



ISIS AFTER THE FALL OF MOSUL

October 2016



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SIMULATION BACKGROUND



The U.S. and its partners have just launched a coordinated offensive to dislodge ISIS from its strongest redoubt – Mosul, the second-largest city in Iraq. Up to 74,000 Iraqi soldiers, 40,000 Peshmerga troops and various Western support units are engaged in what could be the bloodiest battle of the entire anti-ISIS conflict.

Seized by ISIS in June 2014, Mosul has become an increasingly entrenched terrorist stronghold. Up to 9,000 militants are currently garrisoned inside the city, the population of which still numbers around one and a half million.

This presentation analyzes the implications for ISIS and the West should Mosul fall to coalition forces.



METHODOLOGY



In late July 2016, Wikistrat simulated the likely impact and follow-on consequences of the liberation of Mosul from ISIS. Analysts were tasked with identifying key potential outcomes, grouping them thematically before considering the effects of such developments on ISIS – and the possible risks for the U.S. and its allies regarding the likely ISIS response.

40 analysts from 18 countries and covering 12 fields of expertise (including military affairs, counterterrorism, the Middle East and energy security) took part in this exercise. This summary outlines the key findings of the simulation.



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ISIS TACTICS AND STRATEGY



- ISIS is likely to respond to the loss of Mosul by engaging in a prolonged and intensive campaign of asymmetrical terrorism throughout Iraq and Syria.
- ISIS is likely to take steps to mount additional attacks through its sleeper cells in the West and through its affiliates in order to demonstrate its continued effectiveness. The retaliatory activation of sleeper cells will form part of a campaign to instill fear and maintain confidence in the face of such a strategic loss.



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A wounded ISIS will lash out and instill fear and panic into the public in such a way that will justify its legitimacy both to current and potential members.

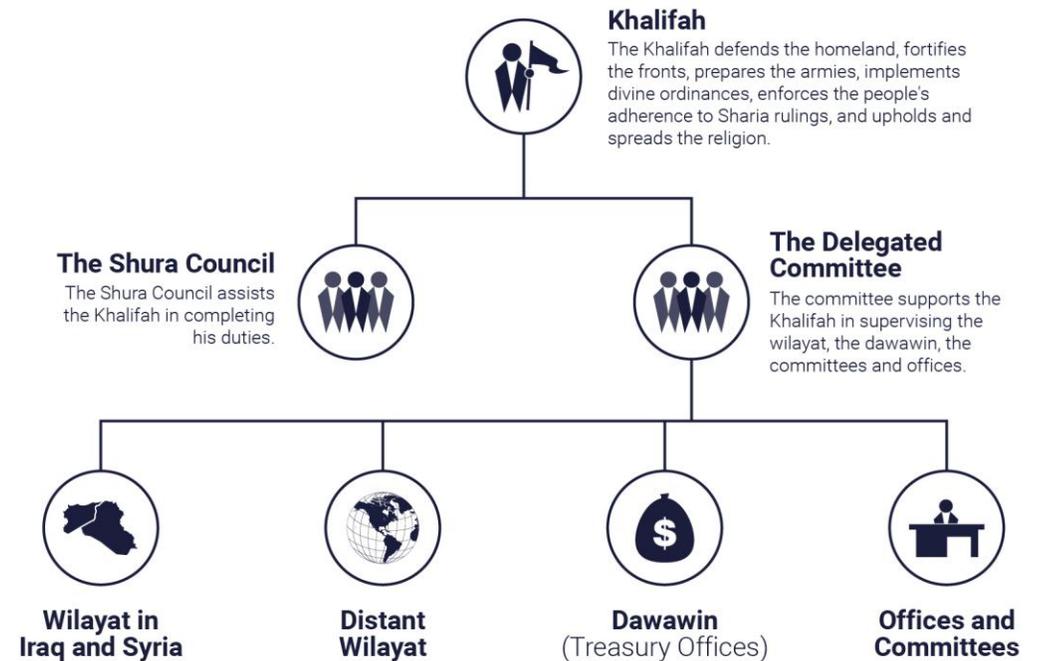
Klemen Kocjancic
Contributing Analyst, Wikistrat

ISIS ORGANIZATION



- Defeat in Mosul would have a major effect on ISIS revenue, given that most of its oil wealth comes from within Nineveh Governorate.
- Ejection from Mosul would lay bare national tensions within the organization. Foreign fighters (who are often paid more and placed in senior positions of command) would be likely to return to their countries of origin. This development would weaken ISIS's ability to mount defensive operations in future campaigns.
- At the same time, the departure of foreign fighters would elevate locally raised Sunni fighters who are more adept at exploiting local tribal practices, customs and courtesies. Though weakened as a whole, ISIS's cohesion would be strengthened, with the remaining forces proving more able to portray themselves as defenders of the local population.

