



ONLINE PRESENCE OF ISIL FOLLOWING ITS FALL

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SECTION 1: **INTRODUCTION**

Following the territorial defeat of the Islamic State in Syria in 2019, analysts and governments alike have closely tracked its evolving strategies in-theatre and online. Although the physical caliphate in its former core territories has now been dissolved, the Islamic State continues to preside over large swathes of land in the Lake Chad Basin and Sahel, and it maintains a residual but active presence in its past Syrian and Iraqi heartlands– one that it can activate at will, as indicated by its January 2024 “Kill them wherever you find them” campaign, which saw its Syrian network claim more attacks in a single week than it had done over the course of the previous six months combined.¹ Complementing and supporting its activities in these remaining spheres of physical influence, the group leverages a wide array of technologies to uphold communication efforts, recruitment drives, and strategic- and operational-level logistics.

The Islamic State’s sustained, innovative, and continually adaptive approach to online activism insulates it from existential defeat due to territorial loss and gives rise to an array of challenges for security practitioners. Technology today enables it to benefit from almost immediate and cross-border transmission of narratives, communications, and logistical activities. This poses complexities for intelligence and security practitioners the world over, especially given recent rapid advances that, while also advantageous to counter-terrorism efforts, have opened up a diverse array of new possibilities for the group to leverage.

Considering the Islamic State’s proven ability to innovate tactically, strategically, and technologically, there is a clear need for continual fine-tuning and re-evaluation of existing counter-terrorism strategies.² This need was underlined by its campaign at the beginning of January 2024, in which were claimed in excess of 100 coordinated operations over a single seven-day period. Addressing these challenges meaningfully requires the constant integration of new technologies and human expertise.

This report explores the online activities of the Islamic State as of October 2023. It is organised into three sections. The first section provides a status update on its global operations, charting its current trajectory in today’s complex geopolitical landscape. The next section examines the breadth of its online activities, exploring both the activities of its official propaganda offices and the activism of its self-proclaimed ‘munasirin’ support base. The last section sets out a series of areas of active and potential innovation that counter-terrorism practitioners should monitor (and, indeed, are already monitoring) moving forward with a view to getting and staying ahead of the group.

¹ Robinson, K. 2023. Defeated and detained, Islamic State still poses extremist threat. CFR. 31 July.

² Maher, S., Tamimi, A., and Winter, C. 2021. Understanding salafi-jihadist attitudes towards innovation. ICSR. 19 January.

SECTION 2: **METHODOLOGY**

This study draws on the open-source intelligence platform ExTrac,³ which leverages human expertise and machine-powered analytics to process live and historic data in real time.

This study draws on the open-source intelligence platform ExTrac, which leverages human expertise and machine-powered analytics to process structured and unstructured data at pace. First, the analysis leverages ExTrac's conflict analytics toolbox to sketch a broad outline of the Islamic State's offline capabilities as of September 2023. It then uses ExTrac's communications analytics tools to identify trends in how, where, and why the movement is engaging in strategic and tactical outreach. Having given an overview of its current trajectory both online and off-, the report explores several key areas of potential innovation to focus on moving forward.

This study uses ExTrac's conflict analytics toolbox to sketch a broad outline of the Islamic State's offline capabilities as of September 2023. It also uses ExTrac's communications tools to identify trends in how, where, and why it is engaging in strategic and tactical outreach.

Having given overview of its current trajectory both online and off-, the report gives an overview of various key areas of innovation that have been highlighted in both policy and Islamic State circles as priorities to focus on moving forward.

3 See extrac.ai.

SECTION 3: THE ISLAMIC STATE TODAY

An analysis of Islamic State military and media activities since the collapse of its territories in Syria in 2019 provides a useful lens to understand its current approach to tactical evolution and strategic capability development. While the group has, by most measures, declined significantly from a kinetic perspective, it continues to be geographically diffuse and, since 2021 in particular, appears to have adopted a more complex operational posture characterised by disinformation and under-reporting.

