

Don't Call it a Comeback: The Islamic State in an Age of Strategic Competition

Description

The deadly assault by four alleged ISIS-affiliated gunmen at a Moscow concert on March 22nd returned international attention to the threats of global terrorist organizations. Taking the lives of at least 137 civilians, the shooting marked Russia's [worst terrorist attack in decades](#). ISIS-K—the Islamic State-Khorasan—claimed responsibility. The same organization conducted the Kabul airport attack [that killed thirteen U.S. servicemembers](#) in 2021. A [2023 Office of the Director of National Intelligence report](#) said ISIS-K “almost certainly retains the intent to conduct operations in the West and will continue efforts to attack outside Afghanistan.”

Since its [declared](#) defeat in 2019, the Islamic State, which once [“consumed” the world’s attention \[like few, if any, international security threats\]](#), is frequently downplayed as a [low-level insurgency](#) while western strategic focus shifted toward [geopolitical competition](#). With the international spotlight shifted away, the Islamic State (IS) works resolutely to resurrect its former prominence. It retains its capability to conduct devastating strikes across multiple regions, regardless of geopolitical boundaries. As evidenced by [dozens of recent attacks across multiple continents](#), its ideology lives on. In recent years, IS [reactivated](#) its cells, [operated in detention camps](#) in northeast Syria for recruitment and indoctrination, carried out substantial [attacks](#) and [prison breakouts](#), and began a [particularly worrying](#) expansion in Africa. In 2023, for the eighth consecutive year, IS and its affiliates ranked as the deadliest terrorist group in the world by the [Global Terrorism Index](#).

It is essential to be cognizant of IS's strategic objectives and how they continue to manifest in the group's current actions in light of the ongoing security concerns posed by the remnants of the Caliphate and the U.S. transitioning its primary focus away from counterterrorism. Understanding this reality and its implication for the challenges emerging in global politics is essential for the United States to effectively address the shortcomings in its shifting security strategy approach, prevent the recurrence of past threats, and ensure a safer future.

The Islamic State's Quiet Global Resurgence

Despite the prevailing focus on near-peer threats, the extent and power of IS's ideological influence, the organization's resilience, and its members' unwavering dedication to its goals demonstrate the need for Western intelligence to not lose touch with the threat of terrorism. IS shows its

[determination](#) to revive its insurgencies, rebuild its forces, and, ultimately, regain territory. According to the [Washington Institute](#), IS has been responsible for 990 attacks over the past year, resulting in over 4,000 casualties. The group maintains a constant presence on the internet and social media platforms, demonstrating [sophisticated and prolific](#) use of information and communications technologies, in-line with the strategies that gave rise to the organization in its early days.

The Islamic State remains highly active in Syria and Iraq, with an estimated [5,000 to 7,000](#) members operating in their former strongholds. Syria, in particular, remains a vulnerable area where the terrorist group can thrive. IS fighters held by the Syrian Democratic Forces represent the [world's largest concentration of terrorists](#). Additionally, [tens of thousands](#) of family members of IS fighters live in overcrowded displaced persons camps. U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres described one of these camps, Al-Hol, as ["the worst camp that exists in today's world."](#) The camp's population is nearly [55,000](#), including Syrians, Iraqis, and third-country nationals. The deplorable conditions in detention camps have benefited recruitment, allowing the Islamic State to legitimize its war and indoctrinate and recruit new members. With most of the camp's population [under 12](#), repatriation and rehabilitation are essential for humanitarian reasons and to prevent the emergence of a new generation of radicalized Islamist fighters. Many countries are reluctant to repatriate their nationals; since the group's declared defeat in 2019, only [74 IS foreign fighters](#) repatriated, the United States [the only Western power to repatriate male fighters](#).

The United States' Evolving Counterterrorism Approach and Resulting Challenges

Following 9/11, counterterrorism became the central focus of the United States' defense and national security agenda and remained a top priority. However, a significant shift in policy occurred in 2018 with the Trump administration's [National Defense Strategy](#), which stressed that in light of increased global disorder, "inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in U.S. national security."

History demonstrates that unchecked terrorist threats can swiftly evolve from minor concerns into significant international security issues. President Barack Obama originally characterized the Islamic State as a ["junior varsity squad"](#) compared to al-Qaeda, just six months before the group embarked on a significant territorial expansion, effectively establishing itself as a proto-state within Iraq and Syria. By prioritizing other national security issues without maintaining efforts in counterterrorism, the United States risks further complacency that will allow terrorism's resurgence as a predominant threat. The strategic shift away from counterterrorism without its eradication allowed affiliates of the Islamic State to rebuild. Shifting the strategic focus on one issue at the expense of the other fails to grasp their global relevance and interdependence.

In 2020, the United States adopted an “over-the-horizon” counterterrorism strategy. Articulated by [President Biden](#) and supported by the [National Security Strategy](#), this strategy implies “[striking] terrorists and targets without American boots on the ground.” The U.S. has consequently aimed to reduce its military footprint in countries where terrorism is a significant concern, instead maintaining a limited number of American soldiers to provide cooperation and support. For instance, approximately [2,500 troops](#) remain in Iraq to offer training and advisory assistance to Iraqi security forces combating IS remnants and countering Iran-backed militia groups. Similarly, in Syria, the United States retains approximately [900 troops](#) collaborating with Kurdish fighters within the semi-autonomous region administered by the Syrian Democratic Forces. Despite the limited military presence, the U.S. forces in Syria play a [pivotal role](#) in preventing a potential resurgence of the group.

The relegation of counterterrorism in the United States national security hierarchy, in contrast to the Indo-Pacific region and Europe, prompts policymakers to support the complete withdrawal from the ongoing fight against terrorism. In March 2023, a [resolution](#) was presented in the House of Representatives aiming to withdraw the United States Armed Forces from Syria. However, as emphasized by House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman [Michael McCaul](#), who took the floor against the resolution, turning away from the effort to counter the IS threat will create conditions conducive to a swift resurgence.

