



General Intelligence and  
Security Service  
*Ministry of the Interior and  
Kingdom Relations*



# Syria's Legacy

Global jihadism remains a threat to Europe

The AIVD regularly publishes reports that analyse developments in the world against the framework of our current intelligence investigations. With these publications the AIVD wishes to contribute to the public debate on specific topics. AIVD publications describe general trends which may vary in individual cases.

# Summary

## ***The jihadist terrorist threat: the new normal***

The persistent jihadist terrorist threat against the West seems to have become an inherent part of our society. This threat is formed by interaction between prominent jihadist organisations (such as Islamic in Iraq an al-Sham (ISIS) and al-Qaeda), networks and individual supporters and sympathisers. Collectively, these constitute the global jihadist movement.

## ***The conflict in Syria as the catalyst of global jihadism***

The conflict in Syria and the associated rise of ISIS had a major mobilising effect upon the global jihadist movement. Due in part to widely disseminated and professional-looking propaganda, the threshold for travelling to a jihadist conflict zone has been lowered. And so too, it seems, has that for carrying out attacks in one's own country.

## ***ISIS not defeated, al-Qaeda still active***

ISIS is far from definitively defeated, and it has transformed itself back into the underground movement it once was. Now it is preparing for a resurgence in an attempt to restore the caliphate it still aspires to. The underground nature of the organisation has repercussions for its ability to prepare, direct and co-ordinate attacks in the West. Despite this, it still intends to carry out attacks in the West or to have its supporters carry out these attacks. The focus is on mobilising supporters and sympathisers worldwide. The extent to which ISIS will succeed in doing this depends in part upon developments in Iraq and Syria.

Al-Qaeda hopes to profit from the decline of ISIS and re-establish itself as the leader of global jihadism. In the shadow of ISIS al-Qaeda has succeeded in establishing a power base in Syria, which has given its international jihadist ambitions a new impulse.

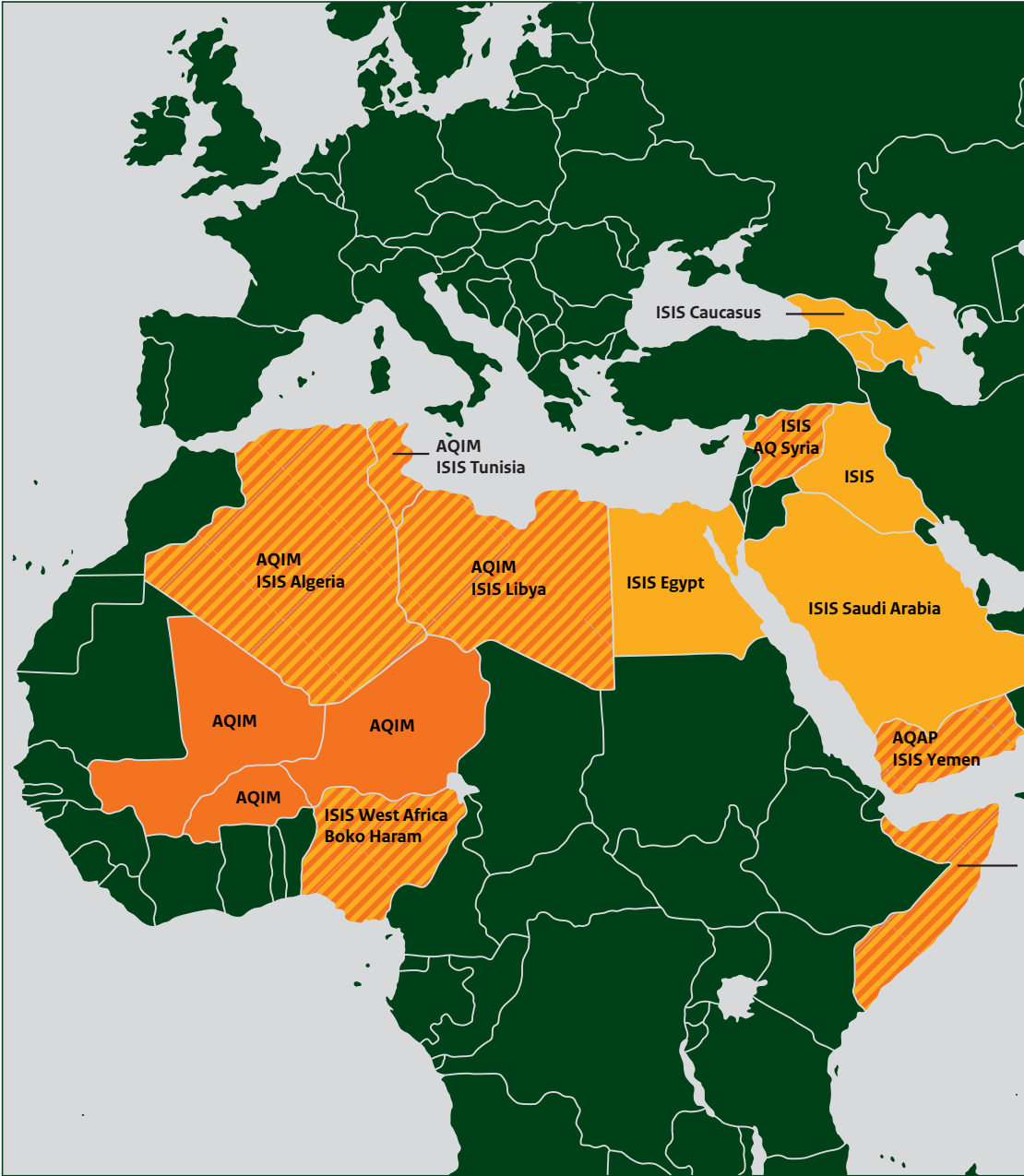
## ***Relative importance of 'brand names'***