Kinetic Trends

Between 2018 and 2023, the number of operations formally claimed by the Islamic State on a month-on-month basis declined by a staggering 82.5 percent, from over 360 each month to just 63 each month.⁴

On the surface, this suggests significant erosion in its operational capabilities. However, when these figures are dissected, they offer a more nuanced perspective. While there has been a 92 percent decrease in claimed attacks in Iraq and Syria (from 280 to 22), the African continent has seen a 100 percent increase in operations, with Islamic State affiliates from the Sahel in the west to Mozambique in the east in their most recent period of ascendancy in Q3 2023.⁵

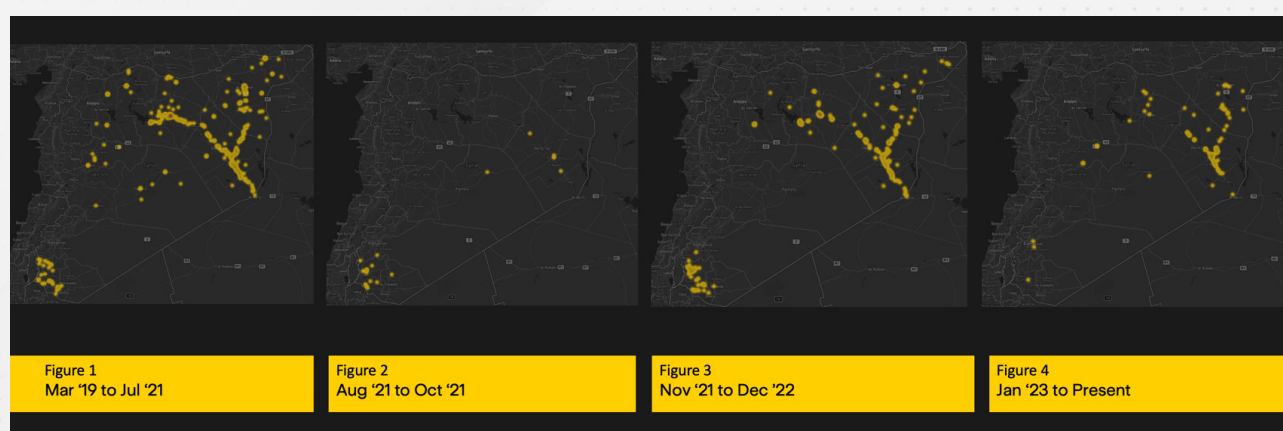


Figure 1. Geographic spread of Islamic State-claimed operations in Syria, 2019 to 2023.

This realignment of the movement's operational focus suggests a potential recalibration of its overarching strategy, one that sees it targeting regions with perceived vulnerabilities, less robust security infrastructure, and other geopolitical factors.

⁴ Source: extrac.ai.

⁵ Source: extrac.ai.