IS in the African Continent and the Influence of Great Powers

The [Global Terrorism Index](#) highlights sub-Saharan Africa as a new epicenter of global terrorism, accounting for 59% of total terrorism deaths worldwide. In this region plagued by instability and an alarming increase in military takeovers, the risk of IS gaining a foothold grows. [Seven military coups](#) occurred in Sub-Saharan Africa in two years alone, fostering a similar instability that allowed for the Islamic State’s rapid expansion in the Middle East in the 2010s. In June 2022, [Al-Naba](#), the official newspaper of IS’s Central Media Office, identified Africa as the region most likely for the group to re-establish a territorial caliphate, calling it the “land of hijra (emigration) and jihad” and calling on followers to migrate to the African continent.

[Diminishing](#) Western influence in Africa amid the growing presence of China and Russia—neither of which are part of the American-led Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS—complicates efforts to establish a cohesive strategy involving key regional actors and African countries. The United States [underscored](#) its intention to counter the expansion of the Islamic State in Africa without directly engaging in local conflicts. Instead, it aims to complement the ongoing initiatives carried out by European and African coalition partners. However, the tensions between European nations and local governments, illustrated by the [decreasing](#) European military presence in Africa and the shifting political orientation of African countries towards China and Russia, hamper this approach.

In the ongoing fight against the [growing presence](#) of IS in Africa, the United Nations criticized the international community for failing to adequately support the joint force tasked with stabilizing the Sahel region. The end of the French Operation Barkhane in the Sahel made evident the failure to recognize and address the complexity of the region's conflict environment. Although the operation initially achieved [notable success](#) when deployed in 2014, reclaiming significant cities and territories controlled by the Islamic State, it later evolved into a protracted conflict with no clear path to victory, allowing the group to spread freely throughout the continent without [any regional strategy](#) to counter it.

The departure of the last French troops deployed in Niger in December 2023 [symbolized the end](#) of more than ten years of French anti-jihadist operations in the Sahel and the largest Western effort to fight the Islamic State in Africa. With this departure, the region remains [the most affected](#) by terrorism, with growing and pervasive terrorist activity that subsequently led local countries to turn to Russia's Wagner Group for military support. Wagner's Africa Corps thus established a foothold in [Mali](#) in 2022, in [Burkina Faso](#) in January 2024, and is expected to expand to [Niger](#). However, the Russian mercenaries' inadequate and damaging counter-insurgency operations [exacerbated](#) terrorist threats and created the risk of spillover violence into previously untouched countries.

As Africa's stability becomes precarious, Chinese and Russian influences gain significance and establish a substantial presence, furthering expansionist interests while Western influence continues to diminish.

Russia has strengthened its defense and security ties with Africa through arms sales, joint military training, Russian PMC activities, and signing over [20 bilateral military cooperation agreements](#) with African states. The Kremlin seeks to replace Western powers in the fight against terrorism amid growing [anti-Western sentiments](#) in the continent. The 2023 Russia-Africa Summit in Saint Petersburg established counterterrorism as one of the three key [mechanisms for the Dialogue Partnership](#) between Africa and Russia.

Wagner is now [primarily active](#) in the Central African Republic, Libya, Mali, and Sudan, which all have complex relationships with Western nations stemming from colonial legacies. The changing political dynamics in Africa also led to a [proliferation](#) of Chinese private military and security companies (PMSCs) operating on the continent, operating under the legal, administrative, and political authority of the CCP. China is currently considering building overseas military bases in several African nations. China's U.N. representative has [recognized](#) terrorism as a major threat in Africa and stressed that they aim to support counterterrorism efforts in the region.

With this ongoing predicament, the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS [pledged](#) to combat terrorism in Africa and strengthen its regional approach through the [Africa Focus Group](#). In March 2023, the Focus

Group marked the first Coalition event in sub-Saharan Africa. It organized as an African-led and civilian-driven counterterrorism effort drawing on the Coalition's experience in Iraq and Syria to address terrorist group affiliates in Africa. Nevertheless, the patterns of insurgencies of the IS's affiliates in Africa and the continent's political landscape provide distinct challenges from the Iraq and Syria experience, requiring a tailored strategy specific to the African setting. Despite six of the Coalition's newest members being African nations, it currently comprises only [20 African states](#), failing to attract countries that face severe and active threats from IS, such as Mali and Mozambique, along with other vital African powers. Maintaining a consistent presence and commitment is essential to reassure partners and prevent them from turning to Russian or Chinese alternatives.

Counterterrorism and the Great Power Paradox

Although the Caliphate in its original form may have fallen, the underlying strategy that allows the Islamic State to operate as a quasi-state entity persists. The reluctance to deal with the aftermath of IS defeat, including its detained fighters and their families, its retreat to Africa as a safe haven, and the resurgence of insurgent cell attacks all provided it with the conditions to ensure its survival. The realignment of worldwide deployments away from combating distant terrorist organizations toward facing Great Powers undermines the U.S.'s counterterrorism apparatus that it invested nearly two decades in establishing at the same time, the failure to recognize counterterrorism's broader role in the current geopolitical competition erodes the United States' strategic advantage in its rivalry with Great Power adversaries.

Benjamin Kurylo is a student at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow, Russia and is pursuing his undergraduate studies in international relations. Specializing in strategic studies, his research interests include Great Power competition, military strategy, international security issues, and irregular warfare.

Main Image: A destroyed home in Sinjar, Iraq, May 12, 2021 (Photo by [Levi Meir Clancy](#) on [Unsplash](#))

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Date Created

2024/04/04