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# Headless & Vulnerable: Cracks in Daesh's Core Must Be Exploited

By Haroro J. Ingram & Omar Mohammed || May 2023



**Haroro J. Ingram** is a senior research fellow at the Program on Extremism at George Washington University.

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**Omar Mohammed** is a research fellow at the Program on Extremism at George Washington University and founder of the Mosul Eye Association

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**ON SUNDAY**, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan claimed that the Islamic State's latest self-declared caliph, Abu al-Hussein al-Husseini al-Qurashi, had been killed in the northern Syrian town of Jandaris by Turkish intelligence forces. It is a claim that U.S. officials have been unable to verify. Nor has the Islamic State officially hinted to the condition of its top leader, although it rarely rushes to verify or refute media reports about its losses. If Abu al-Hussein was killed last weekend, he would be the third Islamic State caliph killed in fifteen months. To appreciate what a problem this is for the group, consider that it took thirteen years for the Islamic State movement's first three leaders to be killed: from Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in June 2006, then Abu Umar al-Baghdadi in April 2010, to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in October 2019.

Even if Abu al-Hussein is alive, last year saw Abu Bakr's successor, '[al-Khalifah al-Mukhbir](#)' Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi, killed in February followed a mere [eight months](#) later by Abu al-Hassan al-Qurayshi. The Islamic State's inability to protect its leaders is more than just a security problem. It suggests that there are fundamental problems in the core of the Islamic State organization. Add to this the significant [downturn](#) in its operational activities and recent trends in its propaganda output, it seems clear that the group is grappling with critical vulnerabilities. These

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weaknesses are offset, to varying degrees, by the Islamic State's network of [global](#) affiliates but also buoyed by the inability of its adversaries to fully capitalize on its plight.



Figure 1. A house north of the town of Aleppo, Syria where Abu al-Hussein was reportedly killed. Image from: <https://www.voanews.com/a/us-not-backing-turkish-claims-islamic-state-leader-is-dead/7073730.html>.

### Cowering Caliphs & Ebbing Operations

The ability of a violent revolutionary movement to protect its top leadership and maintain its operational tempo are important indicators of its 'inner health.' For the Islamic State, these indicators are flashing red. Several factors have contributed to the [weakening](#) of the Islamic State in the last eighteen months. First and foremost, coalition forces and their partners have been successful in targeting and eliminating Islamic State leaders which has significantly hampered the group's ability to maintain continuity in its leadership. While high profile strikes to its top leadership are important, it is the targeting of [commanders](#) and [facilitators](#) that can be most impactful in hampering operational activities.

The killing of a leader in an organization inevitably creates ripples by virtue of the need to replace them. However, the regular and systematic killing of leaders across an organization, as the Islamic State is experiencing, can be devastating to organizational stability, strategic resilience, and maintaining operational outputs. It is not just that the constant need to replace leaders reduces the stock of appropriately [capable](#) replacements, being in a constant state of leadership succession can fuel internal power struggles by exacerbating strategic and ideological tensions. Moreover, the constant turnover of leaders can erode trust both within the organization and amongst its broader communities of support. This all contributes to a strategic and organizational environment that

makes it harder for the Islamic State to fulfill the strategic objectives of its [insurgency](#) campaign: regroup and rebuild whilst using guerrilla operations to weaken its enemies.

Little wonder, then, that the Islamic State's [attacks](#) for the first quarter of 2023 are down by 68% in Iraq and down by 55% in Syria compared to the same time last year. The Islamic State's Ramadan campaigns are typically amongst its bloodiest for the year. During Ramadan this year, the Islamic State [launched](#) 19 attacks in Iraq and Syria respectively. Compared to last year, this [constitutes](#) an 80% decrease in attacks in Iraq and a 37% decrease in Syria.



Figure 2. ISIS fighters in Iraq and Syria. Image from: Wilayat al-Sham propaganda release, March 2022.

### Propagandists Take Point

The Islamic State are aware of their perceived leadership vulnerabilities and operational downturn. As is so often the case, the Islamic State has deployed its propagandists to the information frontlines to shape how these dynamics are perceived by its enemies and, most importantly, its supporters. For example, after the killing of Abu al-Hassan and his replacement by Abu al-Hussein, an-Naba's editorial for issue 368 (8 December 2022), titled *Let a man show me his emir*, proudly argued that Islamic State's caliphs fight on the battlefield and, like any warrior, could be killed. Three months later, an-Naba's editorial for issue 382 (16 March 2022), titled *The Harvest of the Pentagon*, mocked those who were obsessed with the Islamic State's operational numbers, arguing that such figures do not tell the full story.

On both fronts, the Islamic State's propagandists are seeking to reframe how these issues are perceived. Never mind that the group's top leaders have typically *not* died on the battlefield, but more often than not, hiding amongst family only to be [woken](#) early in the morning by special forces. The Islamic State is [obsessed](#) with ensuring its bureaucrats carefully collect and monitor its outputs, but like any political actor, it is dismissive of the numbers when they don't support the narrative. And

it is precisely these types of discrepancies that policymakers and practitioners responsible for [degrading](#) Daesh's brand need to focus their efforts.

