

MP-IDSA

Issue Brief

ISIS: An Enduring Threat

Saman Ayesha Kidwai

October 30, 2024

S*ummary*

ISIS remains an enduring security threat and its narrative has sustained through the attacks and propaganda carried out by its affiliates. Socio-political grievances and religious repression will continue fueling support for ISIS. There is a lack of global appetite to counter the ISIS threat due to geopolitical confrontations and armed conflicts raging worldwide.

ISIS remains a significant security threat despite territorial losses and collapse of the physical Caliphate in March 2019. This is due to its adaptability, resilience, global reach and ideological appeal.¹ The ISIS recently used the Paris Olympics and UEFA Euro Games, two high-profile events, to incite its followers to target Jewish and Western targets. ISIS owes its continued notoriety and relevance to its potent *wilayats* (provinces/affiliates), mainly Islamic State in Khorasan Province or ISKP, sleeper cells and lone-wolves who remain inspired by its Salafi-Jihadi ideology.

The widespread violence unleashed by ISIS central and its affiliates in the first six months of 2024 has resulted in at least 3,749 casualties as a result of approximately 778 attacks across 16 countries,² with Russia being the worst-affected. As per the GTI Report 2024 released by the Institute of Economics and Peace, ISIS remains the deadliest terrorist group for the ninth consecutive year, claiming the maximum number of attacks and deaths from terrorist activities. At least 1,636 deaths and 470 attacks can be attributed to ISIS central and its affiliates in 2023.³ There is a greater coordination of tactics, strategies, and terror financing between various ISIS affiliates. For example, Maktab al-Karrar’s global financing network—overseeing Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Mozambique, Somalia and various parts of Southern, Eastern and Central Africa—reportedly financed ISKP’s attack at the Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul in August 2021.

Media propaganda—ranging from hailing lone-wolf attacks against Jewish or Western targets, calling on supporters to carry out more attacks, and denigrating its enemy groups, states, or movements to expand its support base—has remained central to ISIS’ strategy to sustain its narrative and influence. It has disseminated its propaganda through multilingual radio broadcasts and publications (targeting local population), telegram messaging, artificial intelligence (AI) and decentralised terror networks.

These factors have collectively ensured that Abu Bakr al Baghdadi’s call—‘Our battle today is a battle of attrition. They (anti-ISIS coalition) should know that jihad continues until judgement day’⁴ remains relevant and a rallying cry to mobilise extremists, reinforce ISIS’ ideology in detainee camps and prisons, and carry out deadly terror attacks. The knife attack in Solingen (Germany) in August

¹ [“US-Iraqi Forces Killed At Least 15 ISIL Fighters During Joint Operation on Thursday”](#), *Al Jazeera*, August 2024.

² Daniele Garofalo, [“Six Months of Islamic State Terror Attacks”](#), *Daniele Garofalo Monitoring*, 6 July 2024.

³ [“Global Terrorism Index 2024”](#), Institute for Economics & Peace, February 2024.

⁴ Raya Jalabi, David Piling, Aanu Adeoye and John Paul Rathbone, [“What ISIS Did Next: The Return of the Threat That Never Left”](#), *Financial Times*, 25 June 2024.

2024⁵ and suicide bombing targeting prosecutors in Kabul⁶ and threats concerning potential attacks on the US Capitol Building⁷ in September 2024 are relevant examples here.

The group has not only displayed resilience which is central to its modus operandi, but it has learned to adapt its strategy and tactics to fit evolving dynamics and exploit local, regional and global experiences and conflicts. Today, the conflict in the Gaza Strip, festering anti-government sentiments, surge in far-right populism, and widening socio-economic marginalisation (particularly in Europe) have simultaneously contributed to and reinforced radicalisation, including among young teenagers.

