

Influence Of ISIS Terrorist Group

Posted on January 14, 2020

Introduction

The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), commonly known as ISIS or Da'esh, emerged from the militant environment created by the Iraq conflict and later expanded dramatically during the Syrian civil war. At the height of its power in 2014–2015, the group controlled significant territory in Iraq and Syria, governed millions of people through coercion, and used extreme violence as both a military method and a propaganda instrument. Its territorial project subsequently collapsed under sustained local and international pressure, and its last major territorial stronghold in Syria fell in 2019. However, the disappearance of its self-declared territorial “caliphate” did not end the organisation’s influence.

By 2026, the United Nations continued to assess ISIL as a threat to international peace and security. The Secretary-General’s twenty-second strategic report, issued in February 2026, described the threat as having intensified during the reporting period and noted the group’s resilience in several regions (United Nations, 2026a). The contemporary influence of ISIS is therefore different from its influence during 2014. It is less a conventional territorial power and more a decentralised extremist network whose affiliates, propaganda, ideology, and ability to exploit instability continue to create security challenges.

Origins and Break with Al-Qaeda

ISIS developed from the organisation commonly known as al-Qaeda in Iraq and its successors. Following leadership and organisational changes, the group became the Islamic State of Iraq. The conflict in Syria created opportunities for expansion across the Iraq-Syria border. Disagreements over authority, strategy, and organisational control eventually produced a public split between the group led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and al-Qaeda’s senior leadership.

This distinction is important because ISIS was not simply another name for al-Qaeda. The organisations shared violent extremist ideas but differed over strategy and leadership. ISIS placed exceptional emphasis on capturing territory, declaring statehood, imposing its interpretation of governance, and demanding allegiance to its leader. Its public brutality also became central to its identity and propaganda.

Territorial Expansion and Governance

ISIS's seizure of Mosul in 2014 transformed it from a powerful insurgent organisation into a territorial actor with global visibility. The group captured weapons, infrastructure, financial resources, and populated areas. Its declaration of a "caliphate" attempted to convert military success into political and religious legitimacy.

Within territory it controlled, ISIS imposed an authoritarian system based on coercion, fear, and severe punishment. The group persecuted religious and ethnic minorities, carried out mass killings, enslaved and abused civilians, destroyed cultural heritage, and imposed harsh controls over everyday life. These practices demonstrate why its influence cannot be understood simply through military strength. The group attempted to control identity, education, social behaviour, economic activity, and public belief.

Territorial rule also gave ISIS a propaganda advantage. It could falsely present itself to sympathisers as a functioning state rather than a clandestine militant organisation. This narrative helped it attract foreign recruits and generated international concern about individuals travelling to join the group.

Propaganda and Recruitment

One of ISIS's most influential innovations was its use of digital communication. The group produced highly designed propaganda intended for different audiences and distributed material through online networks. It attempted to glorify violence, present belonging to the organisation as meaningful, and exploit grievances involving identity, discrimination, conflict, or political exclusion.

It is important not to assume that exposure to extremist material automatically causes radicalisation. People become involved in violent extremist movements through varied pathways. Personal relationships, social networks, political grievances, conflict exposure, identity crises, ideology, and individual circumstances can interact. No single psychological profile reliably predicts involvement.

Modern prevention therefore focuses partly on resilience and early intervention. Communities, schools, families, social services, religious leaders, and online platforms may all play roles in reducing vulnerability to violent extremist narratives. Such programmes need careful design because excessive suspicion or discrimination can undermine trust and produce the opposite of the intended effect.

Foreign Fighters and Transnational Influence

The conflict in Iraq and Syria attracted foreign fighters from numerous countries. This gave ISIS an international dimension and created difficult policy questions when individuals later attempted to return home or remained in detention and displacement settings.

Governments have had to balance security, criminal justice, citizenship, rehabilitation, family rights, and child protection. Children connected to ISIS-affiliated families pose particularly difficult humanitarian and legal issues because many were born into or taken into conflict environments without meaningful choice.

The foreign-fighter phenomenon also demonstrated that modern extremist organisations can connect local conflicts with transnational identity narratives. A conflict located in one region can influence individuals thousands of kilometres away through digital communication and social networks.

Impact on Iraq and Syria

The human consequences of ISIS rule and the wars fought against it were severe. Communities experienced displacement, destroyed infrastructure, disrupted education, economic loss, trauma, and sectarian tension. Minority communities suffered particularly grave abuses.

The end of large-scale territorial control did not automatically resolve these consequences. Reconstruction, governance, accountability, reconciliation, and services remain important to long-term stability. Where communities experience insecurity, exclusion, corruption, poverty, or weak institutions, extremist organisations may attempt to exploit grievances.