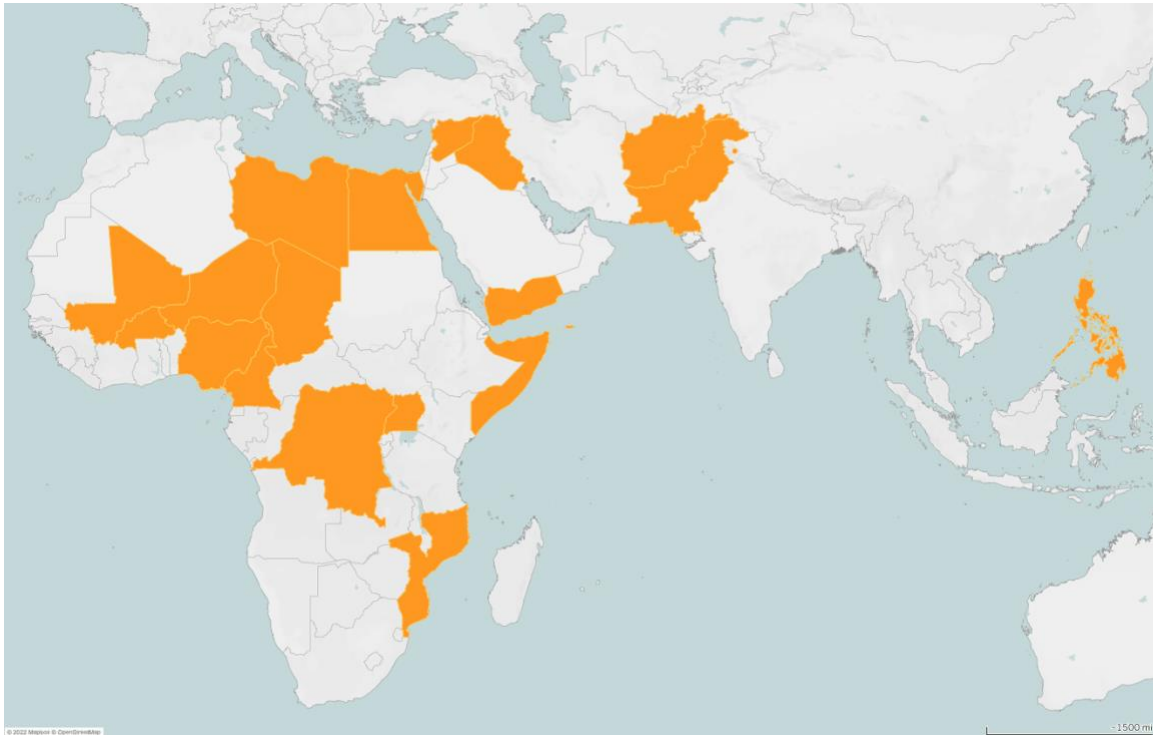


Figure 3. Countries of new ISIS pledges.

### Weak Core, Strong Periphery?

The Islamic State's core, or what could be described as Islamic State Central operating in its traditional heartlands of Iraq and Syria, is critically vulnerable. This has been evident for some time and, whether Abu al-Hussein is dead or not, its core is deteriorating. When the Islamic State pivoted from an Iraq-Syria centric struggle to a [global insurgency](#), it perhaps did so, in part, anticipating a downturn in its Levant and Iraq operations. After all, its global affiliates afford the group a strategic depth that allows it to shift resources and attention where needed. The Islamic State's propagandists are particularly adept at using messaging to reframe and offset problems in one part of the organization whilst highlighting and amplifying other parts. There is no better example of this than the prominence of its [African affiliates](#) in the Islamic State's official propaganda outputs in recent years.

Maintaining counterterrorism pressures on the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria is vital to continue weakening the group in its heartlands, and for the potentially destabilizing ripple effects it will create across the global enterprise. This is important for degrading the Islamic State's global brand, too, for two crucial reasons. First, Iraq and Syria are the heartlands of the Islamic State movement where its foundation story and so much of its folklore emerges. All over the world, the Islamic State's affiliates present a revisionist view of its caliphate, particularly life in its capitals of Mosul and Raqqa, as a source of inspiration for recruiting and mobilizing supporters. Showing its claims about Iraq and Syria to be false and its vision a bloody farce helps to weaken its appeal elsewhere in the world.

Second, the authority center for the Islamic State movement remains in Iraq and Syria. This is, as far as we know, where the Islamic State's leaders reside and where they are likely to remain. While it is possible that a future caliph will emerge in another part of the organization, perhaps in Africa, it seems unlikely for now. Therefore, maintaining pressures on the movement's core leadership will continue to shrink the pool of successors, shake its organizational structures, and potentially exacerbate internal strategic and ideological tensions.

### **The Struggle Continues**

The picture that emerges is a complicated one. The Islamic State is clearly vulnerable for all the reasons we have outlined and more. But the Islamic State is also in a comparatively better strategic position now than at any stage before 2013-14. Furthermore, the Islamic State has a global reach and, with it, a strategic depth unlike any other point in its history. This underscores the importance of exploiting the movement's vulnerabilities, especially when those vulnerabilities are in its core. But all this counterterrorism pressure will amount to very little in the medium to long term if some semblance of peace, and with it, political and economic stability can emerge in Iraq and Syria. More than that, the societies in those countries need support to not just heal after decades of war but build resiliencies to the conditions that fuel violent extremism. With all this in mind, there is a long way to go.