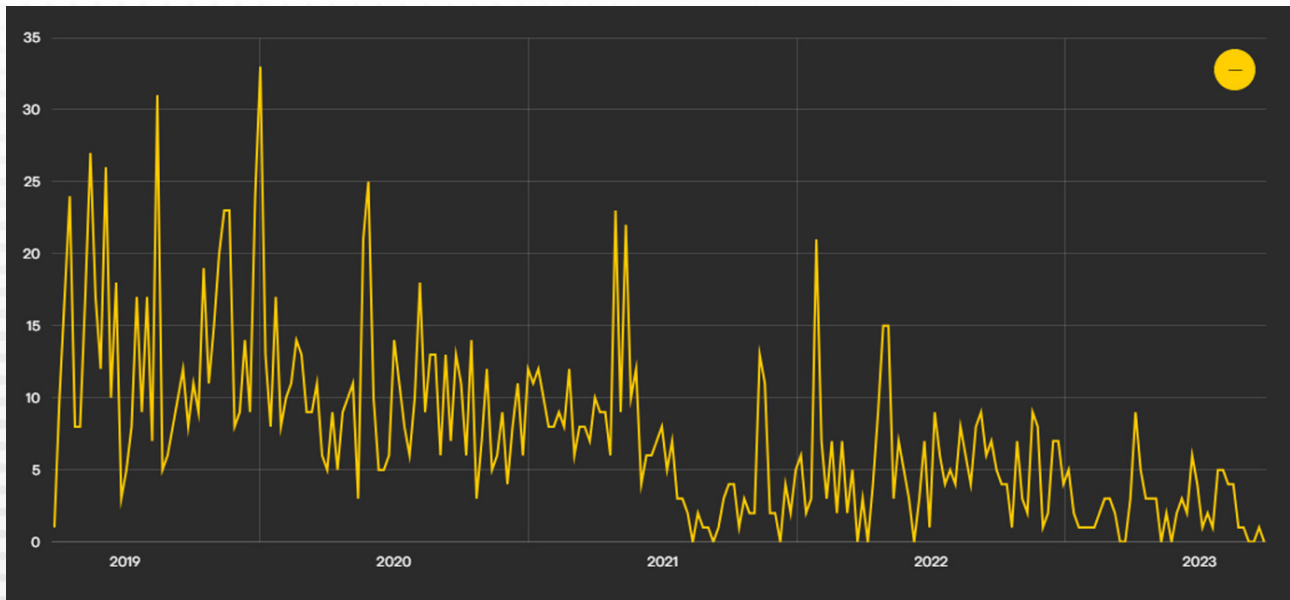


Figure 2. Claimed Islamic State operations in Syria, 2019 to 2023.

That being said, it is important to note that, notwithstanding this clear and definitive decline in formally reported activity in its former core, there is a marked divergence between the number of attacks that are being claimed by the Islamic State and the number of attacks that are being attributed to it by sources external to it. In Syria, for example, just 29 attacks have been claimed over the past three months, while some 221 attacks have been attributed to it.⁶ This, a long-term trend that has characterised Islamic State activity in its core since 2021, underscores the likelihood that the movement is adopting a strategy of deception, misreporting its activities to evade scrutiny and sow confusion among its adversaries.⁷

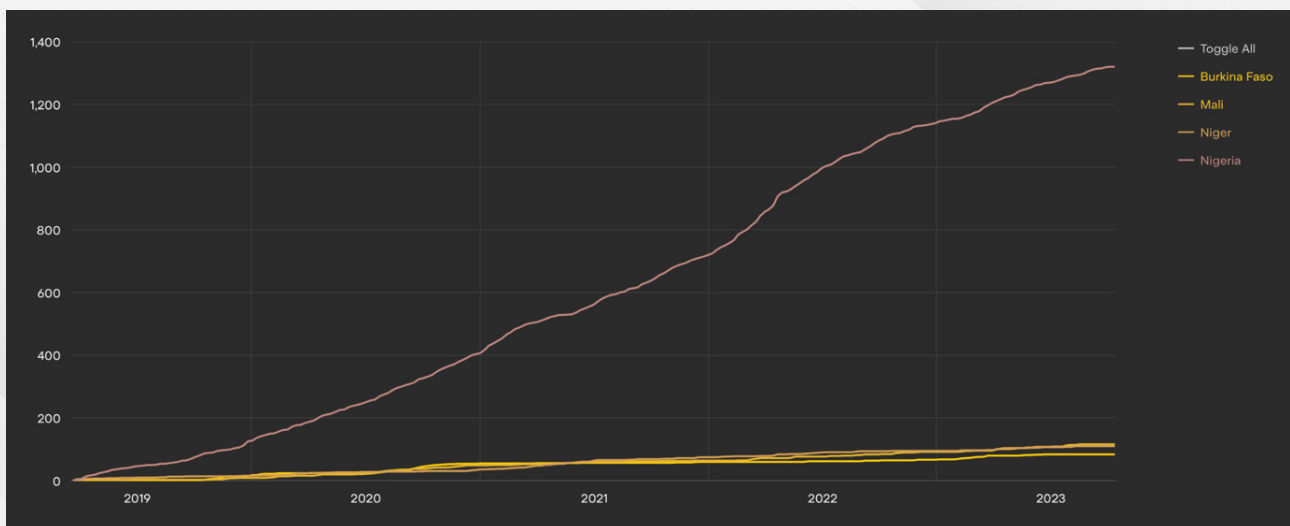


Figure 3. Claimed Islamic State operations in Nigeria, Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso (cumulative), 2019 to 2023.

⁶ Source: extrac.ai.

⁷ Waters, G. and Winter, C. 2021. Islamic State under-reporting in Central Syria. MEI. 2 September.

This notion of deception and misreporting was underlined in early 2024 when, on 4 January, its spokesman declared the start of a new campaign, dubbed “Kill them wherever you find them.” In the ensuing days, its network surged operations globally, reactivating dormant cells in a coordinated series of raids that left hundreds dead.