For now, ISIS and al-Qaeda will remain competitors. Despite the lasting rift between ISIS and al-Qaeda at the leadership level, individual supporters and sympathisers of both organisations may indeed work together. A number of jihadists consider their shared ideology a connecting factor; the value of jihadist 'brand names' is less important to them. Nevertheless, the breach between ISIS and al-Qaeda does cause discord within the jihadist movement, also away from the conflict zone.

## ***Global jihadism is a long-term threat***

The dynamics within the jihadist movement in Europe were greatly impacted not only by the large number of supporters that left their country to join the jihad, or by the considerable number of returnees, frustrated foreign fighters, and those who were killed, but also by interaction of these individuals with the home front. The appeal of jihadist ideology persists, and thus constitutes a long-term threat.

# ISIS and al-Qaeda presence in countries



4 |

Surge in foreign terrorist fighters travelling to the conflict area: individuals from all over the world travel to Syria to combat the Syrian regime.

2012

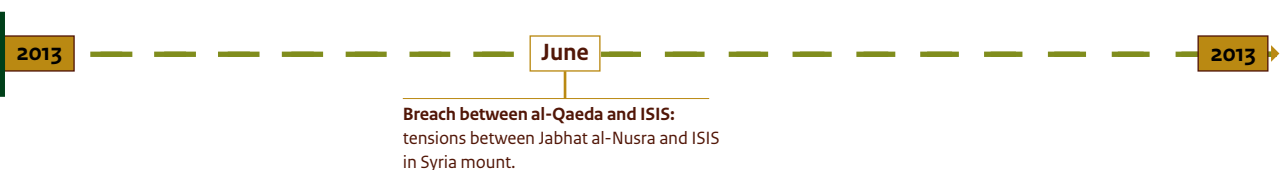
January

Formation Jabhat al-Nusra (JaN)

2012



*This map is a highly simplified representation of reality, with the sole purpose of providing a rough indication of the presence of ISIS and al-Qaeda throughout the world.*



# Syria's Legacy

Global jihadism remains a threat to Europe

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**Proclamation of the caliphate:** ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi proclaims the caliphate. Also more and more families travel to Syria to settle in the caliphate.

2014

February

**Al-Zawahiri distances himself from ISIS** and declares that ISIS is no longer part of the al-Qaeda group.

29 June

22 September

**Speech spokesperson al-Adnani:** ISIS explicitly calls for attacks in the West. Supporters who are unable to travel to the conflict area are encouraged to carry out attacks in their own countries.

2014



# The conflict in Syria as catalyst

**The persistent jihadist terrorist threat against the West seems to have become an inherent part of our society. This threat is formed by interaction between prominent jihadist organisations (such as Islamic State and al-Sham (ISIS) and al-Qaeda), networks and individual supporters and sympathisers. Collectively, these constitute the global jihadist movement.**

The outbreak of the Arab Spring, but especially the conflict in Syria, marked a turning point in global jihadism. Within a short time, Syria emerged as one of the most prominent jihadist conflict zones in the world. From 2012 onwards, an unprecedented number of people from all around the world headed for Syria to take part in the armed struggle against the regime there. The majority of these foreign fighters, including more than 300 from the Netherlands, joined jihadist organisations or networks in Syria. At first mainly the al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra, but later primarily the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS).

The conflict in Syria and the associated rise of ISIS had a major mobilising effect upon the global jihadist movement. Not only did the movement increase in size, it also professionalised. The mobilising ability of ISIS in particular to persuade supporters and sympathisers to carry out attacks in the West, has left a lasting mark these past years on the jihadist terrorist threat assessment.

The caliphate proclaimed by ISIS in the summer of 2014 no longer exists. Militarily, ISIS appears to have been defeated now. The number of attacks on the West has declined sharply since October 2017. But whilst it may seem that the jihadist terrorist threat against the West, and hence the Netherlands, has almost ceased to exist, appearances are deceptive.