Categories of ISIS Fighters

Besides using trained fighters indoctrinated by the group through rigorous physical training and ideological manipulation, ISIS has also expanded the scope to include other categories of fighters.⁸

1. **Lone-Wolves:** These are self-radicalised individuals who have consumed extremist content online, have no formal association with ISIS at the outset and yet claim allegiance and attacks in its name. One notable example is the knife attacker who killed two people in Belgium in November 2022.
2. **Enabled Individuals:** These are partially supported or guided by the terrorist group. For example, Mohammed Al Bared was a 22-year-old engineering student in the United Kingdom who was jailed in December 2023 for 20 years. He attempted to build a kamikaze drone and his chats revealed his support for ISIS. As per the reports, he had established a firm to import from Türkiye to support ISIS activities.
3. **Trained:** These individuals carry out directed assaults after being wholly trained by the group and are the most lethal. The June 2024 attacks in Dagestan (Russia) are some of the more notable examples.

⁵ Marcel Fürstenau, [“Solingen Knife Attack Prompts Tough Security Measures”](#), DW, 30 August 2024.

⁶ [“ISIL Claims Responsibility for Deadly Kabul Attack”](#), Al Jazeera, 3 September 2024.

⁷ TracTerrorism, [“Al-Azaim Media \(Unofficial Islamic State Khurasan/#ISK\) Circulates a Threatening Poster, Vowing an...”](#), X (formerly Twitter), 6 September 2024.

⁸ Raya Jalabi, David Piling, Aanu Adeoye and John Paul Rathbone, [“What ISIS Did Next: The Return of the Threat That Never Left”](#), no. 4.

Terror Financing Avenues

ISIS has used conventional and unconventional terror financing avenues to sustain its terror campaign and extremist ideology, including hawala networks, cryptocurrency and Tinder. While hawala networks have remained vital to its terror financing operations, cryptocurrency platforms like Monero (which are virtually untraceable), have gained a fair degree of media attention. However, ISIS has also relied on unconventional avenues like Tinder for this purpose.

In South Africa, profiles of lesser-known celebrities have been used by ISIS cells based in Durban, Cape Town and Johannesburg (informally linked to ISIS) to extort money from people who were convinced to share their pictures on this platform as part of the terror financing campaign.⁹ The money raised through such criminal activities are generally split between four entities—ISIS Somalia, Mozambique and DRC, and ISIS Central—who then re-distribute it to others involved in the terrorist network.

While South Africa has not experienced any major Islamist attack nor does it have any formal ISIS affiliates, it has become central to the organisation’s material, terror financing and logistical operations. South Africa’s industrialised economy has become one of the lynchpins of ISIS’ recruitment and financing activities. This could be attributed to 3 Cs which are evident in the country—complacency, corruption and criminality. Recently, the US sanctioned several individuals, including Durban-based Farhad Hooper,¹⁰ a known jihadi and reportedly the head of the Durban cell, for their involvement in terror financing activities. Notably, while the use of fake profiles on Tinder might be a more recent phenomenon, the use of loopholes present in South Africa to move terror funds has been a long-standing trend. Al-Qaeda-affiliated Al-Shabaab moved money through South Africa after the Westgate Mall Attack in 2013 (Kenya) in which at least 67 people lost their lives in a four-day siege.

Recent Attacks: Successful and Foiled

ISIS’ resilience could also be understood through the deadly terror attacks carried out and plots hatched throughout Austria, Oman and Russia recently. In August 2024, three Taylor Swift concerts in Vienna (Austria) were cancelled after it was revealed by authorities (after receiving intelligence from the US Central Intelligence Agency) about a deadly terrorist attack planned by ISIS, intending to inflict thousands of casualties. Three arrests had subsequently taken place.

⁹ Elena Martynova, [“From Tinder \(?\) To Terrorism: How ISIL in South Africa Makes and Moves Money”](#), *Insight Monitor*, 25 April 2024.

¹⁰ [“Treasury Designates Members of ISIS Cell in South Africa”](#), U.S. Department of Treasury, 7 November 2022.

In July 2024, Muscat (Oman) witnessed the first terrorist attack claimed by ISIS when the Imam Ali Mosque, a Shia Mosque, was targeted. At least six people were killed and 28 injured. Shortly after the attack, a video of the perpetrators declaring allegiance to ISIS¹¹ was released by the group. Oman, which had never experienced events such as these before, serves as an important reminder of the potential of ISIS and its affiliates to target countries.

