

# Daesh's reappearance puts fragility of Iraq and Syria in focus

Sat, 2020-06-13 21:56

IRBIL, Iraqi Kurdistan: An uptick in attacks in Iraq by suspected Daesh militants since the beginning of this year is stoking fears that the militant outfit is regrouping and could again threaten the country's stability.

On May 28, Daesh spokesperson Abu Hamza Al-Qurayshi released a recording on the messaging app Telegram, saying that the terror group's fighters will "start to increase their attacks against the Crusaders since the US has withdrawn from Iraq."

"Greater punishment against Crusaders is coming once the caliphate achieves the victory and is established once again," Al-Qurayshi said, according to the Iraqi Kurdish news agency Rudaw.

Earlier in May, hundreds of acres of wheat and barley cropland in Iraq's disputed Kirkuk province went in flames.



Daesh claimed responsibility for some of the fires. Around the same time, it released a propaganda video vowing to free fellow members from Iraqi jails.

Since 2017, Daesh has taken advantage of security gaps in disputed regions between Iraq and the autonomous Kurdistan region, terrorizing and extorting locals, and mounting hit-and-run attacks against Iraqi and Kurdish forces.

Citing the US Central Command, the most recent Pentagon Inspector General report, which covers the period from Jan. 1 to March 31, warned that Daesh is "regrouping and reforming" in the mountains of Makhmur in northern Iraq,

which is inside the disputed territories between Iraq and the Kurdistan region.



Since 2017, Daesh has taken advantage of security gaps in disputed regions between Iraq and the autonomous Kurdistan region, terrorizing and extorting locals, and mounting hit-and-run attacks against Iraqi and Kurdish forces.  
(Alamy)

According to the report, the US also expects Daesh “to seek to re-establish governance in northern and western areas of Iraq.”

On May 17 the Iraqi military launched an operation to force Daesh out of its sanctuaries. However, if past efforts of this kind are any indication, it is unlikely to inflict long-lasting damage on the group.

Since 2017, Daesh has reverted to the role of lethal non-state actor – as it was before it conquered one-third of northern Iraq in June 2014 and declared the establishment of a “caliphate.”

“Daesh has posed a threat to Iraq, in its various forms, since 2003 and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future,” Michael Knights, a military and security affairs specialist at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, told Arab News.

“It is now part of the Iraqi landscape, like a resilient weed or virus.”



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(Alamy)

Knights and Alex Almeida, who monitor Daesh’s activities, have detected a 13 percent increase in the militants’ attacks in Iraq this year over the previous year – at least 566 in the first three months of 2020, compared with 1,669 during the entire 2019.

According to Knights, Daesh is again using strategies that worked in the past, including jailbreaks and extorting farmers by threatening to burn their crops.

“In terms of attack metrics, Daesh is back to 2012 levels, but is still only a third of 2013 levels, and it will take more than a year of growth at the current rate to reach 2013 levels of attacks,” he said.

“Also, the insurgency is different at a qualitative level. Today’s Daesh is not really present in the cities, and so far they have turned away from mass-casualty attacks on civilians.”

Nevertheless, the group still poses a threat after transferring its strength from Syria back into Iraq over the past 12-18 months.

# Opinion

This section contains relevant reference points, placed in (Opinion field)

"The movement is still very weak compared with its old self in 2017 or 2013, but it is recovering slowly," Knights said.

He said that if Iraqi and Kurdish forces fail to cooperate quickly, then Daesh "will soon be able to control small villages and rural areas in daylight, and parts of towns at night."

However, Thomas Abi-Hanna, a global security analyst with US-based geopolitical intelligence platform Stratfor, believes Daesh is a long way from being able to capture and control large swathes of territory as it did in 2014.

The group's activities today more closely resemble those of the 2011-12 period.

"Iraq's latest offensive against Daesh is unlikely to have a long-term impact on the group's trajectory," Abi-Hanna told Arab News.