This publication examines how the international jihadist terrorist threat has developed and manifested itself in Europe in recent years. It also outlines the current situation and what effect the legacy of Syria will have on our threat assessment for the coming years.

**Charlie Hebdo attack:** the editorial office of the satirical weekly in Paris is the target of an attack which is claimed by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.

7 January

9 January

**Attack on Jewish supermarket in Paris:** attacker Amedy Coulibaly says he carried out the attack in the name of ISIS.

2015

2015

## Foreign fighters

From 2012 onwards, tens of thousands of people from all around the world left for Syria to fight against the regime there. The majority joined jihadist organisations and networks.

As of 1 November 2018, more than 310 people had travelled from the Netherlands to the conflict zone in Syria and Iraq since the outbreak of the conflict. Approximately 85 of them have died and about 55 have returned to the Netherlands. Another 35 are no longer in the conflict area, but remain in the region, for example in refugee camps or in detention. This means that there are still 135 Dutch fighters in Syria and Iraq, about three-quarters of whom are members of ISIS. The rest have joined networks linked to al-Qaeda, such as Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham or the more recently established Tanzim Hurras al-Din.

These figures are updated monthly at [aivd.nl/terrorisme](http://aivd.nl/terrorisme).



# The West as the enemy

Since its proclamation of the so-called caliphate, Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) has come to embody the jihadist terrorist threat with which the West has been confronted in recent years. Consequently, al-Qaeda has lost its dominant position as the standard-bearer of global jihadism to ISIS. In this chapter we look back at the development of ISIS and al-Qaeda in these past years.

## ISIS

### *The ISIS caliphate*

With its proclamation of the so-called caliphate in the summer of 2014, ISIS also positioned itself as the leader of global jihadism. Within a short period of time, ISIS gained control of a large area of Iraq and Syria, the size of the United Kingdom, within which the organisation also acted as a state.

This state or 'dawla' had a hierarchical governance structure and was supported and shaped by a strong security apparatus and an extensive bureaucracy. Within the so-called caliphate, ISIS subjected the population of the so-called caliphate to strict Islamic laws and regulations, combined with the organisation's own jihadist ideology.

After the proclamation of the caliphate, sympathisers throughout the world were no longer summoned to join ISIS solely to take part in the armed struggle against the Syrian regime. From then on its propaganda also focused explicitly upon recruiting various professional groups, such as engineers, doctors and teachers, who could help further build the young caliphate. In addition, families were invited to settle there so that they could live under Islamic laws and regulations, 'free from corrupting influences'.

### *ISIS provinces*

In addition to its territory in Syria and Iraq, ISIS also has so-called provinces or 'wilayat' elsewhere. As well as formal provinces in, for example, Libya, Egypt, West Africa and Afghanistan, these also include more informal provinces where leaders of various jihadist networks have unilaterally sworn an oath of allegiance to the ISIS caliph. However, the territory actually governed by ISIS in these so-called provinces is small. Moreover, with a few exceptions in the form of attacks against Western targets in North Africa and the Middle East, these provinces focus primarily on the local or regional struggle.

**Paris attacks:** ISIS-trained terrorists carry out attacks in various locations in Paris. This is the first attack that was directed by ISIS from Syria.

13 November

2015

2016

2016

### *Calls for homeland attacks*

Although ISIS initially concentrated on its local or regional agenda in Iraq and Syria, since the summer of 2014 the organisation has increasingly manifested itself in the West through terrorist attacks. On 21 September 2014 its then spokesman, Abu Mohamed al-Adnani, called upon supporters and sympathisers around the world to carry out attacks in the West or against Western ‘targets’ elsewhere. Those who could not comply with the duty imposed by ISIS to travel to the caliphate were encouraged to perpetrate attacks in their own country. In a later speech, delivered just before his death in May 2016, al-Adnani even explicitly placed this duty to attack before the obligation to travel to the so-called caliphate.

To shape its international jihadist agenda, the ISIS leadership set up a special unit for ‘external operations’ which was responsible for planning, preparing and directing attacks outside the caliphate. Members of this unit were responsible for preparing and co-ordinating the Paris attacks of 13 November 2015 and those in Brussels on 22 March 2016, for example. These were committed by terrorists trained, at least in part, in ISIS territory.

### **Directed, encouraged and inspired attacks**

The AIVD divides attacks by both ISIS and al-Qaeda into three categories:

- leadership-directed;
- encouraged by members of ISIS or al-Qaeda;
- inspired by ISIS or al-Qaeda. This latter category, a form of ‘do-it-yourself jihad’, is an increasingly important component of the persistent jihadist terrorist threat facing the West. ISIS in particular has recently succeeded in mobilising supporters and sympathisers around the world to carry out attacks in the West on its behalf.

