



Global Islamism Monitor No. 81

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Related Categories: Islamic Extremism; Terrorism; Central Africa; East Africa; Iraq; Middle East; North Africa; South Africa

ISIS: ALIVE AND KICKING

Does the Islamic State still represent a serious global threat? That question has percolated in policy circles ever since the U.S. and its coalition allies succeeded in dismantling the group's physical *caliphate* in Iraq and Syria in the spring of 2019. In recent months, new signs of life from the group - including a resurgence of attacks by ISIS-affiliated elements in Iraq and disruptive activities in parts of Syria - have suggested that the terror organization, although diminished, remains a viable entity. Now, corroborating data from the United Nations has shed more light on the scope of the problem.

There are still more than 10,000 ISIS fighters active in Iraq and Syria, Vladimir Voronkov, the UN's counterterrorism chief, laid out in an August presentation. That number, moreover, is compounded by other radicals who have migrated to join the organization's other franchises globally - such as the Islamic State West Africa Province, which is active in Nigeria and Africa's Lake Chad region, and which is estimated to have some 3,500 men under arms.

Meanwhile, ISIS itself is metastasizing as an organization. It "continues to build up its combat potential and is seeking to expand the area and scope of terrorist attacks in the country," Vassily Nebenzia, Russia's envoy to the UN, has noted. The group "has now fully transformed into a network structure with a high degree of autonomy of branches and 'sleeping cells' in various countries and regions of the world." (Associated Press, August 24, 2020)

JORDAN'S ISLAMISTS INCREASINGLY ON THE OUTS

Leaders of Jordan's Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Islamic Action Front have signalled that their party plans to boycott the kingdom's upcoming elections this November. IAF spokesperson Thabet Assaf has cited a deteriorating relationship between the party and the Jordanian government, as well as unilateral moves by Amman (such as a recent \$10 billion natural gas agreement with Israel), as the reason for the boycott. The group's decision comes amid a significant stiffening of the Jordanian government's attitudes; this summer, the country's Court of Cassation formally outlawed the Muslim Brotherhood Group, the Brotherhood's social arm in Jordan, which supports the IAF and its political priorities. (*AI-Monitor*, September 3, 2020)

RISING ISLAMIST VIOLENCE IN AFRICA

Violent Islamist activity on the African continent rose 31 percent in the last year, according to a new study from the National Defense University's Africa Center for Strategic Studies. Violence tied to *jihadists* has spiked in five distinct regions on the continent: Somalia, the Lake Chad Basin, the western Sahel, and Mozambique. That last locale, moreover, represents a particular area of concern; incidents of violent Islamic activity in Mozambique have surged sevenfold in the last year, and now represent 42 percent of all Islamist violence on the continent as a whole. (NDU Africa Center, July 21, 2020)

THE AFGHAN "TRUCE" TAKES HOLD

Following the signing of the latest U.S.-Taliban peace agreement back in February, intra-Afghan negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan government have commenced. Among the many sticking points between the two sides is the provision, contained in the U.S.-Taliban truce, that up to five thousand Taliban prisoners would be released from official detention and traded for as many as one thousand Afghan security personnel now held captive by the militant faction. The government of Afghan President Ashraf Ghani was initially hesitant at the stipulation, but has more recently warmed to the idea. Afghan officials and Taliban representatives have resumed discussions on the subject, and even taken confidence-building measures such as the release of hundreds of Taliban prisoners to date. The remaining Afghan and Taliban prisoners are now expected to be released in coming days.

This reconciliation track is not without controversy, however. Countries such as France and Australia have voiced their objections over any arrangement that would entail the release of prisoners involved in fatal attacks against their respective nationals, including humanitarian workers. (*BBC*, September 2, 2020)