Since 2017, Daesh has taken advantage of security gaps in disputed regions between Iraq and the autonomous Kurdistan region, terrorizing and extorting locals, and mounting hit-and-run attacks against Iraqi and Kurdish forces.  
(Alamy)

"Iraqi security forces are riddled with weaknesses and are unable to firmly hold and control the rural areas where Daesh operates," he said.

As a result, Daesh is "well positioned" to threaten Iraq and Syria for years to come since it still has thousands of fighters and hundreds of millions of dollars at its disposal.

"While Daesh is not on the verge of being able to seize territory, attacks and other operations the group has launched will threaten civilians and security forces, damage crops and infrastructure, hurt Iraq's already ailing economy and undermine stability in the country," Abi-Hanna said.

He believes the surge in attacks is a sign of Daesh's renewed strength, especially in light of partial coalition military drawdowns from areas where the group is active, Iraq's internal political crises and the coronavirus pandemic that is consuming most of Baghdad's attention.

"The attacks are becoming increasingly sophisticated. The group has recently been conducting night-time raids, multi-pronged coordinated assaults and suicide bombings, marking a notable uptick from the typical drive-by shootings, mortar attacks and roadside improvised explosive devices (IEDs) it had done in previous months," Abi-Hanna said.



Since 2017, Daesh has taken advantage of security gaps in disputed regions between Iraq and the autonomous Kurdistan region, terrorizing and extorting locals, and mounting hit-and-run attacks against Iraqi and Kurdish forces.  
(Alamy)

Joel Wing, author of the “Musings on Iraq” blog, said that Daesh released a video in May announcing that it was launching a new campaign in Iraq. This followed statements in March by the group vowing to exploit the pandemic.

“The uptick in attacks actually began in April and continued into May, marking the first time Daesh has had two months of increased operations since January-February, 2019,” Wing told Arab News.

“The second week of May had the most incidents since the third week of October 2018, showing renewed strength,” he said.

Since Haider Al-Abadi, the-then prime minister, declared victory over Daesh in Iraq in December 2017, five months after government forces ejected its fighters from Mosul, the group has “focused on preserving its leadership and rebuilding its cadres.”

As a result, Iraq suffered the lowest number of attacks since the Iraq War that began in 2003.



Since 2017, Daesh has taken advantage of security gaps in disputed regions between Iraq and the autonomous Kurdistan region, terrorizing and extorting locals, and mounting hit-and-run attacks against Iraqi and Kurdish forces.  
(Alamy)

Now, however, Daesh “appears to be flexing some of its new muscle,” Wing said.



He said that the present Daesh campaign differs from previous manifestations since the group is now “a completely rural phenomenon.”

“It has virtually no cells operating in cities carrying out attacks,” he said. “There is not a continuous wave of car bombs that it once carried out or even suicide bombers.”

Wing said that Daesh’s present campaign appears to be aimed at “establishing military control over the countryside, driving people out of rural villages via threats, attacks, burning crops and so forth, so that they might be converted into bases and training camps, and threatening others to pay taxes.”

It is yet to be seen if Daesh can sustain this campaign or whether attacks will decline in a few weeks.

“Either way it will be a sign of how much the group has been able to rebuild so far,” Wing said.

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## [Twitter axes pro-government propaganda accounts in Turkey](#)

Author:

Sat, 2020-06-13 01:13

ANKARA: Twitter has removed more than 7,000 "fake and compromised" accounts associated with Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party's (AKP).

The operation was carried out on Thursday night and the axed accounts were linked to the AKP's youth branch.

"Based on our analysis of the network's technical indicators and account behaviors, the collection of fake and compromised accounts was being used to amplify political narratives favorable to the AKP, and demonstrated strong support for President Recep Tayyip Erdogan," Twitter said.

It revealed that the main tools used by the Turkish accounts were “a network of echo chambers used to push propaganda, spread misinformation or attack critics of the government.”

The Turkish presidency released a strongly worded statement condemning Twitter’s move, saying that the allegations were baseless and politically motivated.