Communications Trends

The overall productivity of the Central Media Diwan of the Islamic State, which in its heyday published dozens of distinct media products each day, has collapsed since 2019.⁸ Nevertheless, it still remains a critical arbiter for Islamic State activities globally and an infrastructure that has managed to endure despite nearly a decade of intense cyber and physical counter-terrorism pressure.

There has been a 95 percent decrease in video content and an 89 percent drop in photo releases in the four years up to 2023.⁹ This precipitous decline is due to several factors: both targeted operations against its media infrastructure and the physical elimination of key officials, but also, likely, a strategic internal decision to lie low, reduce the risk of exposure, and conserve resources.

This trend appears to have been accelerated by the repeated killing of Islamic State caliphs and spokesmen.¹⁰ Its historically centralised command-and-control structure, which operated in lockstep with the Central Media Diwan throughout the 2010s, may now be seen as too risky a setup, something that causes the broader movement more trouble than it is worth to keep afloat in its former guise.

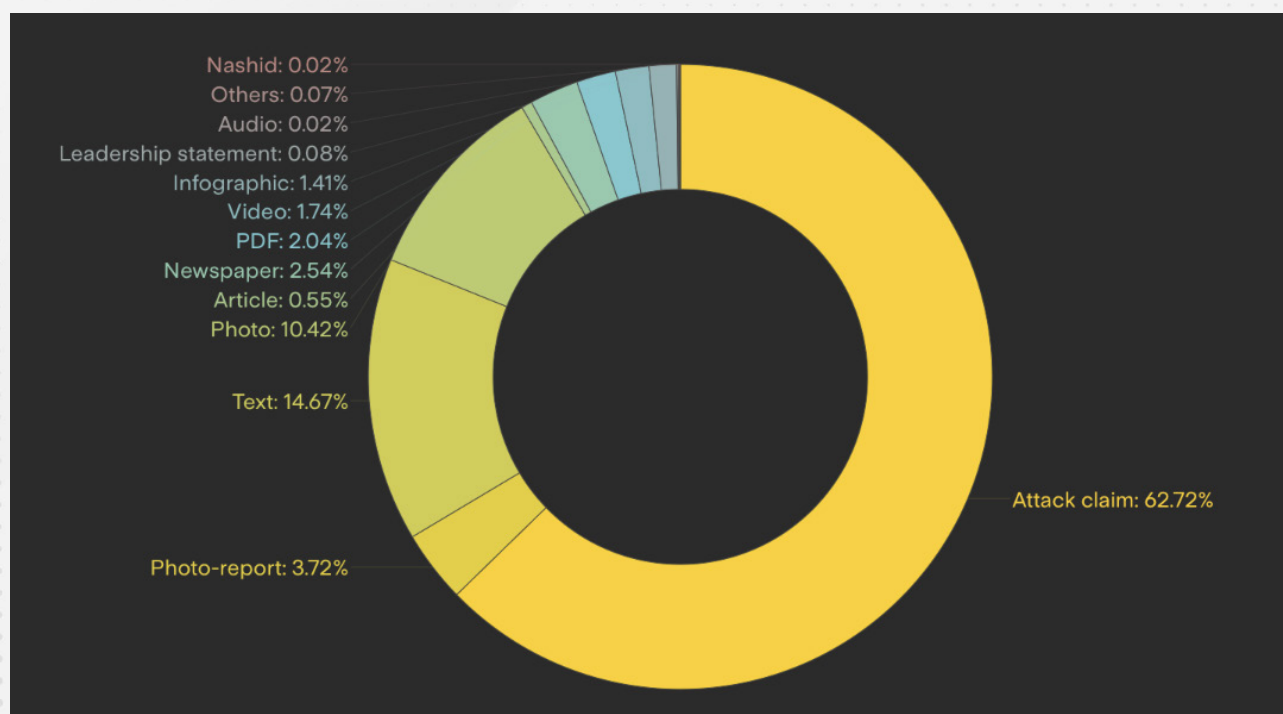


Figure 5. Islamic State propaganda output by content, 2020 to 2023.

⁸ Winter, C. 2019. ISIS propaganda, before and after its collapse. NATO. 11 June.

⁹ Source: extrac.ai.

¹⁰ 2023. ISIS chief killed in Syria by Turkey’s intelligence agency, Erdogan says. CBS. 30 April.