In March 2024, over 140 people were killed and more than 100 wounded when ISKP fighters stormed the Crocus Concert City Hall in Moscow, Russia. However, this was not the only attack that occurred in the Russian territory. A plan to attack a synagogue in Moscow was thwarted in the lead-up to the March 2024 incident and Dagestan witnessed two separate attacks in June 2024 which were claimed by the terrorist group, killing at least 20 and wounding 40 others. It was after the attacks in Dagestan that the Dagestani Muftiate (the religious organisation representing the Dagestani Muslims) decided to temporarily ban the use of niqab. Investigations had revealed that the perpetrators had intended to flee using a disguise. In June 2024, a prison in Rostov was also taken hostage by ISIS detainees. A similar incident occurred in Volgograd in August 2024. Attacks such as these are hailed by ISIS who refer to the hostage takers as *mujahideen*¹² who were later neutralised.

Iraq and Syria: The Erstwhile Bases of ISIS

As the COVID-19 outbreak halted the movement of people and progress of initiatives launched by various countries, including the counter-terrorism training provided to Iraqi officers, ISIS used the opportunity presented by the health crisis to regroup and remobilise. Moreover, as unrest against the government escalated due to unsatisfactory health services, ISIS found opportunity to exploit the resentment and escalate kinetic attacks against the state.

As a result, the unregulated or understaffed areas near the Iraqi-Syria border and near the Kurdish Autonomous Region became vulnerable over time and allowed the group to gradually consolidate its momentum, engage in cross-border trafficking of weapons and movement of its fighters with much ease, and cultivate sleeper cells (later tapped into carrying out attacks) to carry out activities such as ambushing of soldiers using IEDs. Roadside bombs and explosives and targeted assassinations have become common in Iraq and Syria despite frequent raids carried out by Iraqis (independently or alongside Americans as part of joint operations).

¹¹ [“Executors of IS-claimed Attack in Oman Incite Muslims Wake Up, Pledge to Caliph in Posthumous Amaq Video”](#), SITE Intelligence Group, July 2024.

¹² Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamini, [“Islamic State Report on Russian Prison Riot”](#), Aymenn’s Monstrous Publications, 29 August 2024.

Despite the rhetoric about the commitment to the Global Coalition Against Daesh, there has been little effort to frame a mutually agreeable counter-terror strategy between Iraq and the US (two key members of the Global Coalition Against Daesh) and cultivate self-sufficiency within the Iraqi forces, who remain ill-equipped to deal with the persisting threat of radicalisation and violent extremism. This is worrying especially considering that attacks on soldiers, police officers, tribal leaders, PMF and the Peshmerga, have become a recurring phenomenon. ISIS has also used mobile groups to wage guerilla warfare across rural and mountainous regions and train and house its fighters. Despite the repeated raids carried out jointly by American and Iraqi forces against ISIS hideouts, the severity of the threat remains very evident.

Notably, despite the absence of the sectarian tensions among the people that resulted in the rise of ISIS, it is the leadership that continues stroking tensions in various capacities. For example, officers associated with the PMF have stood accused in the past, as a matter of deliberate policy, of unlawfully detaining and torturing Sunni prisoners (because of their alleged ISIS ties) in Eastern Mosul¹³ and Nineveh Governorate¹⁴ up until a few years ago. A former inmate at one of the Mosul-based detention centres pointed out that despite many prisoners not being ISIS supporters, even the smallest victory achieved by the terrorist organisation is celebrated since it is considered the only viable front taking a stand against the government. He argued that

While not many of them did not sympathise with, and even suffered under ISIS, they were also against the Iraqi government that was holding them in these terrible conditions and ISIS was the only one fighting them.¹⁵

These conditions act as a ticking time bomb which is bound to keep Iraq from transitioning into a stable country. At the same time, members affiliated with Shia militias like al-Badr organisation and Kataib Hezbollah have reportedly prevented displaced Sunni families from returning to their neighbourhoods after having infiltrated government institutions and structures.

In Syria, specifically, ISIS has staged large-scale prison breaks such as the Ghweiron Prison Break in 2022, leaving over 500 dead or the September 2024 prison break in the Raqqa Governorate. It has even smuggled several ISIS family members from detainee camps like al-Hol and al-Roj and housed them in areas deemed safe, including the Anbar Desert in Iraq. These camps are managed by SDF forces who are under resourced, understaffed and susceptible to corruption. They have often

¹³ [“Iraq: Intelligence Agency Admits Holding Hundreds Despite Previous Denials”](#), *Human Rights Watch*, 22 July 2018.