“It is a historical scandal that a US-based company tried to market ideological approaches under the guise of scientific data in order to legitimize them,” the presidency said, adding that such moves were aimed at shaping Turkish domestic politics from abroad.

Coordinated activities of Turkish accounts – bots and compromised accounts with fake personalities, similar usernames and pro-government retweet rings – have been a hot topic in the country’s polarized political climate.

The coordinated accounts sometimes carried out large-scale hacking activities toward dissident voices and organizations, while also trying to consolidate domestic support for the country’s cross-border interventions, especially in Syria and Libya.

The Twitter operation also covered 1,152 Russian accounts and 23,750 Chinese accounts. According to Twitter rules, every account and piece of content associated with these accounts has been permanently removed.

Dr. Sarphan Uzunoglu, from Istanbul’s Kadir Has University and editor in chief of NewsLabTurkey.org, said the Twitter operation was one of the boldest moves from a social network platform against government-linked or government-sponsored disinformation networks.

Based on the information shared by Twitter with the Stanford Internet Observatory, the network comprising about 37 million tweets promoted the AKP and criticized opposition parties, especially the pro-Kurdish Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP) and the main opposition Republican People’s Party (CHP).

“The takedown included centrally managed compromised accounts that were used for AKP cheerleading,” the Twitter report said.

Uzunoglu said the decision to remove the accounts must have been a challenging one for Twitter because its activities in these countries may not be easy in the future.

## **NUMBER**

**7,340 Turkish accounts closed by Twitter for making government propaganda.**

“As will be remembered, Turkey’s government tried to pass a law that aimed to force social networks to open branches in Turkey or assign local representatives recently,” he told Arab News. “The government stepped back. However, things can get complicated after this move by Twitter as well.” Uzunoglu added that Turkish municipality resources had been used to finance pro-government astroturfing activities, organized attempts to create a positive but false impression of support for a policy, an organization or a person. There had been a drop in astroturfing after opposition wins in local elections, he said.

“However the ruling party is still known to have their media operations

running their astroturfing operations under different organizations linked to the government or the ruling party itself.”

But he did not expect there to be serious damage to the ruling party’s operation in the digital media landscape because Turkish state propaganda continued to be carried out, especially on WhatsApp or Telegram. Nor did the Twitter operation take into account pro-government supporters, who used the social media platform to push AKP propaganda.

“During the Gezi Park protests of 2013 some Turkish academics revealed pro-government networks via simple network analysis. They even named the pioneers of this network and explained how this activity worked. But, this latest operation has not touched the accounts of these people, many of whom are still actively leading pro-government propaganda because this contradicts Twitter’s free expression agenda. At the same time, however, it makes the fight against disinformation and state-sponsored propaganda, the main purpose of Twitter, less functional than it should be.”

Uzunoglu said that Twitter’s operation against Turkish accounts confirmed what Turkish citizens already knew.

“There is a network that uses state resources to make propaganda in the new media in Turkey. So, actually, we had an opportunity to talk about the secret that everyone knows. No judicial institution will be able to investigate this issue. State authorities will also not be transparent in this regard.”

Erkan Saka, a communications professor at Istanbul Bilgi University, said troll discourse was mostly produced by AKP-related columnists and the country’s politicians and bureaucrats.

“Bots help in disseminating the discourse but they are not particularly efficient,” he told Arab News. “In that sense, I find this move better than nothing, but too late and not very effective.”



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## Conflict, division blight virus response in Libya

Author:

Sat, 2020-06-13 01:07

TRIPOLI: War and division are weakening Libya's fight against the novel coronavirus, with the government struggling to deal with an outbreak deep in the desert south.

The oil-rich North African nation has been mired in chaos since a NATO-backed uprising toppled and killed longtime ruler Muammar Qaddafi in 2011.

The Government of National Accord (GNA) controls the west, including the capital Tripoli, while military strongman Khalifa Haftar controls the east and some of the far-flung oases and oilfields that dot the south.

