



# Global Islamism Monitor No. 79

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**Related Categories:** Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Islamic Extremism; Terrorism; Afghanistan; Europe; Iran; Iraq; Israel; North Africa; Turkey

## THE TALIBAN TAKE THE OFFENSIVE

While Washington has touted the truce concluded earlier this year between the U.S. and Afghanistan's militant Taliban movement as a harbinger of greater stability in the war-torn country, security trends seem to be moving in the opposite direction. According to the Afghan National Security Council, the Taliban carried out an averaged 55 attacks per day in the country during the period between March 1st and May 1st. Taliban officials have claimed that the increase has been in retaliation for continued provocations from the U.S. and Afghan governments, but observers say that the Taliban - facing less military pressure from the U.S. - is now emboldened to press its advantage against the Afghan government.

Whatever the reason, the practical effects of the surge in violence have been nothing short of devastating, with casualties among the Afghan armed forces soaring. "The numbers show Taliban doing nothing for peace and everything to continue their campaign of terror against Afghans," the Council's spokesperson has said on social media. And, if left unabated, the trend could augur a collapse of the U.S.-Taliban deal and a resumption of hostilities, in spite of the Trump administration's desire to reduce its footprint in the Afghan battlespace. "If the Taliban continue to attack, then what they should expect is a response," one U.S. military commander has cautioned. (*Washington Post*, May 1, 2020)

## THE ISLAMIC STATE SHOWS NEW SIGNS OF LIFE

Recent weeks have seen a notable uptick in ISIS-linked violence and activity, causing growing alarm among analysts and politicians in Washington. Recent moves by the terror group in both Iraq and Syria have generated worries among observers that - a little more than a year after the collapse of its self-declared *caliphate* - the Islamic State is once again resurgent. U.S. military officials, however, say that although there has indeed been an increase in ISIS activity of late, "that activity is significantly diminished compared to this time in 2019." Despite what the group's "remnants" are advertising, they say, their attacks in Iraq are "far less than in previous years. They are attempting to keep themselves relevant through disinformation on social media, regular media, and amplifying their messages for recruitment."?

Even so, the once-formidable terror group retains significant operational capability. It is estimated to still command at least 14,000 fighters across Syria and Iraq. Nor does the October 2019 death of the group's self-declared *emir*, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, appear to have inhibited the Islamic State's activity or changed its operational playbook in any meaningful way. And while coalition forces have so far been successful in repulsing the group in areas where the U.S. and allied Syrian Defense Forces (SDF) maintain a strong presence, there are signs that ISIS is now seeking to exploit empty political space in war-torn Syria (such as the Badiya Desert) to its advantage. "We have seen ISIS gaining ground there, attacking even towns, and at least? briefly holding territory," Amb. Jim Jeffrey, the U.S. special representative for Syria, has confirmed. (*VOA News*, May 7, 2020)

## IS AMERICA REDUCING ITS FOOTPRINT IN THE SINAI?

The Trump administration could soon draw down America's military presence in the Sinai Peninsula, the desert swathe of land separating Egypt and Israel, where the Islamic State's regional affiliate has become ensconced. The Pentagon is reportedly mulling plans to pull the American contingent of more than 400 troops from the ongoing 13-country, 1,100 personnel peacekeeping effort in the Sinai Peninsula. The proposed move comes amid ongoing efforts by the Administration to reduce its presence in global hotspots, but - if completed - could significantly impair the counterterrorism efforts of Egyptian president Abdel Fatah al-Sisi, who has waged a long-running campaign to establish control over the unruly area, and whose government relies heavily on U.S. intelligence and support. (*Wall Street Journal*, May 7, 2020)

## **TURKEY TO EUROPE: TAKE BACK YOUR RADICALS**

Last month, the Turkish government announced that it had sent twelve ISIS-linked militants of Finnish origin back to Finland to face prosecution and incarceration. The renditions are part of Ankara's ongoing campaign to repatriate foreign terrorists to their countries of origin - a policy that has put Ankara at significant odds with Europe. The issue is a significant one, because European citizens make up a major portion of the foreign fighters Turkey has deported to date. As of February, Turkey's government had successfully deported 229 foreign terrorists, 75 of whom were identified as being citizens of the EU. The Turkish policy has raised significant hackles in Europe, where some nations have opted to strip their nationals of citizenship if they travel abroad to commit acts of terror. That approach has made it difficult for those individuals to return to their origin countries, and placed added strain on countries (like Turkey) where a large number of these militants now reside. (*Daily Sabah*, May 31, 2020)