

## ISIS GLOBAL INTSUM

*The purpose of this intelligence summary is to document and assess the significance of open source reports regarding the global activity of ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham)*

The Institute for the Study of War (ISW) assessed in February 2015 that ISIS would pursue simultaneous campaigns to defend territory in Iraq and Syria, to foster affiliates in the region, and to polarize populations globally.<sup>1</sup> Events from the March-May 2015 reporting period demonstrate that ISIS is now executing this multifaceted strategy. ISIS carries out these parallel campaigns across three geographic rings. The ISIS “Interior” ring includes Jordan, Israel and Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria, where ISIS focuses its main effort to defend the core lands of its so-called “caliphate.” The “Near Abroad” ring is comprised of lands historically held by Arab rulers, stretching from Morocco in the West to Pakistan in the Far East, where ISIS is attempting to expand its influence to offset losses in its Interior. The “Far Abroad” ring encompasses the wider world, including Europe, the United States, Southeast Asia, and cyberspace, where ISIS is attempting to foment a broader war. ISW assessed that ISIS would deliberately expand in the Near and Far Abroad rings to offset the risks of losing terrain in the Interior ring, particularly in Iraq.

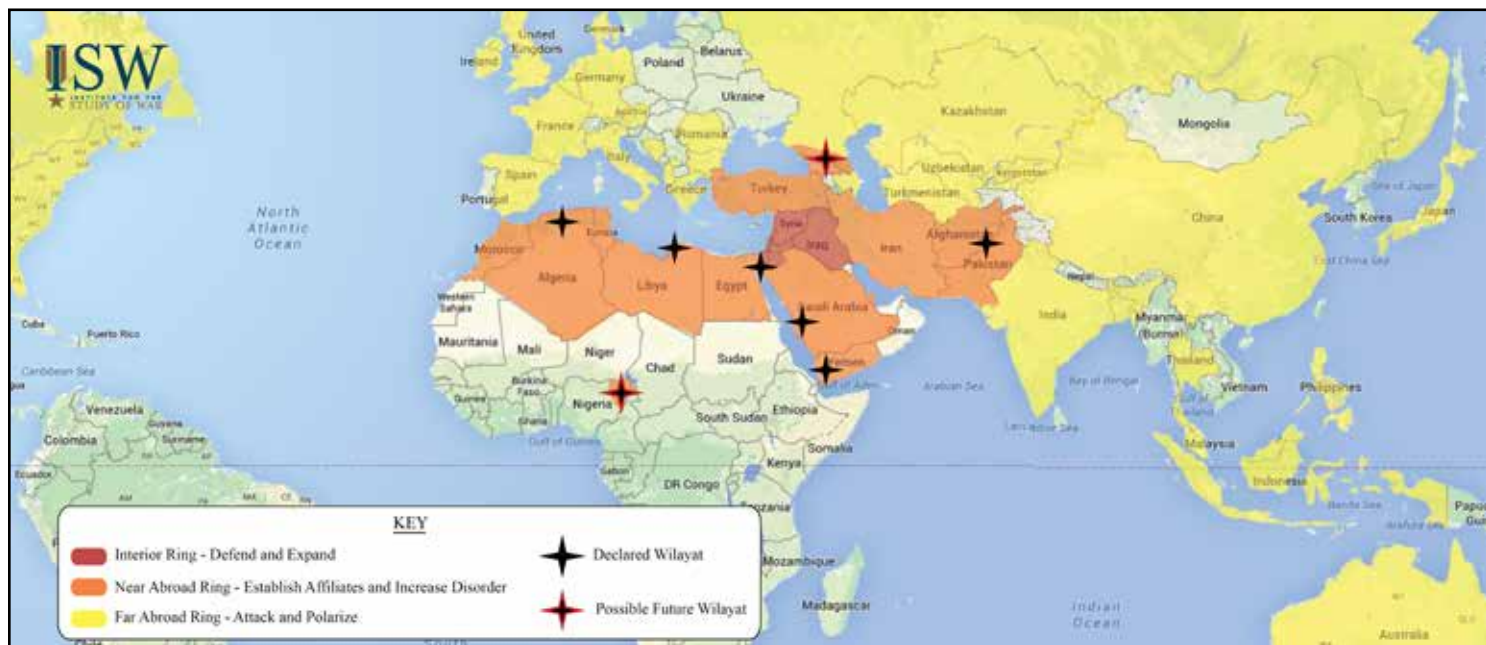
The pivotal event for ISIS during this reporting period was the loss of Tikrit to the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF). The ISF operation to retake Tikrit lasted from March 2 to April 1, 2015. ISIS’s Near Abroad affiliates surged in activity between March 4 and March 22 in correspondence with the battle for Tikrit, suggesting that there is relationship between ISIS’s conception of interior defense and its deliberate outward expansion regionally and globally. The rise in regional attacks while ISIS faced a major loss in Iraq suggests that the surge of regional activity may have been directed or encouraged by ISIS’s leadership specifically to counteract a perception of weakness during the battle for Tikrit. ISIS launched simultaneous attacks on northern Ramadi in Anbar Province and on the Baiji Oil Refinery in Iraq after losing the battle for Tikrit, reviving its Interior campaign, while ISIS-related activities in the Near Abroad concurrently returned to baseline levels. ISIS’s regional affiliates, though engaged in local campaigns,

may nevertheless be responsive to directives or requests from ISIS’s leadership. Loose associates and individual supporters in the Far Abroad may also be receptive to ISIS’s general call for action.