### *The rise of do-it-yourself jihad*

Some ISIS members seemed to have a degree of operational freedom to recruit potential attackers and to encourage them to carry out attacks in the West. In this context, increasing efforts were made to mobilise acquaintances and contacts of foreign fighters who had joined ISIS.

A number of these members were in touch with ISIS sympathisers in Europe through the internet and social media, and encouraged them to carry out attacks in their own countries. In many cases potential targets were discussed and the would-be attacker received advice about making preparations and, for example, the *modus operandi* to be used.

ISIS has also shown in recent years that it is capable of inspiring potential attackers who have not been trained in Iraq or Syria. The mobilising ability of its professional propaganda machine has proven very successful, with deadly results. Attacks inspired by ISIS and its propaganda are undertaken without the approval or direction of the leadership, and often without contact with ISIS members residing in Syria and Iraq. This does not mean that the perpetrators are so-called *lone actors*, however. Most, despite having prepared and carried out the attack autonomously, are actually part of a virtual or physical jihadist network.

As the military pressure from the anti-ISIS coalition has increased, the organisation has become less able to carry out centrally directed and co-ordinated attacks in the West. Since 2016 it has been more and more reliant upon relatively small-scale, although numerous, attacks which are often aimed at the general public and at targets that are difficult or impossible to protect effectively, such as a Christmas market in Berlin (19 December 2016), London Bridge (3 June 2017) or Las Rambles in Barcelona (17 August 2017). The victims are often random civilians, but police officers and soldiers are also targeted. The means used to perpetrate them are often freely available and also used for everyday activities. Stabbing weapons are widely used, but attacks with vehicles (cars and lorries) have also become more common since the one in Nice on 14 July 2016. Firearms, striking weapons or homemade explosives are sometimes used, too.

### *The threat comes from women as well as men*

The majority of the attackers who have carried out attacks in the name of ISIS, or have tried to, are male. However, a number of women have also shown a willingness to do so in their own countries. Although the deployment of women to carry out attacks remains a controversial issue in jihadist circles, including for ISIS, the organisation has been promoting a more active role for them in combat zones since the autumn of 2017. In the West, young women have been involved in several plots foiled by the authorities, and in some cases were being encouraged or coached by ISIS members in Syria and Iraq. One example is the failed attack on Notre Dame in Paris in September 2016, when a number of young women planned to detonate a car filled with gas cylinders near the cathedral.

**Arrests at France's request:** in Rotterdam, a 32-year-old Frenchman is arrested on suspicion of involvement in preparing a terrorist attack.

28 March

2016

## ISIS, born of al-Qaeda

After the breakout of the Arab Spring, ISIS' Iraqi leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, sent the Syrian Mohammed al-Julani to Syria to establish the organisation Jabhat-al-Nusra there. Shortly afterwards, al-Baghdadi announced unilaterally that Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham would emerge to form the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Al-Julani, however, publicly refused to rally to al-Baghdadi's banner and instead publicly renewed his oath of allegiance to al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, who had taken over after the death of Osama bin Laden. Zawahiri's attempts to resolve the conflict failed, after which the two organisations formally severed their ties. This resulted in a so-far permanent breach between ISIS and al-Qaeda, at least at the leadership level.

**Attack Nice:** an attacker drives a truck into a crowd of people on the boulevard in Nice.

# Al-Qaeda

## *In the shadow of ISIS*

As a result of the rise of ISIS, al-Qaeda has lost the position as leader of global jihadism which it acquired after the attacks of 11 September 2001 on the United States. Many of its leaders and prominent fighters have been eliminated in targeted military attacks, mostly by the United States and its regional allies. Due in part to this ongoing military pressure, al-Qaeda's ability to carry out large-scale and complex attacks in the West has been compromised in recent years.

## *An international network*

Al-Qaeda is now represented in more regions, by formal affiliates and associated networks, than it was immediately before and after the attacks on the United States. From Afghanistan and Pakistan, the central leadership has built up an international network of al-Qaeda related organisations.

Whilst al-Qaeda's affiliates have declared their commitment to the international jihadist agenda directed against the West, in practice they are concerned primarily with their local or regional struggles against national authorities and security forces.

## *Syria: a new power base for al-Qaeda*

Al-Qaeda has been able to establish an important power base in north-western Syria. In recent years, not only the number of different al-Qaeda groups in this region but also their composition and their interactions with other armed opposition groups have been subject to constant change. At the beginning of the Syrian conflict, for example, al-Qaeda had both a formal affiliate (Jabhat al-Nusra) and associated fighting groups (such as Jund al-Aqsa) in the country, and individual members were also active in other opposition groups such as Ahrar al-Sham. In addition, persons associated with al-Qaeda and active in Syria have tried to shape the organisation's international agenda from there.