¹⁴ [“Iraq: Muslim Scholars Say Prisoners Being Tortured”](#), *Middle East Monitor*, 19 June 2020.

¹⁵ Vera Mironova, [“Who are the ISIS People?”](#), *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 13, No. 1, February 2019, pp. 32–39.

turned a blind eye to indoctrination and re-indoctrination occurring within camps, creating a new wave of terrorists.

At the same time, as the security forces on both sides of the Iraq–Syria border have been overwhelmed while tackling the security threats, the ground situation became worse. This is because over time, several ISIS prisoners and their families have been released from detainee camps and prisons without tribal guarantees of them disavowing a life of extremism and violence. For example, in November 2020, 515 ISIS fighters and family members, including the former head of Public Relations, Abd al-Hamid al-Dairi were released from detention.

There is still vast scepticism about the scope of de-radicalisation efforts and security concerns that remain in the event of incomplete or failed de-radicalisation programmes implemented. Iraq, for instance, chose to repatriate a few hundred ISIS families to al-Jada’a Rehabilitation Centre in the Qayarra District (South of Mosul, bordering Syria) to gradually re-integrate them into mainstream society. The Yazidi community has condemned the government’s decision to repatriate detainee families and the tribal leaders’ decision to allow their return to mainstream society.

Media Propaganda

The exploitative use of digital and social media, and encrypted chat forums has remained central to ISIS remaining an enduring security threat globally, primarily in the absence of a physical Caliphate and requires further examination. For example, ISKP (possibly the most powerful and notorious ISIS affiliate) has positioned itself as the most lethal ISIS affiliate and potentially as a successor to spearhead the organisation’s activities amid a weakened ISIS Central, especially in terms of media propaganda. It has diverted its resources from trying to hold on to territories to waging guerilla warfare to undermine the Afghan Taliban’s rule, while extensively using a centralised publishing house (Al Azaim Foundation)—the only affiliate to do so—to disseminate propaganda. It has also partnered with Al Ilam to publish translated propaganda pieces in Tajik, Uzbek, Urdu, Malyali, Farsi, Bengali, English, Turkish, Hindi and Russian, among others.

In opposition to restrictive policies adopted by countries like Tajikistan regarding religious expression, it has used the media narratives to position itself as the only viable front to overthrow the President.¹⁶ For example, ISKP has used the Sadoi Khorasan Radio to release over 550 episodes between May 2021 and May 2023. A week after the March 2024 Moscow attack, the affiliate also launched the *Sadoi Khorasan* magazine, in which it condemned the Tajik President’s model of governance and accused him of displaying subservience to Russia.

¹⁶ [“Briefing: Pro-ISKP Media Group Launches New Tajik Magazine”](#), *BBC Monitoring*, 1 April 2024.

These tactics remain vital to its strategy to ensure the organisation’s ideology remains relevant and to sustain the fear and notoriety associated by the global audience. It has also used platforms such as Hoop, Element, TikTok, among others to disseminate its propaganda and radicalise people. More recently, AI has been extensively used by ISKP to generate propaganda and to share their attacks in the form of news bulletin being read by an AI-generated anchor to gain more traction.

After the Crocus Concert City Hall attack and following the attack in the Bamiyan Province (Afghanistan) in which four people—three Spanish tourists and one Afghan—lost their lives, AI-generated videos have been shared on pro-ISKP channels, including Khurasan TV, detailing the group’s activities and successes. Analysts have observed that several pro-ISIS Arabic-speaking supporters have called on their fellow extremists on Telegram to use AI bots to create propaganda that would be visually appealing with great ease.¹⁷ AI-generated content, including memes and posters have been released on platforms like Pinterest and Instagram as effective means to disseminate propaganda and indoctrinate potential recruits.

ISIS and Gazan Conflict

ISKP has also been particularly active in using the events in the Gaza Strip to instigate followers to carry out knifing attacks and the threat levels in terms of the Islamist threat have increased since October 2023. There have also been several attacks—intending to target concerts, markets, church and parliaments—which have been foiled by authorities and have been associated with ISIS supporters.