The United States is currently focused on combatting ISIS in Iraq. Yet ISIS has expanded its global efforts such that breaking its will or capability to fight in Iraq alone will not achieve success. The anti-ISIS coalition must counter ISIS’s forces in the Interior, including Syria as well as Iraq, while simultaneously containing ISIS’s activities in the Near and Far Abroad. This task requires counteracting ISIS’s resiliency by disrupting the transfer of fighters, resources, expertise and propaganda outwards from ISIS leadership within Iraq and Syria. It also may require disruptive actions beyond counter-messaging in places where ISIS affiliates are strongest, such as Libya. Many of the United States’ most capable partners in the region are primarily concerned about Iranian expansionism and domestic extremist movements rather than the regional threat posed by ISIS, which makes uniting the anti-ISIS coalition more difficult. However, if the United States and its allies fail to counter ISIS simultaneously across its three rings, the coalition risks being outpaced by a lethal jihadist model that is spreading quickly.

### *The Spectrum of Affiliation to ISIS*

A wide range of actors contribute to ISIS’s strategic goals.<sup>2</sup> ISIS’s leadership is most closely linked to its regional governorates, or wilayats, in Algeria, Libya, the Sinai, Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Khorasan (Afghanistan-Pakistan). ISIS claims to communicate with local leaders and approve operational concepts in each area. ISIS also likely funneling strategic resources and military training to its most robust wilayats.<sup>3</sup> The groups that constitute wilayats are directly affiliated to ISIS. There are other associated groups and actors worldwide, however, that also appear to align with ISIS and respond to ISIS’s messaging. These actors include cells in the



Near Abroad and the Far Abroad that contain foreign fighters returning from Iraq and Syria, longstanding members of the overlapping global ISIS and al-Qaeda support networks, and “lone wolves” who conduct individual attacks on behalf of ISIS. All of these actors help ISIS to polarize and radicalize populations, to broadcast a message of success and strength, and to organize militant support in the outer reaches of ISIS’s aspirational territory. Strong regional affiliates and an inspired jihadi social movement will help ISIS survive even if it loses urban terrain in Iraq and Syria. This intelligence summary will discuss actors across the spectrum of affiliation to ISIS throughout ISIS’s three geographic rings.

## THE INTERIOR RING

*ISIS sustained major tactical losses inside Iraq and northern Syria in March 2015. ISIS lost its first major city at Tikrit and ISIS lost further territory to Syrian Kurdish forces south of Kobane near its stronghold at ar-Raqqa. ISIS nevertheless expanded its activities in Damascus and the northern Aleppo countryside by early April 2015. ISIS also reset in Iraq and launched simultaneous offensives in Anbar and northern Iraq. ISIS will likely seek to split the ISF along these fronts while continuing operations to expand its geographical footprint in Syria. ISIS’s ability to expand in Syria while sustaining losses in Iraq as demonstrated during this reporting period continues to be a source of resiliency for the organization.*

**Iraq.** ISIS suffered a major defeat with the loss of Tikrit on April 1. ISIS in Iraq launched numerous unconventional attacks across the country while the battle for Tikrit was ongoing, including in Sinjar, Fallujah, Ramadi, and the Hamrin Ridge. Many of these attacks involved multiple VBIEDs and

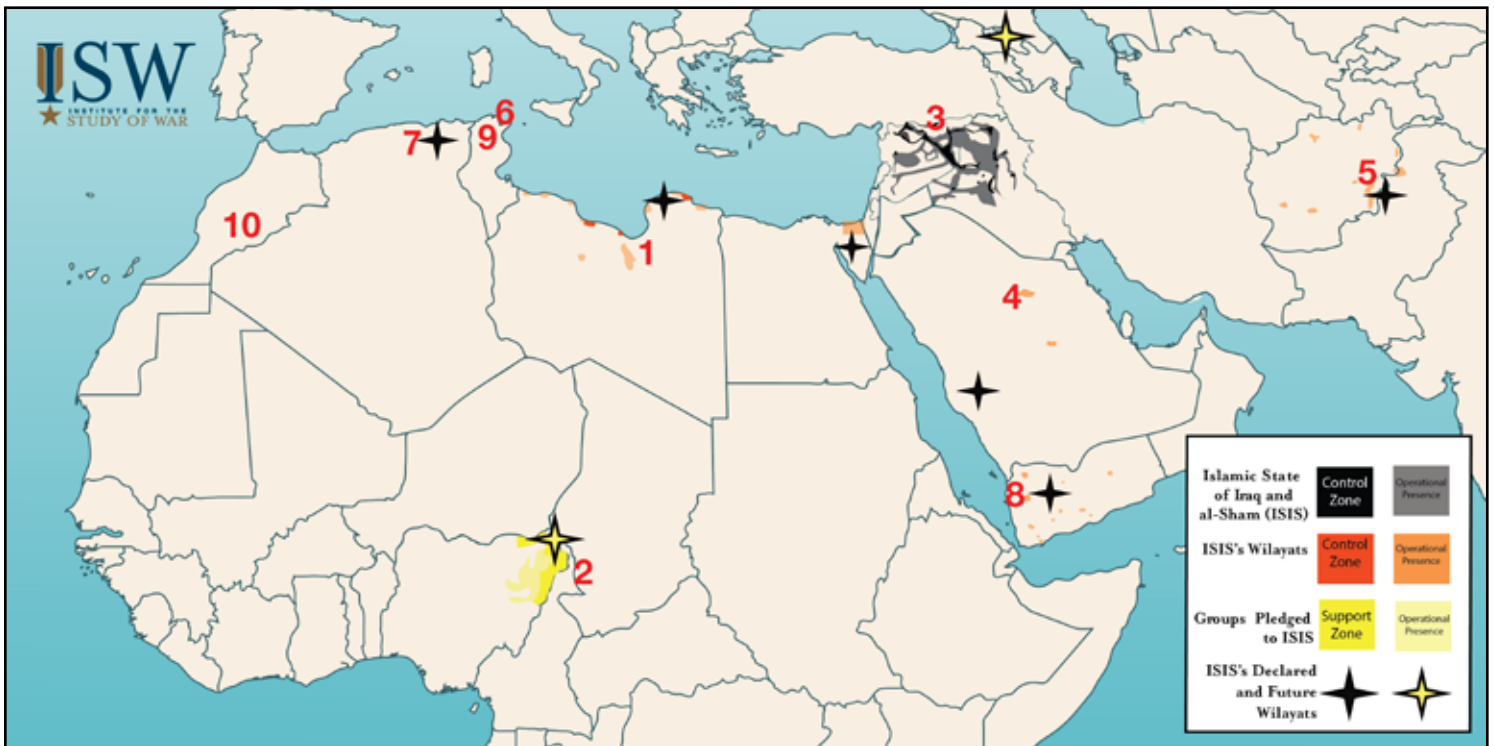
SVESTs rather than ground assault forces, indicating that ISIS continued independent operations on other fronts rather than concentrating its forces upon the defense of Tikrit.<sup>4</sup> This is a telling sign of how ISIS conceptualizes its defense to maximize resiliency rather than local control in some areas. Two weeks later, the ISF launched an operation to clear ISIS from eastern Ramadi and ISIS responded by launching simultaneous major attacks on northern Ramadi and the Baiji oil refinery, directly confronting massed Iraqi Security Forces in both areas.<sup>5</sup> Two weeks later, ISIS followed with a second attack at the Baiji refinery, reportedly seizing 80% of the facility by the time of writing.<sup>6</sup> These operations highlight that ISIS can still launch simultaneous and successive attacks across multiple fronts as part of its overall defense of cities under its control inside Iraq and Syria. ISIS will likely coordinate its northern Iraq and Anbar campaigns in the near term, limiting the ISF’s ability to clear ISIS fully from either area.