With Libya already largely cut off from the rest of the world by conflict when it reported its first coronavirus case at the end of March, the situation appeared relatively contained.

Cases of infection were "very low" compared to neighboring countries, according to Badreddine Al-Najjar, head of Libya's center for disease control.

"We even had weeks without new infections," he said.

The rival administrations imposed curfews and closed borders, schools, businesses and mosques, in a bid to prevent often obsolete and worn-down health facilities from becoming overwhelmed.

But health measures "are difficult to apply due to the political and security context," Najjar said.

The situation has changed rapidly in recent weeks, with dozens of cases appearing in the south's largest oasis city Sabha.

The GNA has reported 393 coronavirus infections and five deaths nationwide, around half of them in and around Sabha.

But that only accounts for cases that the Tripoli-based disease control center has been able to confirm.

Najjar said local authorities in Sabha, which is under the control of pro-Haftar forces, were not equipped to deal with an outbreak, and initially refused the GNA's help.

### **SPEEDREAD**

**The rival administrations imposed curfews and closed borders, schools,**

**businesses and mosques, in a bid to prevent often obsolete and worn-down health facilities from becoming overwhelmed.**

"It was difficult to open up isolation rooms ... and the equipment didn't arrive until after a large number of infections among close contacts," Najjar said.

"The residents did not cooperate and did not respect the preventive measures," Najjar said. "They acted like nothing was wrong."

Ibrahim Al-Zouay, head of the committee to fight the pandemic in Sabha, acknowledged that local authorities had been overwhelmed by the task.

"We were unable to isolate 'patient zero' because the number of cases grew," he told AFP.

"The support and rapid intervention teams stuck to testing and monitoring the family and friends" of confirmed cases, he added.

Divisions and accusations of mismanagement have also marred a plan to repatriate more than 15,000 Libyans stuck abroad.

Libya lacks adequate infrastructure for quarantining arrivals on its soil, and the security situation prompted fears that armed individuals could release people from isolation by force.

So authorities decided to quarantine returnees before their repatriation instead, a decision critics say has led to new infections among those who came into contact with them.

"Each flight carrying returnees was like bringing back booby traps," said Mahmoud Abdeldayem, who works in the civil registry in Tripoli.

"How come there were cases?" he asked, questioning the quarantine and testing arrangements prior to departure.

"There must be a problem in implementing the program."

More than 8,000 people had been brought home before repatriations were suspended last week as fighting in the country intensified.

Mahmoud Khalfallah, a former Health Ministry adviser, said Libya's political divisions had marred its handling of the pandemic.

"Health is above all a service. Involving it in political struggles is shameful and unacceptable," he said.

"It's Libyans who will pay the price."



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## [Politically motivated currency rumors blamed for Lebanon unrest](#)

Sat, 2020-06-13 01:01

BEIRUT: Lebanon's leaders on Friday focused on curbing the sudden rise in the dollar exchange rate following a stormy night of protest into the early hours of Friday morning around the country.

The Cabinet meeting chaired by President Michel Aoun agreed to an interim adjustment to address the crisis.

From Monday, the Banque du Liban will pump \$5-9 million per day to category-A money-changers so that they can gradually reduce the dollar exchange rate from 3,850 to 3,200 Lebanese pounds, provided a security crackdown on black-market money-changers is implemented in parallel.

Before the session Prime Minister Hassan Diab met the money-changing syndicate, a delegation from the Association of Banks and the head of the security services.

Sources close to the parties at the meeting said that "news about the dollar

exchange rate reaching 7,000 Lebanese pounds on Thursday night was just a rumor," stressing that "the dollar exchange rate did not exceed 5,300 Lebanese pounds, and that the purpose of this rumor was political."

"This became clear when the protesters demanded one thing only in front of the media, which was the dismissal of the central bank's governor, Riad Salameh, and they attacked the bank's branches," the sources added.