Jabhat al-Nusra, founded in 2012, was by far the largest al-Qaeda group in north-western Syria. In an effort to become the most influential organisation in the Syrian opposition, Jabhat al-Nusra's leadership adopted a strategic game. As opportune, it either co-operated with other opposition groups or made attempts to influence or weaken them. Due to Jabhat al-Nusra's overt links with al-Qaeda, however, it increasingly struggled to find financiers and other armed factions and so Jabhat al-Nusra eventually decided to formally distance itself from that organisation.

**Failed attack Notre Dame Paris:** a group of French women tries to carry out an attack with a car bomb. An example of an ISIS-stimulated attack in Europe.

28 July

**Formation of Jabhat Fateh al-Sham:**  
the successor to Jabhat al-Nusra.

3 September

2016

Partly as a result of this strategy, Jabhat al-Nusra (and later Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham) indeed became one of the most influential opposition groups in north-western Syria. But even though it publically severed its ties with al-Qaeda in the summer of 2016, the AIVD still regards its successor Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham as an al-Qaeda affiliate that is, in line with its jihadist ideology, prepared to carry out attacks as and when these serve its strategic interests.

The increasing influence of al-Qaeda in north-western Syria attracted jihadists with international ambitions. Early on in the conflict, for example, al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri sent several trusted 'jihad veterans' from Afghanistan and Pakistan to Syria. Members of this so-called Khorasan Group – referring to the Arabic-language name for the Afghanistan and Pakistan region – focused explicitly on preparing attacks on the West. US air strikes prevented them from actually being able to put these plans into action, however. As a result, the al-Qaeda leadership took a strategic break from preparing attacks on the West from Syria in order to give Jabhat al-Nusra room to expand its influence without provoking military interventions from the international community.

In February 2018 al-Qaeda established a new group in Syria, Tanzim Hurras al-Din, with open links to al-Qaeda and a specific focus on the international jihadist agenda. This puts this new group at odds with Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, which prefers to conceal its ties with al-Qaeda.

### *Al-Qaeda also directs, encourages and inspires*

With al-Qaeda, as with ISIS, for the sake of convenience the attacks carried out by both its formal affiliates and its associated networks can be subdivided into directed, encouraged and inspired acts. As well as the centrally directed attacks on the United States in 2001 and, for example, the encouraged attack by Nidal Hassan on Fort Hood, a US military base in Texas (5 November 2009), various others which can be classified as inspired by al-Qaeda were perpetrated prior to the emergence of ISIS.

But neither al-Qaeda nor its international affiliates have managed to undertake any successful attacks in the West since the one on the editorial office of the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* on 7 January 2015. Since then, the organisation has proven far less capable than ISIS of mobilising supporters and sympathisers. Due to its limited visibility in the West now, some people mistakenly assume that al-Qaeda no longer plays a significant role in the jihadist terrorist threat assessment.

**Decline in number of foreign fighters leaving:** ISIS is under military pressure and losing territory. The number of foreign fighters travelling to the caliphate drops to almost zero in 2018.

# The caliphate destroyed, but the dream lives on

Since the proclamation of the so-called caliphate, more attacks have taken place in Europe each year. The majority of these have been committed by ISIS supporters who were inspired by ISIS to take action. Meanwhile, ISIS has lost control of almost all its territory. The so-called caliphate no longer exists, but ISIS continues to strive for a utopian Islamic state as its long-term aim, just as al-Qaeda does. In this chapter we describe how the two organisations are adapting to the current situation.

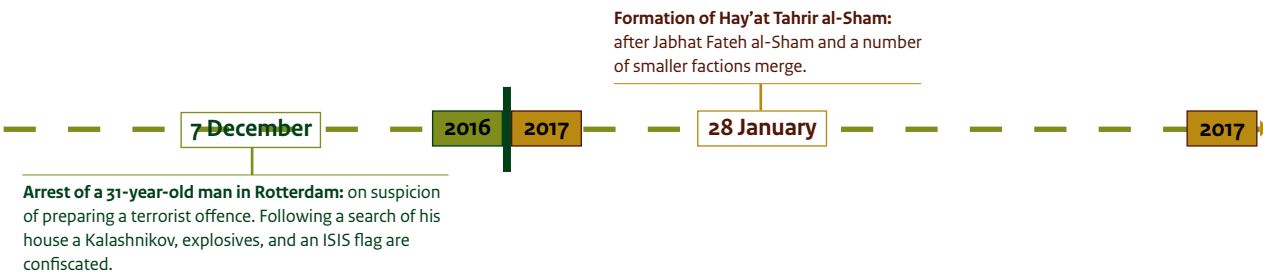
## ISIS

### *Back to familiar territory*

Since the launch of offensives against cities important to the organisation, such as Raqqa and Mosul, ISIS has transformed itself under continuing military pressure into an underground organisation without its state apparatus. This can be seen, for example, in the propaganda material ISIS disseminates. Not only has the frequency of distribution declined, but the message being delivered has been adapted to ISIS' new (underground) situation. The main focus now is the local military struggle in Syria and Iraq, or 'successes' in the ISIS provinces, rather than depictions of the so-called caliphate as a utopian state.