**Syria.** ISIS is defending its existing territory in eastern and northern Syria while expanding into the Syrian central corridor north of Aleppo, southeast of Hama, and southeast of Damascus. ISIS faces varying levels of opposition from the Assad regime, Syrian rebels, and the al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al Nusra (JN) on these fronts, and it is not clear which enemy force ISIS will prioritize. ISIS is directly confronting regime forces in Hama and Homs Provinces while clashing with JN and rebels north of Aleppo as well as rebels in Damascus. ISIS also intensified its sectarian anti-Assad propaganda in eastern Homs and Hama Provinces in March in order to provoke the regime’s base of support

and promote its attractiveness to Syrian rebels as an effective anti-regime actor.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, ISIS re-energized its efforts to coerce and recruit near Damascus, notably capturing ninety percent of the Yarmouk refugee camp from Palestinian militant groups in a surprise offensive on the first week of April.<sup>8</sup> ISIS may intend to degrade rebel unity near Damascus to promote its organization over JN. However, ISIS's claims to be the best actor to provide stable governance and defend Syrians against the regime were weakened in April 2015 when rebels supported by JN and regional governments captured Idlib city and Jisr al-Shughour without any assistance from ISIS.<sup>9</sup> ISIS is also forced to balance its expansion efforts with ongoing defensive operations in northern and eastern Syria, particularly against Kurdish forces supported by coalition airstrikes in Hasaka Province and the southern countryside of Kobane. Continued pressure from Kurdish forces and continued gains by JN may force ISIS to reprioritize among

its Syrian fronts.

**Jordan.** Jordan remains committed to the anti-ISIS fight in Iraq and Syria, even as regional attention among Arab states has shifted to countering Iranian influence in Yemen. Jordanian King Abdullah II discussed the possibility of direct involvement in eastern Syria on April 13.<sup>10</sup> Jordan may attempt to coordinate and support a Syrian tribal uprising against ISIS in Deir- ez-Zour province. This effort could prompt ISIS to attempt attacks in Jordanian territory beyond the multiple SVBIED and SVEST attacks it has already launched on the Iraqi-Jordanian border, most recently on April 25.<sup>11</sup> It also might push anti-government Salafist and Palestinian populations inside Jordan towards ISIS. ISIS has already begun to position itself as a defender of the Palestinian people, releasing a statement on April 13 claiming “the sons of the Islamic State are the sons” of the Palestinian

