months, long after the area had been retaken by Syrian government forces, also correlate to areas where fighting between ISIS and different actors opposing the group was heaviest. This is most notable around Salamiyah City, Tadmor City, and Sokhneh town. Further east in the rural desert areas, ongoing ISIS activity also fragmented and widened as it did in parts of northeast Syria (Figure 11).

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[11] Ranging from attacks on armed groups in the Rukban IDP camp near the Jordanian border, such as Jaish al Asha'er and Maghra al Thawr that saw five ISIS events against them, including at least three IED detonations; on U.S.-led coalition forces stationed at Tanf on the Syrian / Iraqi border (four sustained assaults); and periodic attacks focused on government and Iranian troops at the Zaza checkpoint or Um Ramram in the Sabe Baye area (12). One high-profile suicide attack against a joint U.S.-led coalition / Jordanian Special Operations Forces complex, 2 kilometers east of Rukban camp, in June 2016 also highlighted the groups' reach into Jordan.
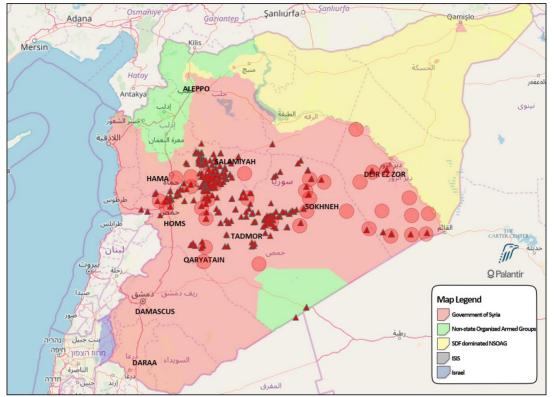
Figure 11. ISIS-linked activity in central Syria from 2016 / 2017 (red triangles) and ongoing ISIS activity between January 2018 to January 2019 (light red circles).

Further west, ISIS also had historical precedence in working through a local affiliate, Liwa al Saddiq in the Eastern Qalamoun mountains. Formerly under the umbrella of Tahrir al Sham (a local group separate from the Al Qaeda affiliate that shares a similar name), the group had been headquartered in Dhumayr town until April 2016. At this time, it relocated to Raqqa after a deal following intense clashes in the city between Tahrir al Sham and Liawa al Saddiq and was formally incorporated into ISIS.

Even after the move, at least 41 ISIS-linked events against Syrian government and opposition forces were recorded in the remainder of 2016 and all of 2017. These events took place in the surrounding Eastern Qalamoun Mountains, especially near Dhumayr, Nasriyah, and Al Sein areas, indicating that the ISIS-affiliated group continued to operate. However, the group's activity in this area abruptly stopped after a government takeover in early 2018. Only two events linked to ISIS were recorded throughout 2018, in June and July, both involving small arms fire against Syrian government patrols. Notably, both attacks occurred in Liwa al Saddiq's former headquarters of Dhumayr town (Figure 12).
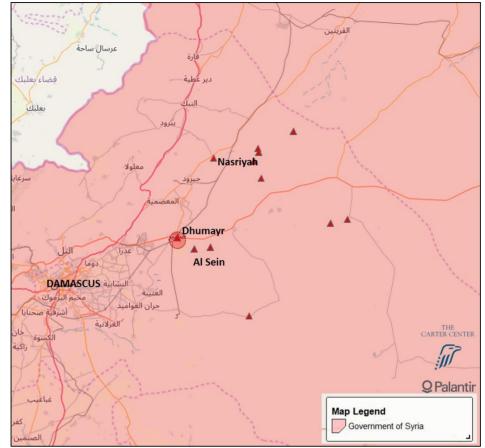
Figure 12. ISIS-linked activity northwest of the capital in 2016 / 2017 (red triangles) and January 2018 to January 2019 (red circle).

