



ISIS leader is dead, but his Islamic State terrorist group is alive with means to thrive

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This weekend's news that Islamic State emir Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi had killed himself in Syria's Idlib province while being pursued by U.S. special forces operators is unquestionably a major milestone in the fight against the world's most notorious terrorist group. It also represents an unalloyed political victory for the Trump administration, which has come under fire of late for its decision to draw down the American presence in Syria.

Yet, however momentous, al-Baghdadi's death remains part of a larger struggle. Although ISIS is significantly diminished, it still possesses formidable strategic capabilities and resources that make it an enduring threat to the United States, as well as to America's interests and its regional allies.

The numbers tell the story.

Global reach and business model

At its most powerful, ISIS was estimated to boast a force of 40,000 foreign fighters drawn from a multitude of nations (among them Russia, Tunisia and Saudi Arabia). Most of this cohort remains active today, despite the collapse of the ISIS caliphate. As of early this year, the U.S. government gauged that the group still had 20,000 to 30,000 active fighters at its disposal. These forces, in turn, will be bolstered in the years ahead by a new generation of radicals that is now being incubated in enclaves like Syria's notorious al-Hawl refugee camp.

ISIS also retains a truly global reach. In fact, over the past year, as its Middle Eastern caliphate has declined, the terror group has succeeded in repositioning itself to other global theaters — with ominous results. ISIS cells and affiliates are active today throughout Africa and Southeast Asia, where they pose a growing threat to the stability of countries like Nigeria, Indonesia and the Philippines. Indeed, the group may even be poised for a comeback in the Middle East.

President Donald Trump with, from left, national security adviser Robert O'Brien, Vice President Mike Pence, Defense Secretary Mark Esper and Army Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, in the situation room on Oct. 26, 2019. (Photo: Shealah Craighead/AP)

In its report on "Operation Inherent Resolve," as the campaign against the Islamic State is formally known, the Pentagon's Office of the Inspector General reiterated that in the absence of continued military pressure on the group from the United States, ISIS remains capable of reclaiming lost territory in Syria within as little as six months to a year.

In terms of finances, too, ISIS remains a potent force. At the height of its power, the Islamic State ranked as the best-funded threat group in history, thanks to a sophisticated business model that revolved around multiple revenue streams ranging from oil sales to looting to the taxation of territories under its control. Not much has changed in this regard either. Despite the collapse of its territorial control, experts estimate that ISIS still has access to hundreds of millions of dollars and continues to generate a steady stream of revenue through informal networks and illicit activities. These funds, in turn, have enabled it to continue funding global operations on an ongoing basis.

Outreach to Muslim hearts and minds

Most of all, the Islamic State's corrosive ideological message remains as enduring, and as appealing, as ever. Counterterrorism experts and officials caution that there has been no discernible change to patterns of recruitment and radicalization in the broader Muslim world over the past year. They also note that the organization's outreach — carried out through a sophisticated apparatus that adroitly exploits social media, online propaganda and new technology — means that it remains a formidable force in the most important arena of all: the struggle for "hearts and minds" taking place in the Muslim world.

Even before al-Baghdadi's demise, the United States was giving every indication that, having successfully destroyed the physical ISIS caliphate, it was eager to turn the page on the "war on terror." In the wake of the ISIS emir's death, the impulse for the Trump administration to consider its counterterrorism mission accomplished is sure to be stronger than ever.

That would be a dangerous misreading of the resilience of the group that al-Baghdadi once commanded — and whose ideological message continues to both mobilize and inspire.

Ilan Berman is senior vice president of the American Foreign Policy Council. Follow him on Twitter: @ilanberman