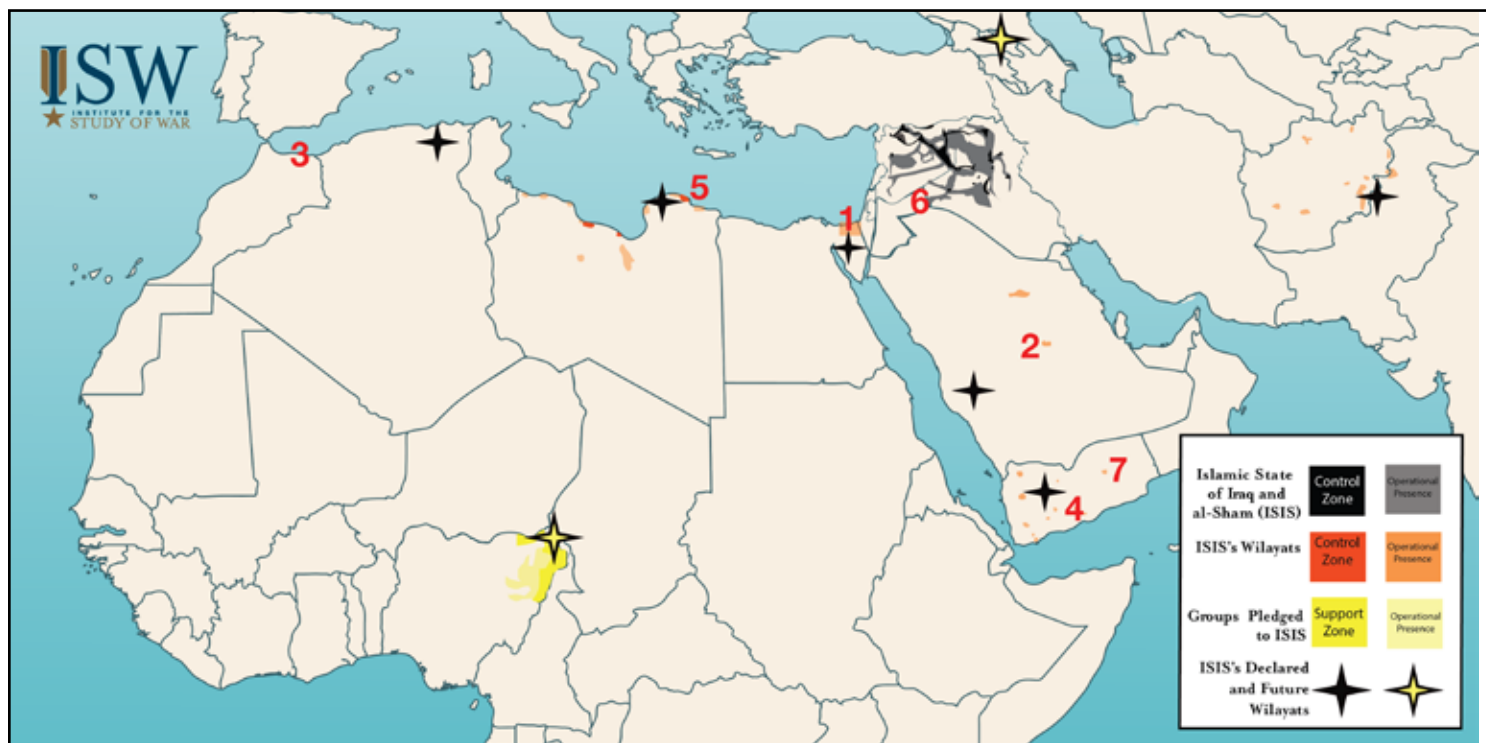


- 1) March 4-6: ISIS's forces in Libya attack oilfields and kidnap foreigners
- 2) March 7: Boko Haram leader pledges to ISIS
- 3) March 12: ISIS spokesman pledges to take over all regional capitals
- 4) March 13: Saudi authorities arrest individuals planning a VBIED attack on the U.S. embassy in Riyadh
- 5) March 17: Leader of ISIS's Wilayat Khorasan (Afghanistan-Pakistan) releases a video
- 6) March 18: Gunmen attack Bardo Museum in Tunisia
- 7) March 19: ISIS's Wilayat al-Jaza'ir (Algeria) claims its first attack since December 2014
- 8) March 20: ISIS operatives detonate 5 SVESTs in Sana'a and Sa'ada
- 9) March 20: Tunisian authorities arrest group planning to launch VBIEDs across the country
- 10) March 22: Moroccan authorities arrest group planning to launch spectacular attacks across the country

## ISIS-Linked Regional Activity in March 2015

ISIS's regional wilayats and groups supportive of ISIS accelerated their activity as ISIS lost Tikrit in Iraq. Their actions helped ISIS claim strategic success and increase strategic resiliency

by Harleen Gambhir



- 1) April 2: Wilayat Sinai launches multiple simultaneous VBIEDs on Egyptian military checkpoints across North Sinai
- 2) April 8: Gunmen linked to ISIS kill two Saudi police officers in Riyadh
- 3) April 13: Moroccan authorities arrest five members of an attack cell linked to ISIS
- 4) April 14: Wilayat Shabwa executes 15 Yemeni soldiers
- 5) April 20: ISIS releases a video showing the beheading of 28 Ethiopian Christians in Wilayats Barqa and Fezzan in Libya
- 6) April 25: ISIS launches multiple SVBIEDs on the Iraqi-Jordanian border
- 7) April 30: Wilayat Hadrawmat simultaneously attacks three Yemeni military targets

## ISIS-Linked Regional Activity in April 2015

ISIS's outreach is changing the nature of regional conflicts. ISIS's affiliates in Libya and Yemen emulated the organization's signature brutality in April, while ISIS's affiliate in Egypt demonstrated increased capability, likely due to resources provided by ISIS's leadership.

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refugees in Syria's Yarmouk camp.<sup>12</sup> ISIS may also expand its media efforts to appeal to Palestinian populations in Jordan, the West Bank and Gaza in a bid to provoke a larger regional fight that could aid its recruitment and messaging regarding a transnational struggle.

### THE NEAR ABROAD RING

ISIS-related activity surged in the Middle East and North Africa as ISIS lost Tikrit in Iraq. ISIS's wilayats conducted major attacks in Yemen, Libya and the Sinai, released significant statements in Algeria and Afghanistan, and attempted attacks in Saudi Arabia. Concurrently, pro-ISIS groups conducted a major attack in Tunisia, released a significant statement in Nigeria, and attempted attacks in Morocco. This confluence of activity suggests that ISIS can surge regionally by providing general guidance that applies to numerous local campaigns, both among officially affiliated wilayats as well as loosely connected supporters. It also shows that ISIS can instigate synchronized offensives across its global rings in order to absorb losses and maintain a narrative of success.

ISIS is changing the regional jihadist landscape through its Near Abroad activities as more groups exhibit signs of ISIS's methodologies of military action and governance. Their pursuit of local campaigns with ISIS's guidance creates opportunities for ISIS to adapt to new fronts and generate resiliency for its principal campaign inside Iraq and Syria.