Noting the above, it is important to point out that the Islamic State's media infrastructure may be down, but it is now out. In the first week of January 2024, in support of its week-long global campaign, there was a five-fold increase in its activity and output, something that indicates a clear latent ability to coordinate, produce, and amplify kinetic, offline activities in spite of the challenges it faces due to the combined efforts of its adversaries.

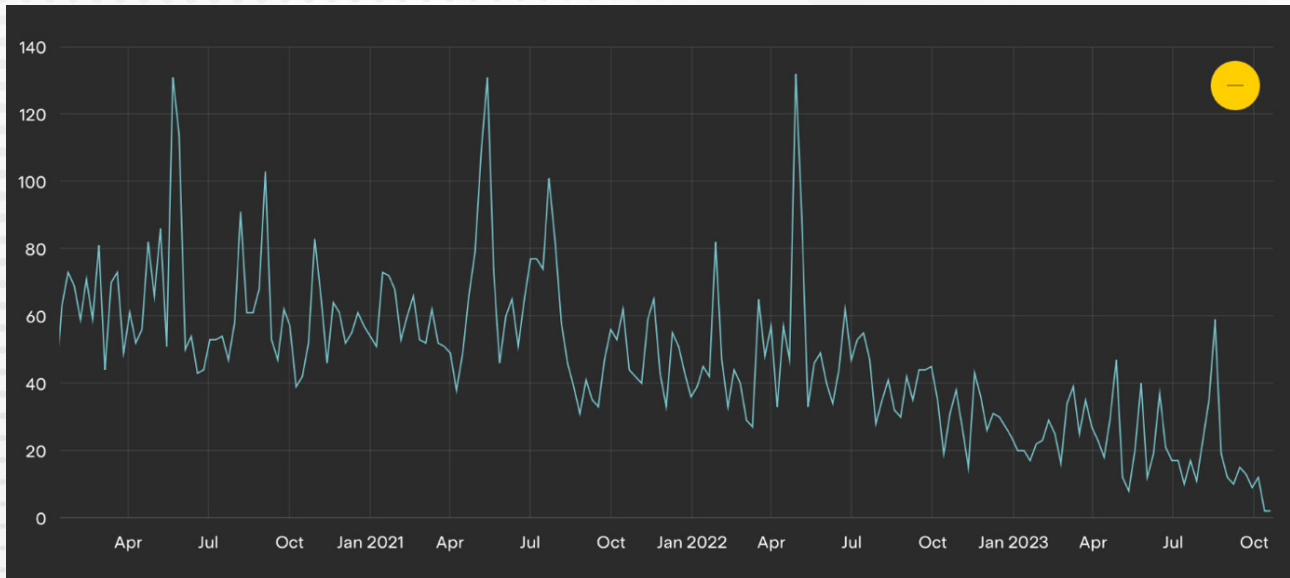


Figure 4. Official Islamic State propaganda output, 2020 to 2023.

SECTION 4: **ONLINE ACTIVITIES TODAY**

The precipitous decline of the Islamic State's official media outreach activity has had a profound impact on its broader ecosystem of munasirin (supporters).¹¹ This impact has been coupled with strategic, lasting disruptions to its unofficial media infrastructure, something that has necessitated a greater level of adaptability within its support base including, first and foremost, the rise of more decentralised munasirin-run media collectives. That being said, the movement as a whole remains capable and coherent.

Communicating 'Success'

Historically, high-profile violent incidents perpetrated by Islamic State cells and networks have been instrumental in buoying the moral of munasirin ecosystem, particularly during challenging periods. Such incidents or campaigns serve as rallying cries, a way to galvanise and instil fervour among the rank-and-file even at times of hardship.

This strategy was self-evident in 2019, both in the course of the revenge campaign that followed Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's death and the devastating attacks in Sri Lanka that occurred shortly after the Islamic State's defeat in Baghuz. These campaigns and others like them served dual purposes: they were acts of revenge at a material level and, more importantly, powerful propaganda tools to invigorate the munasirin right at the point that their morale was at its lowest.¹²

With the decline of the Islamic State's physical operations – let alone the complete absence in recent years of high-profile terrorist attacks – the job of the Islamic State's online proponents has become more challenging. In the absence of regular high-impact (or even low-impact) campaigns in its core, its overarching narrative has had to be redirected.