Damascus

ISIS activity in the capital contrasted heavily with the entity's operations elsewhere in the country, especially with respect to its relationship to Jabhat Fatah al Sham (JFS). In the southern Damascus suburbs of Hajar al Aswad and Yarmouk camp, an uneasy truce and collaboration had existed between ISIS and JFS since early 2016. This continued into 2017, with only 24 conflict events between the two groups recorded throughout the year. In contrast, there were a combined 432 recorded conflict activities carried out by ISIS or JFS against the Syrian government or its allied forces. [12]

However, with the growing pressures of the Hajar al Aswad and Yarmouk siege by Syrian government forces in 2018, the nature of the relationship between JFS and ISIS in the two neighborhoods became more hostile, aligning with the two groups' relations elsewhere in the country. Conflict activities between ISIS and JFS

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[12] A similar case of truce between the two groups was also seen in the Qalamoun Mountains on the border with Lebanon in late 2015, when ISIS and Jabhat al Nusra agreed to coordinate activities. This collaboration appeared to continue into 2016 and 2017, as data from the area shows that just one conflict event between the two sides was recorded in the vicinity of Falita town in June 2017. In contrast, 147 events by these two groups in the Qalamoun Mountains were against the Syrian government and allied forces.

increased significantly—from 24 events recorded in 2017 to at least 188 events in 2018. ISIS also made significant inroads into Yarmouk camp, controlling all but a small portion of it just prior to the May 2018 Syrian government offensive.

ISIS also made increasing attempts to improve its capacity to control the population in southern Damascus just prior to the Syrian government's offensive, conducting arrests and public executions as well as establishing new laws in the camp. The government offensive against ISIS-controlled areas in southern Damascus removed the group's physical presence from this area. No conflict events linked to ISIS have been recorded there since May 2018.

Daraa Governorate
Finally, in Daraa Governorate, a different local picture emerged about the way ISIS operated. Instead of branding itself as ISIS, the local affiliate, Khalid Bin Walid Army (KBW), retained its name and local identity. Through a conglomeration of three local groups—Liwa Shuhada al Yarmouk, Harikat al Muthanna al Islamiyah, and Jaish al Jihad—KBW largely focused on consolidating its territory around the four nodes of Jlein, As Shajarah, Tassil, and Ain Thaker towns, taking advantage of the natural defensive terrain. KBW took this area in April 2017 (Figure 13).
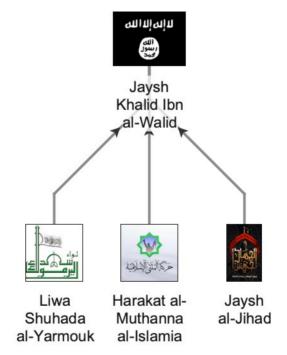

Figure 13. ISIS-affiliated entities in Daraa Governorate.

Only 142 conflict events associated with KBW were recorded between April 2017 and April 2018, before increasing to 241 events from May 2018 to January 2019. This is a fairly low level of activity compared to ISIS affiliates in other parts of the country. By contrast, between April 2017 and August 2018, when the Syrian government consolidated territorial control over Daraa Governorate, 2,086 conflict events recorded in this area were attributed to various opposition groups surrounding the KBW pocket. Also, KBW did not direct attacks against Israel

despite its proximity to the Golan Heights and ISIS's public rhetoric against Israel. KBW directly engaged with the Israeli Defense Forces only once in its history, on November 27, 2016, after targeting an IDF patrol near the southwestern edge of its territory.

Since the Khalid Bin Walid Army-controlled areas were taken over by Syrian government forces in August 2018, only three conflict events linked to the group have been recorded – two IEDs that were discovered and diffused, and one armed clash. Yet some 36 violent incidents have been recorded against Syrian government forces in the area since August 2018, all by unidentified armed actors. Five of those have occurred in the area previously controlled by KBW (Figure 14). With pro-ISIS graffiti appearing in various towns around Daraa Governorate in 2019, there is a possibility that residual ISIS presence remains, particularly through the old KBW network.
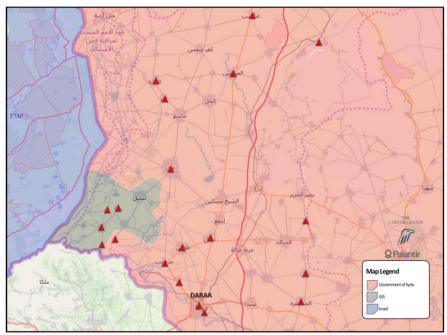

Figure 14. Conflict activity against Syrian government forces in Daraa Governorate since September 2018 with former Khalid Bin Walid Army areas highlighted (gray).