### ISIS's WILAYATS

**Libya.** ISIS maintains three wilayats in Libya: Wilayat Tarabalus in the west, Wilayat Barqa in the east, and Wilayat Fezzan in the south. These governorates likely coordinate their activities internally and may even operate under a unified command.<sup>13</sup> The Libya wilayats are ISIS's strongest source of redundancy if it loses control of urban centers in Iraq and Syria. ISIS's forces in Libya control the cities of Derna and Sirte,<sup>14</sup> conduct governance activities, and run training camps.<sup>15</sup> The Libya wilayats are gaining strength primarily by convincing local groups to align with ISIS ideologically and

adopt ISIS's style of warfare. ISIS began this outreach process with the deployment of small groups of Libyan fighters back home from Syria in the spring of 2014 in order to recruit their countrymen and replicate ISIS's methodology inside Libya.<sup>16</sup> More recently, ISIS's central leadership appealed to Libyan and Tunisian Ansar al-Sharia leaders in a March 30 publication.<sup>17</sup> ISIS may repeat this strategy for attracting militant groups, originally used in Syria in 2011 and 2012, to gain traction in other states in the Middle East and North Africa. ISIS's forces in Libya seek to accelerate the nation's conflict and limit prospects for a political solution. ISIS made multiple calls in March and April for fighters to travel to Libya if they could not reach Syria, indicating preparation for long-term engagement in the country.<sup>18</sup> Notable attacks during the reporting period included attacks by Wilayat Tarabulus on foreign embassies in Tripoli and oil fields along Libya's central coast as well as periodic VBIED attacks by Wilayat Barqa on House of Representatives-allied forces in Benghazi.<sup>19</sup> Wilayats Barqa and Fezzan also released a video on April 20 showing the execution of 28 Ethiopian Christians as part of an ISIS-wide media series on ISIS's relationship with Christians, demonstrating their responsiveness to ISIS's trending anti-



*New members of ISIS's Wilayat Barqa attend a training camp in April 2015.<sup>1</sup>*



*Wilayat Barqa members conduct street work in Derna in April 2015.<sup>2</sup>*

Christian program.<sup>20</sup> ISIS faces local resistance due to this sort of brutality, even within its stronghold of Derna.<sup>21</sup> But ISIS likely will be able to continue operations in Libya as long as other militant actors are focused on the country's ongoing civil war.

**Yemen.** Yemen's civil war between al-Houthi rebels and anti-al-Houthi forces accelerated in late March 2015. The internal conflict exacerbated a regional proxy war between Arab countries and Iran, creating a security vacuum that opened new opportunities for both al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and ISIS. ISIS's emerging wilayats in Yemen greatly contributed to this intensification, primarily through a series of spectacular, simultaneous attacks conducted by Wilayat Sana'a on March 20 targeting two Zaydi mosques in Sana'a and a government facility in Sa'ada.<sup>22</sup> Together, these five SVEST operations killed more than 130 people in one of the largest terrorist attacks in Yemen's history. Over the next five days U.S. Special Forces withdrew from Yemen, the al-Houthis seized Aden International Airport as well as al-Anad military base, and a Saudi Arabia-led coalition initiated airstrikes as part of Operation Decisive Storm. ISIS's rival AQAP took advantage of the chaos by seizing the city of al-Mukalla in eastern Yemen on April 2 and freeing nearly 300 inmates from a nearby prison.<sup>23</sup> ISIS's forces in Yemen nevertheless seem determined to conduct operations despite AQAP's strength in the country. Since March 20 seven alleged wilayats have published photos claiming small attacks against the al-Houthis in Yemen's Lahij, Aden, Abyan, Shabwah, Sa'ada, Sana'a, Ibb, Taiz, al-Jawf, al-Bayda, and Hadramawt provinces.<sup>24</sup> Most recently, official ISIS news sources claimed an attack against a government checkpoint in Hadramat and released a video showing the execution of 15 Yemeni soldiers in Shabwah on April 30.<sup>25</sup> These operations in eastern Yemen suggest that ISIS may compete with AQAP for influence amongst Sunni populations. ISIS's fighters in Yemen will use the al-Houthi conflict to increase sectarianism, exacerbate conflict and gain further power in line with ISIS's methodology in Iraq. This intent is reflected in ISIS propaganda releases from March 30, April 14 and April 24, some of which directly compares the al-Houthis to Iraqi Shi'a.<sup>26</sup> ISIS's methods of territorial control, violent hard power, and sectarian exacerbation may change the nature of the Yemeni battlefield, especially as AQAP increasingly conducts territorially-driven operations. Pro-ISIS groups will leverage the disorder in Yemen to recruit and grow in strength.<sup>27</sup>

**Afghanistan.** ISIS declared its wilayat in the Khorasan, or the Afghanistan-Pakistan region, in January 2015. Wilayat Khorasan previously focused on recruitment and training,



Screen shot from a video from Wilayat Sa'una released in April 2015.<sup>3</sup>

but may soon shift to sectarian and terror attacks.<sup>28</sup> Afghan politicians attributed significant attacks to ISIS in the reporting period, including a suicide attack in Jalalabad that killed 35 civilians on April 18.<sup>29</sup> Wilayat Khorasan denied conducting the attack, which matched the style of other groups such as the Taliban and exceeded any capability ISIS has shown in the region thus far.<sup>30</sup> It is possible that a militant organization attributed the attack to ISIS in an effort to deflect criticism for killing civilians. Still, the event provides an example of the type of explosive attack on civilians that Wilayat Khorasan likely aspires to conduct. Wilayat Khorasan also likely seeks to introduce a sectarian element into the Afghan conflict. Second Afghan Vice President Mohammed Mohaqiq highlighted this threat on April 4 when he attributed the February kidnapping of 31 Shi'a Hazara civilians in Zabul province to ISIS.<sup>31</sup> As in Libya, Egypt and Yemen, ISIS's wilayat in the Khorasan has adopted aspects of ISIS's methodology and produced photosets of nascent social control, governance, and military activities.<sup>32</sup> However, the group has not yet conducted complex or high-end attacks, a capability that would indicate considerable unity and strength. Instead, Wilayat Khorasan seems to consist



Wilayat Khorasan militants allegedly firing mortars at Pakistani military facilities in Khyber, Pakistan in April 2015.<sup>4</sup>

of disparate splinter groups from the Afghan Taliban, the Pakistani Taliban, Jundullah, and most recently the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU).<sup>33</sup> As the Taliban engages in peace talks, more militants may turn to ISIS as a way to obtain funding and continue jihad. These militants enrich Wilayat Khorasan with local connections and battlefield familiarity. Their defection supports the arguments of Afghan leaders who emphasize the threat of ISIS in order to encourage continued U.S. military support. Discerning meaningful reports of ISIS activity from the claims of local leaders will be extremely challenging and important in coming months, particularly as ISIS co-opts elements of organizations like the IMU which operate beyond Afghanistan into Pakistan and Central Asia.