Yet the caliphate as an ideal is still very much alive. In an audio message from Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi released on 22 August 2018, the loss of territory is trivialised as a tactical and ultimately merely temporary setback. The ISIS leader declares that the disintegration of the so-called caliphate as a geographical entity and the ongoing trials facing ISIS are inextricably linked to the road to final 'divine victory'.

Although ISIS has suffered significant losses, including the loss of several prominent leaders, commanders and fighters, the organisation is in better shape now than its 'predecessor' al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) was in 2007, when the United States declared its military defeat. ISIS has managed to adapt to the new, although to the organisation very familiar, reality: that of an underground insurgency. There are still considerable numbers of foreign fighters in Iraq, including Dutch jihadists. Moreover, local circumstances, which have already given the organisation room to flourish once, remain virtually unchanged.





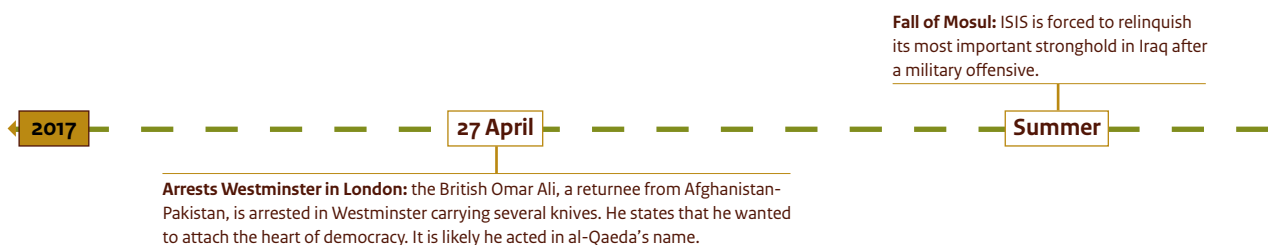
For a long time Turkey was a springboard for the unprecedented numbers of foreign fighters travelling to Syria from all over the world after the outbreak of the Syrian conflict. ISIS (and indeed also al-Qaeda) uses Turkey as a strategic operating base. From here ISIS can recover, reorganise and reshape its underground struggle in the region. In addition, it uses the relative peace in Turkey to forge plans for shaping (or reshaping) the international ambitions it still harbours.

The fact that Turkish interests do not always correspond with European priorities in the field of counterterrorism is problematic. Although the Turkish authorities do act against ISIS and al-Qaeda, they prioritise the fight against organisations like the PKK. Thus both organisations are offered sufficient breathing space and freedom of movement to sustain themselves.

### *The threat of attacks unabated*

The number of attacks committed by or on behalf of ISIS in the West increased every year following the proclamation of the so-called caliphate. Since October 2017, however, this trend has reversed and the number of attacks committed by or on behalf of ISIS in the West has fallen sharply. However, ISIS remains capable of mobilising the global jihadist movement. Since March 2018, for example, it has claimed responsibility for attacks in Trèbes, France (25 March 2018), Liège (29 May 2018), Paris (19 June 2018) and Trappes, also in France (23 August 2018). There have also been arrests in the Netherlands and surrounding countries, by which attacks have been prevented. In some of these cases the arrested showed an interest in using unconventional attack means.

That ISIS claims certain attacks does not mean that ISIS actually bears responsibility for all of them, nor even that it was aware of the perpetrator's plan beforehand. For example, although it has claimed responsibility for the attack at a country music festival in Las Vegas on 1 October 2017, there is no indication at all that the shooter was acting on behalf of ISIS or motivated by jihadist ideology.



## A great caliphate

Al-Qaeda and ISIS both aim to establish a caliphate in which the worldwide Muslim community can live under Islamic law and regulations without being exposed to 'impure' influences.

Since the second half of the 1990s, al-Qaeda has explicitly seen the West as a legitimate target for attacks. Their objective is to end Western military and other support for 'apostate Muslim regimes' in the Islamic world. Without this Western backing, regimes would be unable to maintain their power and could be overthrown. After that, Islamic emirates could be established and eventually united in one great caliphate.

ISIS focuses mainly on Syria and Iraq, but as a legacy of its history as al-Qaeda in Iraq it continues to 'flirt' with an international jihadist agenda. The West had already been considered a legitimate target of attacks for some time, but this aspect became more prominent after the anti-ISIS coalition was established and its military campaign of air strikes was launched against the organisation in Iraq and Syria. Since then, ISIS has been emphasising that the attacks it carries out and claims are retribution for the suffering that is being inflicted on Muslims.