"The agreed mechanism will allow category-A money-changers to get dollars from the central bank. The number of these money-changers does not exceed 50, and the 250 category-B money-changers will not be able to purchase these dollars from the central bank."

The Banque du Liban defines the function of category-B money-changers as "buying and selling foreign currencies against any other foreign currency or against the Lebanese currency, buying and selling metal coins and gold bars below 1,000 grams, and selling traveler's checks, provided the value of the checks still to be collected does not exceed \$10,000 or its equivalent in other currencies at any time."

The sources told Arab News: "There are ministers who objected to the proposal that requires businessmen to deal with category-A money-changers and present invoices from these money-changers to the banks they deal with in order to make transfers in dollars so as to prevent businessmen from dealing with the black market."

Some ministers considered this proposal impractical because there are businessmen who keep their money in their homes and use it in their transfers, so they cannot provide invoices to prove the money's source. Discussions during the Cabinet meeting focused on tackling the financial chaos by implementing strict security measures and reducing the media that accompanied the protests.

After his meeting with President Aoun and Prime Minister Diab at Baabda Palace, Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri was keen to declare that "it was agreed to reduce the value of the dollar against the Lebanese currency, starting today, to less than 4,000 Lebanese pounds until it reaches 3,200 Lebanese pounds. It was also agreed to communicate with the International Monetary Fund using one language under the auspices of the parliament."

When asked whether the dismissal of the central bank's governor, Riad Salameh, was discussed during the meeting, Berri replied: "We need everyone aboard today, we do not need to dispense with them."

On Friday, money-changers refrained from making dollar purchases or sales, pending the outcome of the meetings.

Aoun wondered during Cabinet's session if the aim of the rise in the dollar exchange rate on Thursday was to bring people to the streets and cause the disturbances.

He also wondered if this was a political or a banking game or something else. He said that three parties were accountable for the financial chaos: The government, the Banque du Liban, and the banks, highlighting that "the losses should be borne by these parties, not the depositors."

Prime Minister Diab said: "The country cannot stand further turbulence, and strict measures are required to stop any person or entity that resorts to this method."

The security services announced the arrest of five money-changers in Beirut, Chtaura, and Tripoli as well as an Ethiopian in the locality of Dora who were involved in illegal money-changing.



Former Prime Minister Saad Hariri described intimidation calling for the dismissal of Riad Salameh as “an economic, political and constitutional madness that will slaughter the Lebanese economy.”

He wrote: “They are searching for a way out to save themselves from the evil of their own decisions and actions, not for a solution to save the economy.” “This is a malicious and vengeful mentality that is looking for a scapegoat to absorb the people’s righteous anger and cries of hunger from all regions,” he said.

Samir Geagea, head of the Lebanese Forces Party, said on Twitter: “As long as Hezbollah, the head of the Free Patriotic Movement, Gibran Bassil, and their supporters are in power, prepare for further deterioration every day.”

Former Minister Mohamed Choucair said: “The rod, threats, and the imprisonment of money-changers cannot reduce the dollar exchange rate. Even the decision to pump dollars into the market will not produce anything and will only drain the foreign exchange reserves. Achieving this requires two main factors: the citizens’ confidence in the government and its performance and securing liquidity in dollars from abroad. Everything else is useless.” Activists in the civil movement are preparing for a huge demonstration on Saturday. It will start outside the Ministry of Finance in Beirut and go to Riad Al-Solh Square.

It is not known whether supporters of the parties in power will join the protesters opposing the government at the weekend.

Amal and Hezbollah supporters joined the protests on Thursday night, and demonstrations were seen in the southern suburbs of Beirut for the first time since the uprising started in October.

However, their only demand was to hold the governor of the Banque du Liban accountable.

This demand was raised in the Cabinet weeks ago by the Free Patriotic Movement and was later passed over in order to prevent any financial tensions.