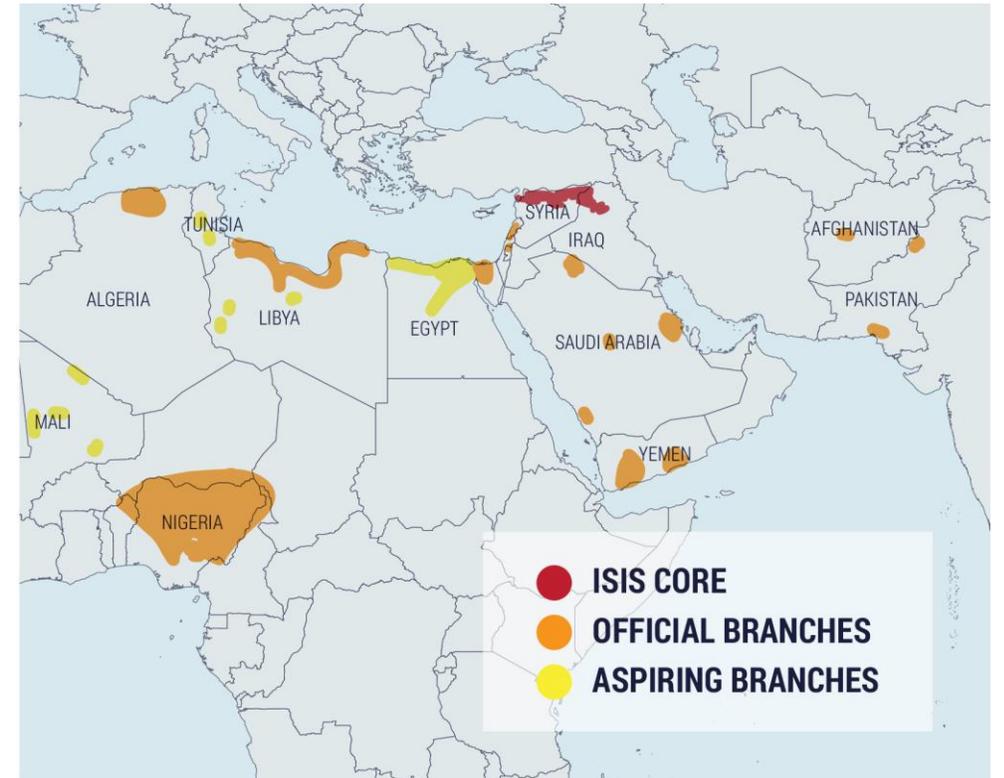
HOW ISIS DESCRIBES ITS GOVERNMENT STRUCTURE



ISIS'S LOCATION



- ISIS fighters will likely retreat to smaller strongholds such as Al-Qa'im and Raqqa in order to stage a secondary defense. Raqqa in particular offers a possible safe haven, as no ground force has a major incentive to seek its capture: It is too far removed from the focus of Kurdish forces or those loyal to the Assad regime, and Iraqi forces are highly unlikely to engage in "hot pursuit" across the Syrian border.
- ISIS fighters that are able to do so will refocus on Libya, which offers fertile territory for continued struggle. Despite recent setbacks in Sirte and other areas, ISIS enjoys a shadow presence in Libya, enabled by the country's political divisions and residual popularity of Islamist ideology.



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ISIS'S LOCATION



- In Iraq, Syria, Libya and elsewhere, ISIS fighters will likely shift away from the now-failed effort to seize and administer towns and cities. Such groups will likely move to a “shadow-government” approach, seeking to build an insurgent campaign.
- Despite recent losses – including the imminent fall of Sirte – ISIS will continue to maintain a hidden presence in many areas. As the country continues to suffer from devastating political divisions, and since the popularity of Islamist ideology has not yet diminished, Libya will prove fertile ground for bombings, assassinations, extortion and other acts of political violence.