Counterterrorism therefore cannot rely only on military action. Security operations may disrupt armed networks, but durable prevention also requires legitimate institutions, access to justice, functioning public services, economic opportunity, and trust between communities and government.

Regional Affiliates and the Evolution of the Threat

After losing most of its territory in Iraq and Syria, ISIS increasingly relied on decentralised affiliates and associated networks. These groups operate in different political and social environments and should not be assumed to function identically. Some use the ISIS brand to strengthen local insurgencies, while others maintain closer ideological or organisational relationships.

The United Nations reported in February 2026 that the threat posed by Da'esh had intensified during the reporting period and that the organisation had demonstrated resilience in several regions (United Nations, 2026a; 2026b). This shows that territorial defeat in Iraq and Syria did not eliminate the broader network.

The shift also changes how influence should be measured. Territory is no longer the only relevant indicator. Analysts must consider the ability of affiliates to exploit conflict, conduct attacks, spread propaganda, recruit supporters, raise resources, and sustain local networks.

Technology and Adaptation

Extremist organisations adapt to changes in communication technology. The United Nations' 2026 briefing noted that ISIL and associated actors were exploiting emerging technologies as part of their adaptation to counterterrorism pressure (United Nations, 2026b). This creates challenges for governments and technology companies because harmful content can migrate between platforms and communication environments.

The appropriate response must balance security with lawful expression and privacy. Broad censorship can create civil-liberties concerns and may drive extremist communication into less visible spaces. More targeted approaches include enforcing platform rules, preserving evidence of criminal activity, disrupting clearly unlawful content, improving digital literacy, and supporting credible alternatives to extremist narratives.

Understanding Aggression and Group Violence

Psychological theories such as the General Aggression Model can contribute to understanding how personal and situational factors influence aggressive behaviour. DeWall, Anderson, and Bushman (2011) explain that aggressive outcomes can be influenced by cognition, emotion, arousal, learning, and situational inputs. However, a terrorist organisation cannot be explained adequately by individual aggression alone.

ISIS developed within political conflict, institutional collapse, sectarian tension, armed networks, ideological movements, and regional instability. Group violence is therefore better understood through multiple levels of analysis. Individual psychology matters, but so do organisational incentives, leadership, social identity, political opportunity, and conflict conditions.

Counterterrorism and Prevention

Effective counterterrorism requires several complementary approaches. Law enforcement and intelligence services need to prevent planned violence and investigate criminal activity. Financial controls can make it harder for designated terrorist networks to move resources. Border and travel systems can identify lawful security concerns, while international cooperation is necessary because extremist networks operate across jurisdictions.

Prevention also requires attention to conditions that extremist recruiters exploit. Programmes may support education, community trust, conflict resolution, youth opportunity, and disengagement from violence. Rehabilitation and reintegration can be appropriate for some individuals, particularly where criminal-justice systems determine that community-based supervision is suitable.

These measures should respect human rights and the rule of law. Collective punishment, arbitrary detention, or discrimination against communities can create new grievances and undermine the legitimacy on which effective security depends.

Victims and Accountability

Analysis of ISIS should remain centred on the people harmed by its actions. Survivors of mass violence, sexual violence, displacement, persecution, and family loss may require long-term medical, psychological, legal, and economic support. Documentation of crimes is also important for accountability.

Justice can take different forms, including domestic prosecution, international cooperation, evidence preservation, reparative measures, and recognition of victims. Accountability is particularly difficult where crimes occurred across multiple jurisdictions or during intense armed conflict, but impunity can weaken recovery and reconciliation.

Conclusion

The influence of ISIS has changed significantly since the organisation's territorial peak. It no longer controls the broad areas of Iraq and Syria that gave its 2014 "caliphate" global prominence, but its ideology, affiliates, propaganda, and ability to exploit instability remain relevant. The United Nations' 2026 assessment confirms that ISIL continues to pose an evolving international security threat.

The lesson is that territorial defeat is not the same as elimination of an extremist movement. Sustainable prevention requires legitimate governance, community resilience, lawful security measures, international cooperation, support for victims, and attention to the political and social conditions in which violent organisations can recruit. Understanding ISIS as a changing network rather than a fixed territorial organisation provides a more accurate basis for analysing its continuing influence.

References

DeWall, C. N., Anderson, C. A., & Bushman, B. J. (2011). The General Aggression Model: Theoretical extensions to violence. *Psychology of Violence*, 1(3), 245–258. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0023842>

United Nations. (2026a). *Twenty-second report of the Secretary-General on the threat posed by ISIL (Da'esh) to international peace and security* (S/2026/57). <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4102030>

United Nations Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee. (2026b). *CTED and UNOCT jointly brief the Security Council on the 22nd report of the Secretary-General on the threat posed by ISIL (Da'esh)*. <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/ctc/>