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## [Palestinians welcome opposition to Israel's West Bank annexation plan](#)

Author:

Sat, 2020-06-13 00:55

AMMAN: Palestinian officials have welcomed the international community's opposition to Israel's West Bank annexation plans, but want the pressure to be permanent.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has announced that he will annex parts of the West Bank, including the strategic Jordan Valley and dozens of Jewish settlements, in line with President Donald Trump's Middle East peace plan. Netanyahu has signaled he will begin moving forward with annexation next month.

The Trump plan envisions the creation of a Palestinian state, but on reduced territory and without meeting the key Palestinian demand of having its capital in east Jerusalem.

Hanan Ashrawi, a member of the PLO's executive committee, said there needed to be a complete stop to the annexation policy.

"What we need is nullifying the policy of annexation and undoing earlier annexation both de facto and de jure," he told Arab News.

Ashrawi said that Palestinians accepted the compromise of the two-state solution, but that the international community had yet to apply any serious pressure in that direction.

"Recognizing the Palestinian state is neither punishment for Israel or reward for Palestinians. They should have recognized Palestinians on the '67 borders long ago because that is the fulfillment of international law, the right of self-determination and their own people's decisions in their respective parliaments."

The PLO official argued that it had taken Palestinians a lot of effort and persuasion to reach this position, and warned that Israel might expect rewards if it walked back on its actions.

**The question is not the size or location of the annexation but the very concept of annexation of someone else's land, which is contrary to international law and an affront to the will of the international community which Israel so far has treated with utter contempt.**

**Hanan Ashrawi**, Member of PLO executive committee

"There is another problem looming now, that Israel might reduce its annexation to settlement clusters or decide to postpone its actions and will want the world to reward them. The question is not the size or location of the annexation but the very concept of annexation of someone else's land, which is contrary to international law and an affront to the will of the international community which Israel so far has treated with utter contempt."

The escalation of opposition to Israel's annexation plans have come from different quarters.

Germany, which sent its foreign minister to meet with leaders of Israel, Jordan and Palestine, has talked about the possibility of sanctions if the Israelis act unilaterally against international law.

The ambassador of the UAE to Washington, Yousef Al-Outaibi, wrote to the Israeli people in the Yediot Aharonot newspaper and recorded a video calling on them not to support annexation.

"For years, the UAE has been an unfailing supporter of Middle East peace," he said. "We have consistently and actively opposed violence on all sides: We designated Hezbollah a terrorist organization, condemned Hamas incitement and denounced Israeli provocations. I was one of three Arab ambassadors in the East Room of the White House when President Trump unveiled his Middle East peace proposal in January."

More recently Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan, said the annexation plans were a "dangerous escalation" that threatened the peace process, while the World Council of Churches called on the EU to impose sanctions if Israel violated international law and annexed Palestinian territory.

Senior Fatah leader Jibril Rajoub said that Palestinians would fight annexation on all fronts, but that their opposition would be done in a principled way.

"We are approaching a turning point and we need to put aside all our differences and work on all fronts," he told Arab News. "This must be a priority for all. We need to focus attention on stopping this grave violation of our rights. With all humility, we are ready to lead in a principled way. We want to apply the techniques of the popular struggle, to begin with protests and end with civil disobedience. We need to be unified, we want to change the reality and we want to live in our own state and we want the world to be with us."

Rajoub, a leader of the Palestinian intifada, said there would be no rush to any action that could affect the global consensus that was forming in support of an independent Palestinian state. "We lived both intifadas and we have been struggling to end the Israeli occupation," he added.

Some have said that it is possible that Netanyahu might opt to annex one or more of the settlements near the greenline that once separated Israel from the occupied West Bank.

Lawyer and human rights specialists Dalia Qumsieh told Arab News that Israel was expanding Highway Number 60, which connects West Jerusalem to the Gush Etzion settlement. It could be one of three settlements, in addition to Maaleh Adumim and Ariel, that Israel might annex as a first step starting July 1.



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Saudi foreign minister declares Israel's plans to annex West Bank a 'dangerous escalation' German FM warns Israel against West Bank annexation plans