

Islamic State's territorial losses are expected to result in a substantially increased terrorism threat for Europe says Otso Iho, Senior Analyst at Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Centre, IHS Markit

Key points:

- Daesh (aka the Islamic State) will lose its remaining territory in Iraq and Syria, but is highly likely to transition into a shadow state and underground insurgency, while continuing to undermine security and stability through constant low-level violence and periodic mass-casualty operations, particularly in Iraq.
- For European security, returning foreign fighters and their families will present both immediate and long-term challenges, increasing the terrorism threat on the continent significantly in the ten-year outlook.
- A wider outcome of Daesh's decline is the potential resurgence of existing groups such as Al Qaeda.

Daesh's existence as a territory holding organisation in Iraq and Syria will likely come to an end within 12 months, changing the group's nature significantly. According to Conflict Monitor by IHS Markit, on 29 June 2017, since the start of 2017 Daesh's territory has quickly reduced by 40%, while its revenues have dropped by 80%. At current rates of territorial loss, the group will have only residual territorial influence from late 2017 onwards and is unlikely to remain in control of areas before its fourth year comes to a close in June 2018.

However, the loss of territory will not mark the end of Daesh as a militant organisation. In all likelihood, the group will transition from a pseudo-state to an underground armed insurgency and remain able to conduct asymmetric attacks against security forces in both Iraq and Syria, continuing to undermine security and central governance. Additionally, it will seek to maintain some semblance of its former governance structure as a shadow state, carrying out summary justice through abductions and executions and portraying itself as exercising power in areas under government control.

International element

Since the establishment of the Islamic State (Daesh) on 29 June 2014, the group has actively called for retaliatory attacks against Western civilian and military personnel in their home countries.

Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Centre has recorded 32 attacks attributed to Daesh across 11 countries in Europe between 13 November 2015 and 18 August 2017, killing a total of at least 323 people and wounding at least 794. This has included attacks conducted by small cells or lone actors with varying, usually minimal, levels of connection to and support from the group. Sectarian tensions across Iraq, and to an extent in Syria, will enable the group to continue waging an armed campaign and undermine security in its heartlands, but the group will also continue to focus on planning, facilitating, and encouraging attacks internationally to maintain its relevance and influence globally. This will also be hoped to inspire more lone actors, who's small-scale but frequent attacks will help keep the notion of Daesh alive and active. The international element's importance for Daesh will increase as its focus in Iraq and Syria shifts back towards insurgency in the wake of large-scale territorial losses.

Reverberations in Europe: foreign fighters and other returnees will transform the terrorism threat

The conflicts in Iraq and Syria and the rise of Daesh have defined a generation of militant Islamists in the region and abroad. Across Europe, they have motivated around 5,000 men to travel to participate in the conflict and become foreign fighters, while in many cases spouses and underage children have also immigrated to the group's territories alongside the men. Many children have also been born in Iraq and Syria within Daesh's territory to foreign fighters. The potential return of these communities en masse from the conflict zones presents the most significant driver of Islamist terrorism in Europe in both the short and long term. Returning combat-experienced militants will pose an immediate security threat in the short term, while the wider communities associated with those fighters will present long-term challenges for the radicalisation of a new generation of militant Islamists.

Returning fighters increase local cells' capability

A February 2013 study by Senior Research fellow at the Norwegian Defence Research Establishment, Thomas Hegghammer, found that of known Western foreign fighters who fought in Afghanistan and Iraq between 1990 and 2010, only one in nine returned to the West with the express intent to conduct attacks.

However, foreign fighters joining the ranks of the Islamic State currently have a much more virulent and violent Islamist ideology that encourages attacks in the West than their counterparts from the Afghan conflict - likely making a higher portion amenable to undertaking operations back in their home states.

If we follow Hegghammer's formula, should half of the 5,000 militants return to their home countries, based on precedent this would leave an estimated 270 militants prone to plan and conduct attacks, though this number is likely to be significantly higher in the case of returnees from Daesh. Additionally, though they may not seek to actively conduct attacks, the wider pool of former militants will have substantial skills that will be transferable to existing Islamist networks in Europe. These include the effective use of a range of small-arms, the construction of reliable IEDs, and close knowledge and training on operational security measures. This military skills transfer would increase local cells' capabilities significantly, also increasing the likelihood that a cell would be able to conduct a successful attack.

Beyond the immediate threat posed by returning militants, the Islamic State's legacy will also present longer-term challenges to Europe. Many foreign fighters' families will also return to

Europe, widening the pool of individuals playing a part in militant networks considerably. Children who have spent a notable portion of their childhood or youth growing up in the Islamic State will have been indoctrinated into the group's violent Islamist ideology, and some will have participated in violence. Though verifiable reports of life in the Islamic State are seldom available, the Islamic State's propaganda has frequently featured children, presented as the "cubs of the Caliphate", engaging in religious and military training, as well as conducting executions.

De-radicalisation efforts must focus across the family unit

While counter-terrorism efforts must primarily focus on foreign fighters most likely to conduct attacks, any de-radicalisation programmes implemented by European countries to specifically deal with returnees should ensure that the wives and children of foreign fighters are actively included within their remit. In its Rumiya magazine, published monthly since September 2016, an increasing number of features have focused on women's roles in Daesh's battle; on supporting their husbands' work as militants; on tending to and "reforming" her children and encouraging them to engage in combat and aspire to martyrdom; and even on participating in combat when it was required. A failure to include this segment of society in a plan to mitigate Islamist militancy in Europe would be to allow an indoctrinated core segment of Islamist communities to continue facilitating the radicalisation of a new generation of potential militant Islamists. At present, most countries will lack an effective program for dealing with returning foreign fighters, and legislation across European countries differs as to whether travelling to Syria or Iraq to join a group gives grounds for arrest or not.

Power vacuum may lead to resurgence of Al-Qaeda

Daesh's decline will have significant impacts on how the terrorism threat develops both in the group's heartlands in Iraq and Syria and around the world. For global militant Islamism, the group's campaign in Iraq and Syria has created a legacy that will continue to inspire militancy for years to come. In Europe, returning foreign fighters and their families will present one of the key drivers of the developing terrorism threat in the five- to ten-year outlook, with these individuals crystallising the Islamic State's legacy for local Islamist communities and militant networks in Europe. More widely, Daesh's decline will likely open up a vacuum, in which the role of Al-Qaeda will increase markedly; how the relationship between Al-Qaeda and Daesh

develops will have direct implications for international terrorism, and will be a key indicator of the form attacks in the West will take in the future.