## Al-Qaeda

### *Recovery of al-Qaeda*

Al-Qaeda attempts to profit from the decline of ISIS and re-establish itself as the leader of global jihadism. In his speeches al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri repeats his earlier criticisms of ISIS and its 'failed caliphate', as shown in the audio message released on 23 August 2018. Although the operational importance of Afghanistan seems to have diminished somewhat, the al-Qaeda leader still resides in this region and seems to play a significant role in the day-to-day management of his organisation's global network. In his speech, al-Zawahiri stresses the ideological importance of Afghanistan for the eventual resurrection of the caliphate, a goal which al-Qaeda continues to pursue as well.

The al-Qaeda leadership has made Hamza bin Laden, son of deceased leader Osama bin Laden, who was killed in May 2011, a prominent figurehead for the organisation in an attempt to attract new supporters and so strengthen its ranks. In addition to his origins and charisma, the fact that he has never explicitly criticised ISIS is also seen as an advantage. As a bridge-builder, the young Bin Laden may be able to persuade disillusioned ISIS members and fighters to join (or rejoin) al-Qaeda.

Al-Qaeda is also trying to increase its mobilising ability by modernising its propaganda to bring it more into line with the high-quality professional ‘standard’ which has become the norm since the rise of ISIS in 2013. Propaganda messages are now shorter than they used to be, are more likely to have visual support from, say, video stills, and refer to more recent events.

In addition, and imitating ISIS’ success in this respect, supporters and sympathisers are now being urged to carry out small-scale attacks in the West on behalf of al-Qaeda. To date, though, these calls have remained virtually unheeded. One exception has been the arrest by the British authorities in London of a potential perpetrator accused of planning an attack near Westminster in the name of al-Qaeda in April 2017.

In Syria, al-Qaeda has been able to build a strategic operating base in the shadow of ISIS. A number of its prominent veterans, some of whom were held under house arrest in Iran after 2001, are playing an important role in this. In particular, the release by Iran of five very experienced al-Qaeda leaders has considerably strengthened the leadership framework around al-Zawahiri; they have ensured the restoration of greater central control over the global al-Qaeda organisation. A number of them have also travelled to Syria, where they have stimulated al-Qaeda’s international ambitions.



# The jihadist terrorist threat: the new normal

**The jihadist terrorist threat against the West, and thus against the Netherlands, seems to have become an inherent part of our society. Both ISIS and al-Qaeda remain unwavering in their intention to carry out attacks in the West or to have its supporters carry out these attacks.**

The conflict in Syria has left its mark on the jihadist terrorist threat assessment. Due in part to widely disseminated and professional-looking propaganda, the threshold for travelling to a jihadist conflict zone and seeking affiliation with an international jihadist terrorist organisation there has been lowered. And so too, it seems, has that for carrying out attacks in the name of such an organisation in one's own country. To a certain degree, this readiness to act appears to be related to the 'success' of the jihadist terrorist organisations which encourages and inspires supporters.

It is expected that this legacy of the conflict in Syria will continue to shape the jihadist terrorist threat for a long time to come. In this final chapter, we look at that threat in the coming years.

## *ISIS and al-Qaeda remain competitors*

The so-called caliphate proclaimed by ISIS in the summer of 2014 no longer exists. Despite this, ISIS is far from definitively defeated. The dream of a caliphate as a utopian state remains intact and the organisation has adapted to its new circumstances, transforming itself into an underground movement. From this position, one it is already familiar with, ISIS could recover and possibly prepare for a resurgence.

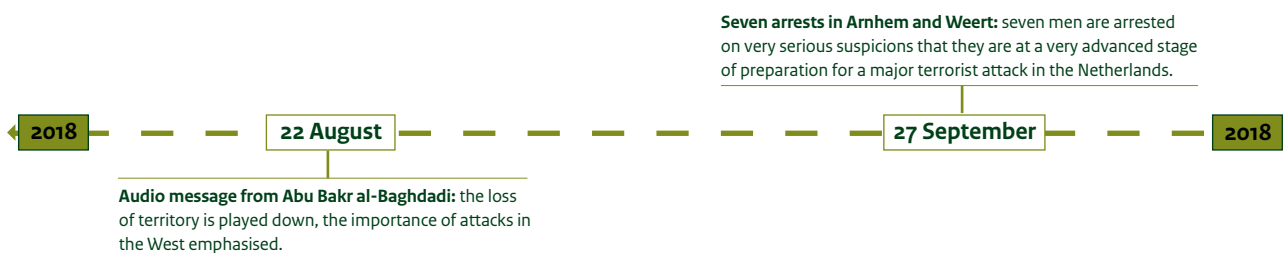
As an underground organisation, ISIS will also have a destabilising effect upon the security situation in North Africa and the Middle East in the long term. Although its underground nature will affect the extent to which its leadership is capable of preparing, directing and co-ordinating attacks in the West, ISIS has in no way dropped this intention. In recent years, though, the focus of this ambition has shifted to mobilising supporters. Although the number of successful terrorist attacks carried out in the name of ISIS in the West has declined sharply since October 2017, ISIS is still sporadically successful. In this respect, the interest shown in several cases by its supporters in unconventional means of attack is worrying.