ISIS channels have become proactive in celebrating the death of Ismail Haniyeh and Saleh al-Arouri (former Head of Hamas’ Political Bureau) to position itself as the only front representing the best interests of Palestinians, expand its support base and denigrate Iran. Yahyha Sinwar was declared by ISIS as an *apostate* far worse than a Jew as part of ISIS propaganda following his death. ISIS publications like *Al-Naba* have also claimed that Haniyeh (whose organisation Hamas it considers to be an apostate) ‘died in Iran’s embrace’ while hinting that Iran betrayed him to safeguard itself. Additionally, referring to the targeted assassination of Hamas leaders, ISIS has propounded that ‘the Shia bloc has only brought you woes and destruction’.¹⁸

Threats Facing India

Recently, reports emerged that Islamic State in Hind Province’s (ISHP) Chief Haris Farooqi and aide, Rehan, were arrested in India for their involvement in

¹⁷ Sirwan Kajjo, [“IS Turns to Artificial Intelligence for Advanced Propaganda amid Territorial Defeats”](#), *VOA News*, 23 May 2024.

¹⁸ Mina Al-Lami, [“IS has Gloated at the State of its Muslim Rivals Following the Assassination...”](#), X (formerly Twitter), 2 August 2024.

radicalisation and terror financing. It was an important breakthrough and points towards ISIS threat and inroads in certain parts of India, for example, with regard to revelations about its association with the proscribed Popular Front of India (PFI) and attacks in places like Coimbatore and Mangalore. However, despite ISIS activities in South India and links to the PFI, and having established ISHP and launched *Voice of Hind* magazine to direct its efforts and strategies concerning the Indian subcontinent, it has failed to garner much support overall.

Its ideology has failed to gain traction due to the doctrinal differences with the Hanafi-Deobandi beliefs of most of the Muslim extremists within the subcontinent. Moreover, its activities in terms of physical attacks and propaganda have remained on the lower threat spectrum than the groups who owe their patronage to Pakistan, such as Lashkar-e-Taiba. It has failed to make inroads in Islamist extremists' fold due to the in-fighting with groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba¹⁹ who have reportedly taken out several of its leaders. Overall, ISHP's ideology has limited influence in a secular and multicultural country like India and therefore poses no immediate and major threat to its national security and integrity.

Conclusion

ISIS remains an enduring security threat and its narrative has sustained through the attacks and propaganda carried out by its affiliates. This is likely to continue being the case for the foreseeable future. The world is also likely to see more innovative ways of terror financing and increasing exploitation of AI-powered tools with decentralisation of access to technology and emergence of digital wallets and transactions that cannot be traced.

It can be expected that attacks spanning beyond the areas considered to be traditional areas of influence of affiliates like ISKP (having carried out attacks beyond the *Khorasan* region, for example, Moscow) will continue occurring, with emphasis on softer targets as a key strategy. In addition, while socio-political grievances will continue fueling support for ISIS, religious repression (as is evident in Tajikistan and Dagestan) is unlikely to prove beneficial in a bid to counter the threat the group poses.

Finally, there is lack of global appetite to counter the ISIS threat due to geopolitical confrontations and armed conflicts raging worldwide. This is despite ISIS' wholly rejectionist stance and anti-Westphalian approach which should ordinarily be a binding factor for countries worldwide. Arguably, the world must brace itself for a growing confrontation with the evolving security threat posed by ISIS and its affiliates.

¹⁹ Abdul Sayed and Tori Refslund Hamming, [“The Growing Threat of Islamic State in Afghanistan and South Asia”](#), United States Institute of Peace, June 2023.

About the Author



Ms. Saman Ayesha Kidwai is Research Analyst at the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi.

Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses is a non-partisan, autonomous body dedicated to objective research and policy relevant studies on all aspects of defence and security. Its mission is to promote national and international security through the generation and dissemination of knowledge on defence and security-related issues.

Disclaimer: Views expressed in Manohar Parrikar IDSA's publications and on its website are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Manohar Parrikar IDSA or the Government of India.

© Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA) 2024