One of the most notable shifts has been the turning of munasirin attention towards Africa, something prompted by the Islamic State's tack towards the continent.¹³ This has seen munasirin far outside the African continent taking more interest in it than they were before, establishing groups on platforms like Telegram and Rocket.Chat that are dedicated to discussions around its affiliates' exploits from west to east Africa.

This unerring focus on Islamic State 'successes,' whether in Africa or elsewhere, is one of the principal reasons that the movement has remained coherent since its territorial collapse in 2019. Both fighters and supporters alike, because of this singular narrative focus, are able to frame theirs as the 'winning side' continually making gains in the face of adversity.

11 Winter, C. and Amarasingam, A. 2019. The decimation of Isis on Telegram is big, but it has consequences. WIRED. 2 December.

12 Lister, T. 2019. Destroyed on the battlefield, ISIS begins a new chapter of terror. CNN. 1 May.

13 Rolbiecki, T., van Ostaeyen, P., and Winter, C. 2020. The Islamic State's strategic trajectory in Africa. CTC Sentinel 13:8.

Rising Obfuscation

These changing operational dynamics have also given rise to an increased emphasis on deceptive community building and social engagement.

Forums and chatrooms now serve not just as places to get together amplify the news and content of the Islamic State. They are increasingly seen as an essential glue to keep the movement coherent and unified, drawing in a constellation of audiences and anchoring their interests and intent. Given platform disruption efforts are now highly effective, detecting and deleting Islamic State content as well as the individuals that spread it usually within minutes of its appearance, these communities have attempted to increase their resilience and longevity of late by toning down their overt support for the Islamic State, broadcasting its ideas but not its official content.¹⁴

Notably, though, lurking on the peripheries of this ecosystem there remain clusters of channels and groups that pose significant and more direct security concerns. These are hubs dedicated to the dissemination of instructional materials, targeting coordinates, weapon designs, and even recipes for poison.¹⁵ While these communities have been pushed further into the shadows than before, it is crucial not interpret their obscurity as being a sign of lacking capability. Entry into these circles –which often use nothing more than legitimate, legal technologies built to enable user privacy – remains accessible for those who know where to look or have insider connections, and, accordingly, they pose an intractable challenge to counter-terrorism practitioners and policymakers alike.

Disruption Efforts

Efforts to counteract activities occurring in these spaces have seen some success. Platforms like Telegram now see a high rate of channel and group takedowns on a day-to-day basis. However, notwithstanding this it remains central to the Islamic State community, a status that seems unlikely to change anytime soon.

Moreover, more mainstream platforms like Facebook, X, and TikTok, while not primary spaces for Islamic State mobilisation and logistical activities, continue to be plagued by Islamic State influence activities.¹⁶ Even though they are unequivocally more challenging terrain than they were before for direct and overt pro-Islamic State activities, they remain critical theatres for psychological and propaganda operations. So, while the Islamic State's online ecosystems have transformed in response to both internal and external pressures faced by both the group and the communities around it, their core intent and capabilities remain intact.

14 Alrhoun, A., Winter, C., and Kertesz, J. 2023. Automating terror: The role and impact of Telegram bots in the Islamic State's online ecosystem. TPV.

15 Clifford, B. 2018. Trucks, knives, bombs, whatever: Exploring pro-Islamic State instructional material on Telegram. CTC Sentinel 11:5.

16 Wells, G. 2019. Islamic State turns to teen-friendly TikTok, adorning posts with pink hearts. WSJ. 21 October.

SECTION 5: **EMERGING THREATS**

The rapid acceleration of technological innovation in recent years, especially in the fields of encryption and artificial intelligence (AI), brings both opportunities and challenges. Groups like the Islamic State have been actively experimenting with novel technologies and attempting to exploit the new avenues that they afford for years.

Artificial intelligence

With generative AI becoming both increasingly sophisticated and vastly more accessible, it is feasible that communities aligned with the Islamic State will seek at some point, if they have not already, to produce propaganda at scale and in a manner that is carefully tailored to specific demographics.

While companies like OpenAI have invested heavily in trust and safety technologies, workarounds are almost always possible on some level, meaning that it will be possible to rapidly generate multilingual text for integration into publications or to be posted as individual messages.¹⁷ Such messages can be created at scale and tailored based on specific cultural and socio-economic attributes of the target audience in question, even integrating specialist in-group slang.