## The jihadist movement in the Netherlands

The Dutch jihadist movement consists of more than 500 supporters and several thousand sympathisers. They constitute a potential threat, as illustrated by the arrests in Weert and Arnhem on 27 September 2018 of seven people who had intended to carry out an attack in the Netherlands and had been under AIVD scrutiny for some time.

In addition, there are 135 Dutch citizens in Syria, Iraq or elsewhere in that region. Several dozens of Dutch jihadists have failed in their attempts to reach the conflict zone in Syria and Iraq. Not all of them have abandoned their jihadist ideology, and some still form part of the jihadist movement in the Netherlands.



Despite attempts by al-Qaeda to re-establish itself as the leader of global jihadism, the question remains as to whether it is actually capable of achieving this. Although the organisation has not managed to profile itself through attacks in the West for quite some time, it has benefited from the instability which arose after the outbreak of the Arab Spring in North Africa and the Middle East. Al-Qaeda is larger and more geographically widespread now than it was on the eve of the terrorist attacks in the United States with which it gained international name recognition. The power base the organisation has built up in the shadow of ISIS in Syria may be subject to change due to local military and other developments, but it will remain significant to the jihadist terrorist threat in the West, also in the long term.

Al-Qaeda also retains an undiminished intention to carry out attacks in the West or to have its supporters carry out these attacks. It prefers large-scale attacks on symbolic targets, but certainly does not decry small-scale attacks by individual jihadists acting on its behalf. Still, the question remains as to what extent al-Qaeda is capable of increasing its mobilising capability and persuading supporters around the world to actually carry out attacks.

The breach between ISIS and al-Qaeda at leadership level seems to be permanent. For the time being, the two organisations continue to exist in parallel, as competitors. Individual fighters from either organisation retain the possibility of switching their allegiance.

A large number of jihadists consider their shared ideology as a connecting factor, making the value of jihadist brand names an aspect of minor importance. Nevertheless, the breach between ISIS and al-Qaeda does affect the mutual relations between jihadists away from the conflict zone, where discord between supporters and sympathisers of ISIS and al-Qaeda certainly does exist.

### *The threat comes from the movement*

The Syrian conflict marks a turning point in global jihadism. The conflict and the related rise of ISIS have had an almost hypnotic mobilising effect on the global jihadist movement and have determined its internal dynamics. As a result of the conflict in Syria, the movement has grown and professionalised.

Despite the continuing military pressure on both ISIS and al-Qaeda, there are still large numbers of foreign fighters, including a considerable number from the Netherlands, in the combat zone in Syria and Iraq. In addition, there are jihadists in the region who have been detained by, for example, the Kurdish, Iraqi or Turkish authorities. Eventually, they might return. Although foreign fighters have come back to Europe in considerable numbers, to date there has been no truly large-scale return.

Apart from the threat of attacks, in the long term those who have travelled to the conflict zone, frustrated foreign fighters, those who have returned and even those who have been killed will have a considerable impact on the potential jihadist terrorist threat. Through the experience they gained on the battlefield, they have acquired a 'veteran' status with which they can increase their prestige amongst supporters and sympathisers. Using this status and experience, these jihad veterans could expand and strengthen existing networks, and build new national or transnational ones. Moreover, hundreds of jihadists arrested in Europe since 2015 are expected to be released from custody between 2019 and 2023. Many of them will not have abandoned their jihadist ideology during their detention.

Another aspect of the Syrian legacy which will influence the long-term threat from global jihadism is the transnational nature of the movement, which has in part been reinforced by the conflict in Syria. The contacts foreign fighters have made in the combat zone and the experiences they have shared there may have forged links which could have an effect on the jihadist terrorist threat in the long term as well.

The AIVD is also concerned about the possible threat posed by women and minors. The publication *Jihadist women*, a threat not to be underestimated (November 2017), states that women represent a threat not only as potential attackers, but that they can also support the jihadist movement by recruiting others and producing propaganda. As well as women, recently ISIS has also publicly stressed the importance of the organisation's attention for the new generation of jihadists, the so-called 'cubs of the caliphate'. Moreover, the jihadist movement is now being reinforced also by an even younger generation; children who were too young to travel to the caliphate during the original exodus beginning in 2012.

The appeal of jihadist ideology is expected to persist, even without a new catalyst similar to the impact of the state of the conflict in Syria in the past. Because of this, global jihadism will continue to pose a threat in both the short and the long term.





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