Wilayat Khorasan members burning marijuana in Khyber, Pakistan in April 2015.<sup>5</sup>

**Saudi Arabia.** No significant reports of ISIS-related activity in Saudi Arabia emerged until this reporting period even though ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared a wilayat in the country in November 2014. Saudi Arabia's government released information on April 28 claiming that Saudi groups linked to ISIS had reached an "advanced stage" and had planned several foiled attacks against Saudi military and U.S. interests since December 2014.<sup>34</sup> It is unclear whether the detained groups constituted a prospective wilayat or whether they were simply cells led by ISIS's returned foreign fighters. The largest group, detained on March 8, included 65 members who allegedly planned to attack prisons and target civilians to "provoke sectarian strife" – both signature targets of ISIS. Saudi authorities detained two individuals on March 13 who planned to launch an SVBIED against the U.S. embassy in Riyadh. In response to this threat, the U.S. closed its Riyadh embassy and two other diplomatic posts in Saudi Arabia for a week beginning on March 15.<sup>35</sup> Notably, these detainments coincided with ISIS's Near Abroad surge in which every other wilayat executed a major attack or released a significant message. Syrians reportedly coordinated with a Saudi national to plan the attack, indicating possible direction

from ISIS's leadership in relation to the March regional surge. The threat of ISIS-linked activity in Saudi Arabia continued as alleged ISIS operatives attacked Saudi policemen on March 29 and April 8.<sup>36</sup> In response, the Saudi Ministry of Interior increased security around shopping centers and oil facilities on April 20 due to the possibility of militant attacks.<sup>37</sup> Government security efforts have been successful in preventing attacks thus far and ISIS may therefore focus its efforts on attempts to build wider popular support, as demonstrated by ISIS propaganda from April 14 urging Saudi citizens to revolt against their government.<sup>38</sup> Individuals and groups linked to ISIS may also attempt to exacerbate sectarian tensions sparked by Saudi Arabia's operations against the al-Houthis in Yemen.<sup>39</sup>

**Sinai.** ISIS's Wilayat Sinai conducted a coordinated, complex attack on April 2 that exhibited increased sophistication compared to the group's last major attack in January 2015.<sup>40</sup> This growth in military capability was likely fueled by expertise and resources from ISIS's leadership. In particular, during the April 2 attack Wilayat Sinai simultaneously launched multiple VBIEDs targeting several Egyptian military checkpoints along the al-Arish-Rafah highway and subsequently deployed a follow-on unit to cut off Egyptian reinforcements. Wilayat Sinai forces also stole two armored military vehicles during the attack and reportedly brought a medical vehicle to treat injured fighters.<sup>41</sup> Beyond this operation, Wilayat Sinai stole about a dozen utility vehicles over March and April in likely preparation for a larger VBIED campaign in the North Sinai.<sup>42</sup> The Egyptian military accelerated its counterterror operations in response, notably suspending fuel and water trucking operations in areas of North Sinai on March 17 in order to prevent theft.<sup>43</sup> Tensions between locals and the Egyptian government will likely increase due to this suspension of services as well as allegations of civilian casualties caused by Egyptian airstrikes on March 31.<sup>44</sup> Wilayat Sinai will capitalize on civilian hardship to recruit and gain influence, following



Wilayat Sinai militants firing a mortar in May 2015.<sup>6</sup>

the social and military model used by ISIS in its early phases in Iraq. The current focus of the Egyptian government and military on Yemen may create additional opportunities for Wilayat Sinai, especially if the Egyptian military responds to resource constraints by conducting unsophisticated and generalized counterattacks in the Sinai.

**Algeria.** ISIS's Wilayat al-Jaza'ir (Algeria) is the least active of ISIS's wilayats. Nevertheless the group participated in the Near Abroad surge, releasing multiple statements on March 19 which claimed small arms and IED attacks on Algerian security forces on February 3, March 5, and March 6.<sup>45</sup> Algerian media attributed the first attack to Jund al-Khalifah in Algeria (JKA), an al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) splinter group that pledged allegiance to ISIS in September 2014 and likely constitutes the primary membership of Wilayat al-Jaza'ir. This claim, as well as reports of a JKA cell dismantled on March 22, indicates that remnants of the organization may still be active despite the Algerian government's December 2014 counterterrorism offensive.<sup>46</sup> Under the umbrella of Wilayat al-Jaza'ir, ISIS also retains historic networks in the country that are likely connected to pro-ISIS elements in Tunisia.

#### ISIS'S NETWORKED REGIONAL PRESENCE

**Tunisia.** The suicide gunmen attack on the Bardo Museum in Tunis on March 18, claimed by ISIS, demonstrates how the confluence of ISIS and al-Qaeda elements in North Africa may lead to emergent threats in the region. While both groups recruit heavily from Tunisia, the al-Qaeda affiliated Uqba Ibn Nafaa Brigade is the country's strongest operational extremist group. However, the Bardo attack diverged from Uqba's usual pattern of attacking security forces near its mountainous stronghold in western Tunisia, indicating that ISIS-linked elements likely played some role in the operation. Members of ISIS's network likely intend to gain a following by launching more spectacular and lethal attacks in Tunisia. This assessment was strengthened on March 20 when Tunisian authorities intercepted an ISIS cell that planned to detonate VBIEDs in multiple cities across the country.<sup>47</sup> ISIS and al-Qaeda's differing target types in Tunisia suggest that the groups' efforts may increase the total threat spectrum within Tunisia rather than cancel each other out.