Encryption

Encrypted communications are not new, but the now-mainstreamed and seamless integration of end-to-end encryption into contemporary communication platforms presents an array of challenges.

Today, encrypted messaging is not just about sending text securely. Platforms can now support encrypted file-sharing, voice notes, video calls, and even livestreaming. Such tools offer groups like the Islamic State a suite of communication capabilities wherein planning, coordination, and execution can all be managed discreetly.

Digital finance

In recent years, cryptocurrencies have become a tool of choice Islamic State fundraising. They are routinely promoted as a means of financing anything from media activities and weapons procurement to human trafficking and smuggling efforts from and to places like al-Hol camp in northeast Syria.¹⁸

¹⁷ Siegel, D. and Doty, M. 2023. Weapons of mass disruption: Artificial intelligence and the production of extremist propaganda. GNET. 17 February.

¹⁸ Alexander, A. 2021. Cash camps: Financing detainee activities in al-Hol and Roj camps. CTC. September.

Moreover, the relative anonymity that they afford their architects, which becomes doubly difficult to navigate when combined with systems like hawala, allows for strategic deception. It means that the Islamic State can run covert fundraising campaigns, masking them as legitimate humanitarian drives, drawing funds ostensibly to support needy communities in, say, al-Hol only to redirect them via hawala to other malign activities both within and across Syria's borders.

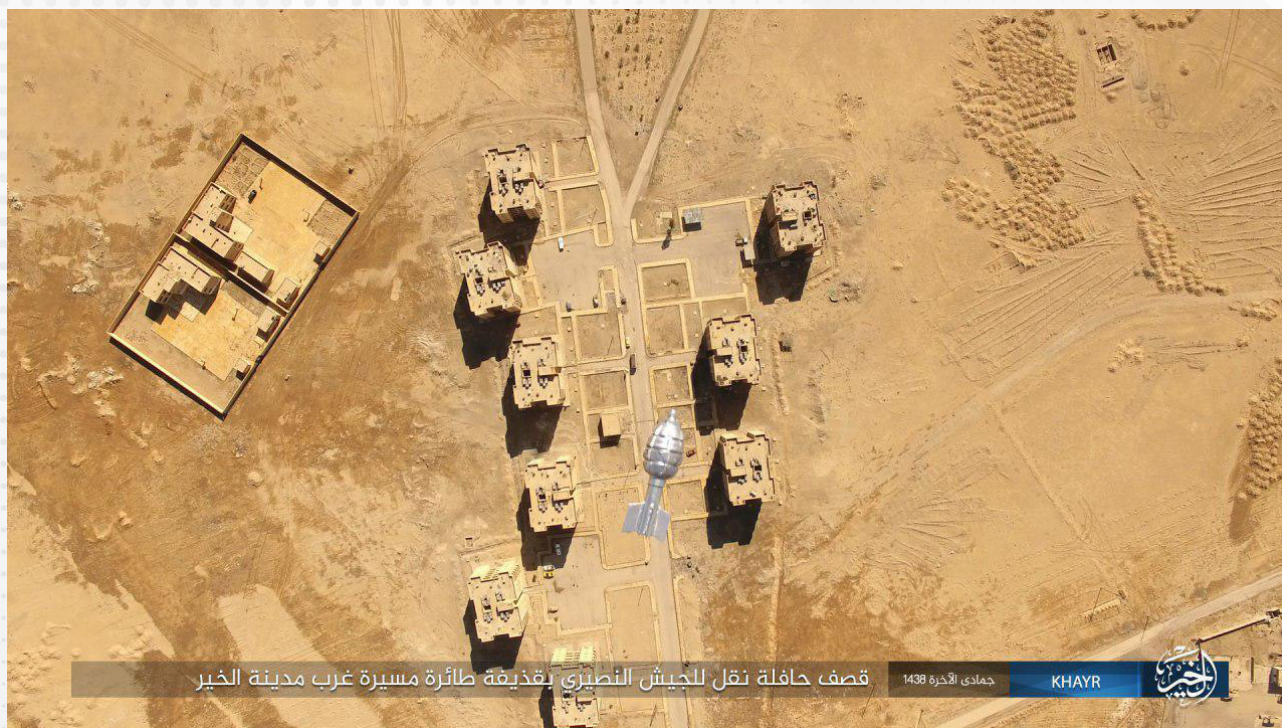


Figure 5. Image from 2017 showing drone technologies wholly integrated into the Islamic State's arsenal in Syria and Iraq.