It is possible that ISIS in Syria has always been a conglomeration of several unique, regional entities throughout Syria operating in distinct ways. Sometimes these groups attempted to hold territory; other times they acted as spoilers or influencers in seemingly passive areas of the country. This does not discount areas where the group clearly operated in a centralized manner, such as in Raqqa.

What is clear from the conflict data is that there is correlation between areas of former ISIS control via local entities and continued ISIS-related attacks. A further nuance is that where ISIS allowed more local expression of its affiliates, such as the Eastern Qalamoun Mountains and in the southern Damascus and Daraa governorates, the group typically failed to continue operations after the fall of Raqqa.
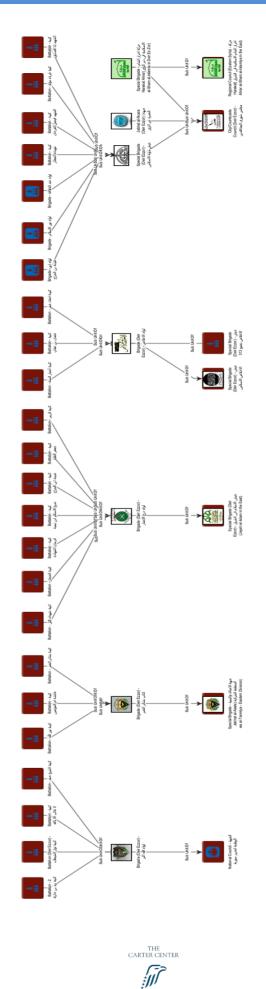
6 | CONCLUSION

The violent extremist armed group known as ISIS or Daesh lost nearly all of its territorial control in Syria after the military campaigns against it since 2016. The enduring activity of ISIS-affiliated groups and fighters around Syria remains nonetheless significant, though the total number of recorded conflict events is under 1,000 in the past year. This ongoing capacity for violence raises questions about the nature of ISIS's current and future influence on the stability and social cohesion in Syria. This paper also highlighted the local differences of ISIS. Through its diverse local iterations, the group has evolved to pose a more complex and diverse threat.

This new stage of ISIS activity is also less public and more guarded, making it difficult for policymakers and key stakeholders to monitor the group's influence and intentions, let alone understand how it operates. Approaching ISIS as a unified, coherent entity may have been a useful tool for policymakers in the past – especially for the military actors engaged against ISIS. Yet the fragmentation of the group since 2016 and the group's emphasis on its local networks means that treating it as one entity could be ineffective and counterproductive moving forward. Ultimately, with the right approach tailored to the local context, it could be possible to effectively deal with the ongoing but nuanced threat ISIS poses to stability in Syria.

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For queries or comments about this report, please contact

syriamapping@cartercenter.org

SYRIA CONFLICT MAPPING

Since 2012, The Carter Center's Conflict Resolution Program has endeavored to analyze open-source information related to the Syrian conflict in as much detail as possible, with the goal of assisting mediators and conflict responders with up-to-date, detailed analysis of developments in the country. Using these publicly available resources, as well as information gleaned from regular consultations with stakeholders, the Center has documented and mapped 122,000 conflict events in Syria as well as the ever-changing relations between the armed groups. For more information, visit our website at www.cartercenter.org.

The Center's Syria Project also produces weekly conflict summaries, covering the main developments of the week. The team also considers data requests and ad hoc reporting. Please contact us on syriamapping@cartercenter.org to set up a meeting or sign up on our website.

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