**Morocco.** Moroccan authorities arrested thirteen individuals linked to ISIS in nine cities across Morocco on March 22. Officials claimed that the individuals constituted a group that was "in permanent contact" with ISIS's leadership, received

foreign funding, and had named itself “The Islamic State in the Western Maghreb.”<sup>48</sup> The cell had reportedly smuggled in weapons from the Spanish territories of Ceuta and Melilla and was planning a series of assassinations targeting Moroccan military and political figures. Moroccan authorities also arrested five members of an ISIS-linked operational cell in Nador on April 13.<sup>49</sup> The group worked with an individual who was planning an attack in the Netherlands, highlighting Morocco’s location as a pathway connecting Europe and North Africa. ISIS is likely expanding upon its existing recruitment networks in Morocco to support cells that seek to undermine stable states in North Africa and launch attacks in the Far Abroad.

**Boko Haram and al Qaeda.** Boko Haram’s leader Abu Bakr Shekau pledged allegiance to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi on March 7, confirming rumors of growing contact between the organizations. ISIS’s leadership celebrated the pledge in a speech released on March 12, but chose not to establish a wilayat in Nigeria immediately. ISIS has a standardized wilayat creation process which was detailed in a February 12, 2015 publication. Prospective affiliates must document their allegiance, unite under a collectively chosen leader, and present a military and governance strategy to ISIS for approval in order to be officially recognized as a wilayat.<sup>50</sup> ISIS does not permit anyone to announce a wilayat or present themselves as representatives of ISIS until this process concludes. ISIS thus requires internal unity and strategic cooperation from its wilayats. ISIS’s choice to delay a declaration of a wilayat in Nigeria suggests that the operational relationship between Boko Haram and ISIS might be limited. More formal relations may have formed in subsequent weeks, as indicated by official ISIS publications on March 31 and April 23 that referred to a “Wilayat Gharb Afriqiya (West Africa).”<sup>51</sup> These mentions suggest, but do not confirm, that ISIS’s leaders have officially designated a wilayat in Nigeria. In the meanwhile, ISIS has used Boko Haram’s pledge as an



Members of “Wilayat Gharb Afriqiya” in April 2015.<sup>7</sup>

opportunity to announce ISIS’s intent to “rule” Africa, a choice that increases the stakes for ISIS’s strategic competition with al-Qaeda. ISIS may attempt to coopt African extremist networks that have historically fallen within AQ’s orbit. For example, an unconfirmed report from March 23 indicated that some AQIM-linked groups may act to support ISIS.<sup>52</sup> Al-Qaeda does not seem to have mounted any coordinated response to ISIS’s efforts, indicating that AQ may not yet consider ISIS a real threat in the region or, alternatively, that AQ is choosing to emphasize different priorities while avoiding confrontation.

**Caucasus.** It is not clear whether ISIS’s leaders plan to establish a wilayat in the Caucasus in the near or medium term. Several regional Islamic Emirate of the Caucasus (IEC) commanders defected to ISIS in late 2014 and early 2015.<sup>53</sup> Additionally, the Caucasus exists in territory previously held by Arab rulers and is home to many of ISIS’s foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria. ISIS may choose to redirect elements of its foreign fighter contingent to return and ignite broader conflict in the Caucasus, replicating ISIS’s model of establishing wilayats in Libya. Alternatively, ISIS’s leadership may decide to phase the declaration of a Wilayat Qawqaz [Caucasus] until after ISIS’s Syria campaigns have succeeded or culminated. ISIS-linked activity in the Caucasus over March and April 2015 supports the latter explanation. ISIS seems focused on recruiting from the Caucasus, not on entering domestic conflict in the area.<sup>54</sup> An opportunity for such an entrée may still present itself, especially given the assassination of IEC leader Ali Abu Muhammad al-Dagestani by Russian Special Forces on April 19.<sup>55</sup> ISIS-supportive elements in the region may choose to unite and form a new attack plan targeting the Caucasus region or Russian urban centers such as Moscow and St. Petersburg.

## THE FAR ABROAD RING

*The threat of attacks from members of ISIS’s network strengthened in the months following the January 2015 Paris attacks as existing jihadist recruitment cells established attack elements, in some cases in coordination with returned foreign fighters from Syria. These small cells have the capability to launch larger, more sophisticated attacks than individuals acting alone. However, they are also more likely to be detected and halted by law enforcement. Southeast Asia in particular emerged over March and April as a location with a confluence of recruitment and attack cells. Meanwhile, individuals inspired by ISIS continue to attempt attacks in the U.S., Europe, Asia and the cyber domain. Over March and April, attackers both linked to and inspired by ISIS demonstrated responsiveness to centrally announced priorities. ISIS explicitly encourages attacks in the Far Abroad in order to provoke Western governments and societies into targeting and alienating Muslim communities. ISIS hopes that this polarization will reinforce its narrative of a global struggle and drive Muslims towards ISIS.*



**Individual actors.** American citizens Elton Simpson and Nadir Soofi shot and injured a police officer outside of the Curtis Culwell Center in Garland, Texas, during a contest to draw the Prophet Muhammad held on May 4.<sup>56</sup> The men reportedly supported ISIS and were subsequently acknowledged by ISIS as “soldiers of the caliphate” in an official statement.<sup>57</sup> Simpson and Soofi’s attack is the first ISIS-inspired attack in the U.S. or Europe since Omar el-Hussein killed two individuals in Copenhagen on February 16. The rarity of successful attacks is the result of persistent counterterrorism operations to identify and detain ISIS recruiters, radicalized foreign fighters, and aspirational domestic attackers. North American authorities halted significant ISIS-related attack plots targeting government and military targets on March 9, March 26, April 2, and April 10.<sup>58</sup> Some of the detained individuals were linked to the U.S. military, highlighting the particular threat posed by Western military members who can transfer their expertise to ISIS or gain access to sensitive sites in the homeland. Western law enforcement agencies continue to aggressively pursue investigations into homegrown extremism, with multiple cases open in each of the U.S.’s fifty states as of March 25.<sup>59</sup>



