

IS IS REGAINING STRENGTH IN IRAQ AND SYRIA

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India- West Asia

Five months after U.S.-backed forces ousted the Islamic State from its last shard of territory in Syria, the terrorist group is gathering new strength, conducting guerilla attacks across Iraq and Syria, retooling its financial networks and targeting new recruits at an allied-run tent camp, U.S. and Iraqi military and intelligence officers said.

Though President Donald Trump hailed a total defeat of the Islamic State this year, defence officials in the region see things differently, acknowledging that what remains of the terrorist group is here to stay.

A recent report warned that a drawdown this year from 2,000 U.S. forces in Syria to less than half that, ordered by Mr. Trump, has meant the U.S. military has had to cut back on its support for Syrian partner forces fighting the Islamic State.

Although there is little concern that the IS will reclaim its former physical territory, a caliphate that was once the size of Britain and controlled the lives of up to 12 million people, the terror group has still mobilised as many as 18,000 remaining fighters in Iraq and Syria.

Huge war chest

These sleeper cells and strike teams have carried out sniper attacks, ambushes, kidnappings and assassinations against security forces and community leaders.

The IS can still tap a large war chest of as much as \$400 million, which either has been hidden in Iraq and Syria or smuggled into neighbouring countries for safekeeping. It is also believed to have invested in businesses, including fish farming, car dealing and cannabis growing. And the group uses extortion to finance clandestine operations. Farmers in northern Iraq who refuse to pay have had their crops burned to the ground.

During the past several months, IS has made inroads into a sprawling tent camp in northeast Syria, and there is no ready plan to deal with the 70,000 people there, including thousands of family members of IS fighters. U.S. intelligence officials say the Al Hol camp, run by Syrian Kurdish allies, is evolving into a hotbed of IS ideology and a breeding ground for future terrorists. NY Times

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