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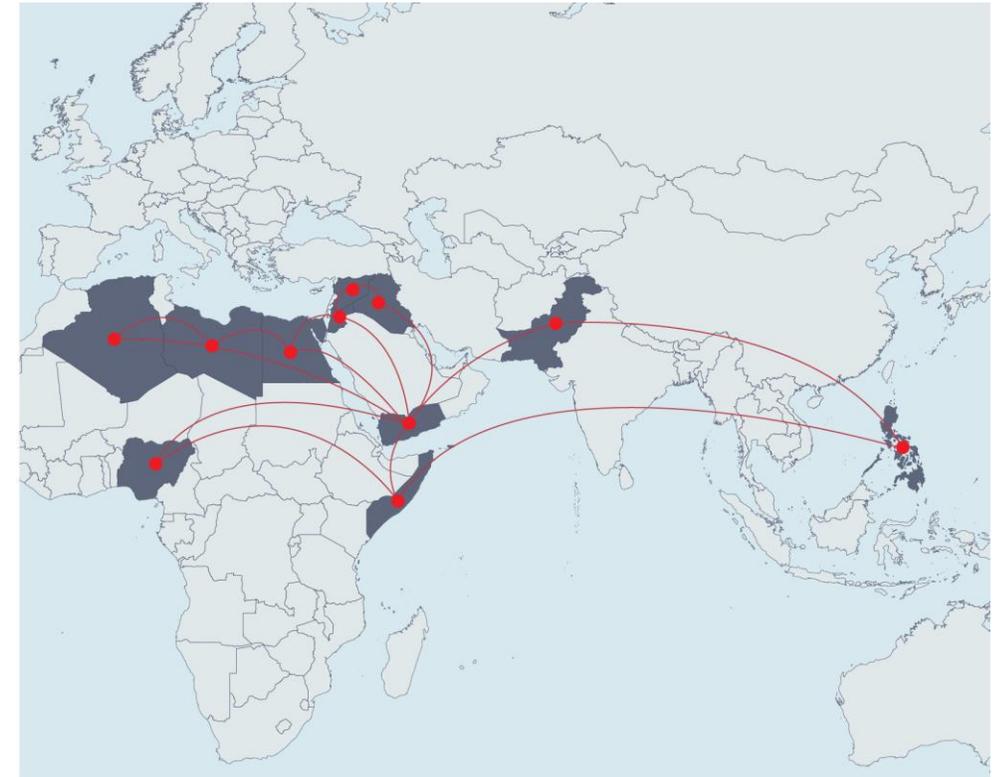
Raqqa, the “capital” of ISIS, will become the last redoubt of the organization and will be the site of its attempt to bleed the coalition dry.

Ben Mendales
Researcher, Wikistrat

ISIS RESPONSES



- ISIS's relations with other groups would be heavily impacted by the fall of Mosul, and could either strengthen or weaken depending upon Raqqa's willingness to play a reduced leadership role.
- Sunni Arabs may turn against ISIS in a new "awakening," seeking to throw off a repressive leadership dominated by foreign fighters. Alternatively, they may cleave more closely to ISIS, accepting the argument that greater cooperation is needed to prevent being overrun by Iraqi forces backed by the Shi'a-dominated PMF. This argument may ring true with local Sunni tribal forces.
- ISIS could succeed in calling upon the efforts of other jihadist and takfirist groups to ally to its defense by mounting terrorist attacks against those responsible for its defeat in Mosul. Alternatively, such groups could rescind their allegiance to ISIS, ending their affiliate status and leaving the group isolated.



ISIS MESSAGING EFFORTS



- ISIS will seek to maintain the impression that a triumph over its adversaries is inevitable, and will portray defeat in Mosul as a necessary setback on the road to victory.
- The destruction of large portions of Mosul and the civilian suffering prompted by displacement will be used for propaganda purposes. ISIS will also lean more heavily on success against Western targets for propaganda and recruitment.
- Videos and photos of abuse by Kurds or Shi'a militias will be used to undermine popular support for Mosul's liberators, and stoke resentment that may benefit a future counteroffensive.



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The message will be that this event represents a time of “testing and trial” for both the group and its supporters that must be endured in order to demonstrate their faithfulness.

Phillip Van Gaalen-Prentice
Researcher, Wikistrat

STRATEGIC TAKEAWAYS



- The defeat of ISIS in Mosul will not constitute the wholesale defeat of the organization. The group will attempt to fragment and decentralize, reinforcing strongholds in smaller towns and laying the basis for a counteroffensive via propaganda operations.
- ISIS's core following will likely shrink in size, but grow more cohesive and determined in nature. Military operations "post-Mosul" could prove harder to execute effectively, not easier.
- ISIS's near-term goals will change from capturing and administering territory to a defensive campaign aimed at preserving its own existence. Priority will be given to destroying the will of its adversaries through a concerted campaign of asymmetric terrorism.
- ISIS will seek to use terrorist attacks against Western targets via sleeper cells and lone wolves to maintain the support of its followers and to bolster its recruitment efforts.
- ISIS will place a heavy emphasis on maintaining its allies: Sunni Arabs and a wide range of international terrorist organizations.



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