Drone technologies

The rise of affordable 3D printing and drone technologies have also impacted on the Islamic State's capabilities – the latter in particular. In one recent case in the UK, for example, an individual was charged on the basis that he had been found to have used 3D printing technology to build a kamikaze drone.¹⁹

Drone technologies can also pose challenges even when not weaponised by design. The Islamic State was an early adopter of adaptive technologies, using commercially available recreational drone technology to deploy explosive payloads, as far back as 2016. It also led the way in integrating commercial drone technology into both C2ISR activities (essentially intelligence gathering, planning, and operational guidance) and media production.

¹⁹ Loh, M. 2023. A PhD student in the UK has been found guilty of 3D-printing a chemical weapon drone in his bedroom for a terrorist attack. Insider. 29 September.

SECTION 6: **IMPLICATIONS**

The Islamic State, in spite of its tangible decline in terms of both territorial control and formal media output since 2019, persists as a varied threat in physical theatres and digital ecosystems alike.

The enduring adaptiveness of its military operations, particularly in the African continent, coupled with its complex, innovative posturing in online spaces, underscores the deliberate, innovative, and resilient challenge it poses to security practitioners globally. Its recent manoeuvring in digital spaces in particular speaks to a pronounced and definitive shift towards subterfuge, covert community-building, and psychological operations – characteristics that are also reflected in the context of its kinetic activities in places like Syria.

In light of these changes to its structure and strategy, the Islamic State has astutely navigated the contours of recent advances in technology. It has exploited encryption, digital finance, and drone technologies seamlessly and, while its supporters' forays into generative AI have so far been fleeting, it is reasonably likely that this status quo will not last.

Considering these conditions, proactive and adaptive counter-terrorism strategies are more important than ever if we are to continue to respond meaningfully to the threat posed by this group. Indeed, navigating its complexities in both physical and digital spheres demands a holistic and continuously evolving approach to strategic counter-terrorism policymaking. This must encompass strong and deep international collaboration, integrated technology, and continually fine-tuned methodologies for detecting, disrupting, and dismantling its networks and activities both online and off-. The Islamic State may have lost its territorial core five years ago, but it remains a clear, present, and persistently creative danger.

SECTION 7: **SCENARIOS**

Scenario 1: Reactivation of Propaganda Activities

In this hypothetical scenario, the Islamic State significantly amplifies its communicative presence in digital ecosystems by leveraging new technologies now available to it at scale (especially AI). This results not only in more propaganda campaigns but also more sophisticated propaganda campaigns leveraging encrypted communications and generative AI to create persuasive, tailored messaging.

Policy Implications:

- Counter-terrorism practitioners and policymakers must ensure continued vigilance in relation to the Islamic State's media activities, with continual monitoring of its uptake of new technologies;
- The same communities must continue to work with civil society to invest in and deploy counter-strategic communications and digital literacy programmes to combat propaganda, misinformation, and radicalisation in online spaces.
- Optimised policy in this space demands strengthened international collaboration, which relies on sharing (limited) intelligence and resources to tackle the borderless nature of the threat.

Scenario 2: Increased Asymmetric Warfare

This hypothetical scenario sees the Islamic State tacking towards more expansive asymmetric warfare, which in other contexts has meant an increased focus on attacks on civilians. As much was indicated in the leadership statement published in January 2024. This could include the expanded use of drones and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in public spaces, both in theatre and in unstable regions in Africa and the Middle East where it has a more sustained presence.

Policy Implications:

- Governments must continue to prioritise assistance in training and equipping local security forces in vulnerable regions. Territorial safe havens, even if remote and small, can be used as crucibles for external operations.
- Continually invest in public education initiatives to maximise latent vigilance and preparedness against potential attacks.
- While drones have not yet been successfully deployed in a terrorist attack in a Western country, they have been implicated in many. As such, developing and deploying technologies in the context of counter-terrorism policing is a key capability that should be prioritised.



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