*Tweets allegedly from Elton Simpson, posted before the May 4 attack in Garland, Texas. The user pledged allegiance to ISIS and called for supporters to follow Junaid Hussain, also known as Abu Hussain al-Britani, a British hacker currently fighting with ISIS in Syria.<sup>8</sup>*

**Attack cells.** Members of ISIS’s network in the Far Abroad began to plan domestic attacks in early 2015, potentially posing a higher threat than the previous trend of lone wolf attacks. Authorities raided ISIS-linked cells in Malaysia on March 29, April 5, and April 26; in Spain on April 8; in Morocco on April 13; and in Australia on April 18.<sup>60</sup> Many of the groups originally conducted recruitment for ISIS before subsequently planning attacks, in some cases with the help of returned foreign fighters. The cells were often in contact with members of ISIS inside Iraq and Syria, but it is unclear whether attacks in the Far Abroad are directed by ISIS or

simply a behavior outwardly encouraged by ISIS’s leadership through its public statements and social media campaigns. Increased indications of direction from ISIS’s leadership would elucidate how ISIS prioritizes its resources, particularly its manpower, between the Interior, Near Abroad and Far Abroad campaigns. This question is particularly relevant for the Caucasus, North Africa and Southeast Asia, which all contain relatively high concentrations of individuals who may be willing to either emigrate or launch domestic attacks.

**Polarization.** ISIS has explicitly stated its intent to create an atmosphere of fear and hatred in the Far Abroad via constant attacks in order to incite state and popular pushback against Muslim populations. ISIS’s intention seems to be to mobilize Muslims in the Far Abroad on ISIS’s behalf. ISIS’s campaign to polarize the Far Abroad manifested in different ways across Europe, Australia, and Central Asia over March and April 2015. Within Europe and Australia, far-right parties and grassroots organizations reacted strongly to the jihadist attacks of early 2015. Social groups such as “Reclaim Australia” and the “Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the Occident” (PEGIDA) held large rallies protesting the alleged negative effects of Muslim immigration on April 4 and 13.<sup>61</sup> Both demonstrations prompted counter-protests, some of which turned violent. European conservative parties in Spain, Austria, and Italy advocated or adopted a range of “counter extremism” and “cultural preservation” measures over the spring of 2015, including legislation to limit zoning permits for kebab shops, to introduce a state-regulated brand of Islam, and to prevent the construction of mosques.<sup>62</sup> An arsonist attack against a German mosque on April 15 and the arrest of a German group seeking to attack mosques on May 6, while likely isolated incidents, serve as a reflection of the growing polarization that ISIS seeks to cause in the West.<sup>63</sup> Countering the polarization objective of ISIS’s global strategy will be especially difficult because it manifests in individually minor events which shape powerful social trends in the aggregate. The problem is exacerbated by the current focus of Western states on internal security and order in response to frequent jihadist attacks.

**Cyber.** Pro-ISIS cyber groups demonstrated a new capability on April 9 through the hacking of the television broadcasting, website and social media accounts of a major French television network.<sup>64</sup> The attack likely required a high degree of coordination over several weeks, indicating that groups such as Cyber Caliphate may have command-and-control elements. Inspired cyber groups do not need to be directly linked to ISIS’s leadership in order to aid the organization’s Far Abroad goals. The evolution of the ISIS-inspired cyber

threat beyond simple website defacement indicates that these groups may be increasing their internal organization in order to launch more sophisticated attacks.



Content posted on TV5 Monde’s website during the April 9 cyberattack. The perpetrators halted transmission of 11 channels for three hours.<sup>9</sup>

**FORECAST:** In the Interior ring, the organization will likely maintain campaigns in southeastern Hama Province and southeastern Damascus as primary expansion efforts as the anti-ISIS coalition continues to pressure ISIS in Iraq. As shown in its recent propaganda, ISIS will likely promote its own perceived advantages over al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) and other Syrian rebel groups as a more capable governing body and a more brutal opponent to the Syrian regime. This messaging campaign may manifest in heightened targeting of regime installations. ISIS’s efforts at rebel co-optation will be constrained by the current momentum and popularity of JN. JN operates throughout the Syrian central corridor and may act to counter ISIS’s outreach attempts.

ISIS will continue to pursue regional resiliency through its strongest Near Abroad affiliates in Libya and the Sinai. Given ISIS’s efforts to unify non-ISIS militant groups in other wilayats, ISIS’s wilayats in Afghanistan and Yemen may make a greater effort to unite disparate splinter groups to conduct coordinated attacks. These affiliates will likely plan brutal, sectarian attacks as a means of distinguishing themselves in a competitive jihadist landscape. ISIS will likely try to take advantage of Arab states’ focus on Iran and the conflict in Yemen in order to bolster its sectarian appeals and foment unrest in stable states. ISIS may increasingly push its networked cells in Saudi Arabia to become operational. Even failed terror campaigns aid ISIS’s goal of raising regional tensions and demonstrating its reach.

If its core operations in Iraq or Syria are threatened, then

ISIS will likely accelerate its regional activity in order to project an image of success and growth. In particular, ISIS may take advantage of untapped support in Nigeria and the Caucasus, where jihadist groups have pledged to ISIS but have not yet been fully integrated into ISIS’s Near Abroad operations. Strengthened relationships would likely lead to the proliferation of ISIS-style tactics, techniques and procedures in those areas. Given numerous disrupted attack attempts in Europe, ISIS may direct and encourage attacks in Southeast Asia with new vigor. These operations would likely follow the same pattern as the European attack cells, with networked foreign fighters uniting with small ISIS-supportive militant groups in Malaysia, the Philippines, and Indonesia to plan attacks. This new attack vector may be supplemented by the work of pro-ISIS hacking collectives, which exhibited an ability and willingness to coordinate in the French television attack. The successful incident likely encouraged the hacking group and further coordination may enable it to launch more sophisticated and disruptive cyberattacks.

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