



საქართველოს სტრატეგიული და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობების კვლევის ფონდი  
GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

# Security Review

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**Post-ISIS Period:**

**Threats and Challenges Globally and Locally**

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During the past months, the defeat of Daesh (or ISIS) was announced several times. This included a respective statement made by the President of the United States, Donald Trump. Finally, on March 23, 2019, the Press Speaker of the pro-Kurdish SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces), Mustafa Bali, stated that they had occupied the last settlement controlled by Daesh – Baghouz, located in Eastern Syria<sup>1</sup> for which purpose both the international coalition formed against Daesh as well as their local allies had been fighting for years.

Now the main questions are how real the defeat of Daesh is, whether or not the threat of terrorism has been eradicated, what the post-ISIS period will look like in the Middle East and the rest of the world and what kind of threats and challenges the new era could bring.

### **Short History**

Approximately five years ago, in June 2014, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi informed the world of the creation of a “Caliphate” (or ISIS, or Daesh) in Iraq and Syria, declaring himself to be a Caliph.

This group of jihadists managed to assert control over a territory roughly the size of Britain, with ten million inhabitants, in a short period of time.

They soon became renowned for previously unheard of brutality and intolerance; as a result, they attracted tens of thousands of fighters as well as finances from all around the world, especially the Middle Eastern region.<sup>2</sup>

Daesh, unlike other terrorist organizations, not only managed to hold and control territory but also acquired many attributes characteristic of a state: it established its own ministries and schools, collected taxes, controlled borders and issued identification documents.<sup>3</sup> They went as far as instituting their own currency – the Islamic Dinar.<sup>4</sup> Daesh also managed to mobilize serious financial means – just in 2014, its income amounted to USD 1.9 billion.<sup>5</sup>

Jihadist organizations standing ideologically close to Daesh, like Al-Qaeda, had always opposed its declaration of a Caliphate as their leaders (first Osama Bin Laden and then Ayman al-Zawahiri)

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-caliphate-over-islamic-state-territory-lose-syria-iraq-terrorists-jihadis-a8781896.html?fbclid=IwAR0gyNxOpBSzYOd19\\_btsUg9sFE2\\_dShSPz0NOATEAbc4MOXVN8-xEhmNF4](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-caliphate-over-islamic-state-territory-lose-syria-iraq-terrorists-jihadis-a8781896.html?fbclid=IwAR0gyNxOpBSzYOd19_btsUg9sFE2_dShSPz0NOATEAbc4MOXVN8-xEhmNF4)

<sup>2</sup> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/02/22/isis-success-was-also-its-undoing-syria-sdf-islamic-state/>

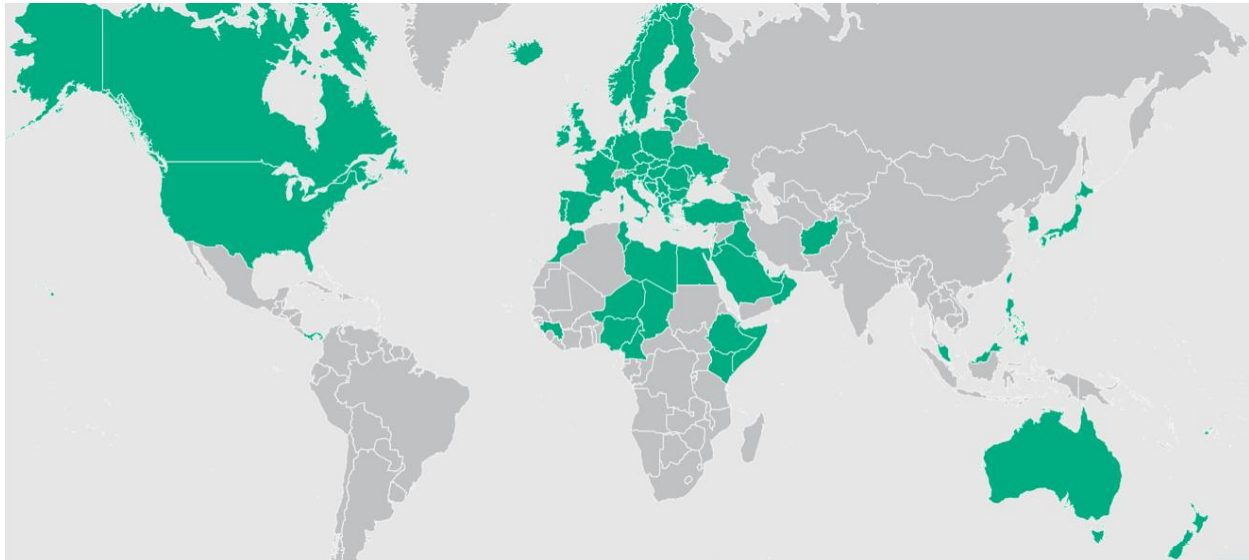
<sup>3</sup> <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/03/turkey-syria-islamic-state-defeat-joy-might-be-premature.html>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/islamic-state/11230324/islamic-state-announces-its-own-currency.html>

<sup>5</sup> [https://edition.cnn.com/2019/03/23/middleeast/isis-caliphate-end-intl/index.html?utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_source=fbCNNi&utm\\_content=2019-03-23T09%3A17%3A36&fbclid=IwAR3lp7vREmhVh0BcmbFoZaCw\\_wl6Dfm4fTp7Kc2cfdYcw3UPgNHYDXnaVtM](https://edition.cnn.com/2019/03/23/middleeast/isis-caliphate-end-intl/index.html?utm_medium=social&utm_source=fbCNNi&utm_content=2019-03-23T09%3A17%3A36&fbclid=IwAR3lp7vREmhVh0BcmbFoZaCw_wl6Dfm4fTp7Kc2cfdYcw3UPgNHYDXnaVtM)

believed that conditions necessary for declaring a Caliphate had not yet been created and they would become a direct target of the US should such a step be taken.<sup>6</sup>

As the events that unfolded around Daesh later showed, Al-Qaeda was correct in its assessments: soon after the declaration of a Caliphate, in September 2014, a global coalition was formed against Daesh with the initiative of the United States of America, bringing together 79 countries, including Georgia.<sup>7</sup>



*Members of the Global Coalition against Daesh*

The global coalition, headed by the US, not only started bombing Daesh's positions (over 32,000 targets were attacked by air in Iraq and Syria from 2014 to 2019<sup>8</sup>) but Washington also sent US weapons and instructors on the ground to assist the allied Iraqi government and the pro-Kurdish forces (SDF, YPG) which were efficiently fighting against Daesh.<sup>9</sup> It was precisely the pro-Kurdish forces that performed the final attack on the last position held by Daesh and as of March 23, 2019, this jihadist organization no longer controlled territories in Syria and Iraq.

Parallel to Daesh losing its territories, its activities also declined. If there was an average of 208 incidents per month between Daesh and the allies in 2016, only 121 such facts were recorded from January 2019.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/02/22/isiss-success-was-also-its-undoing-syria-sdf-islamic-state/>

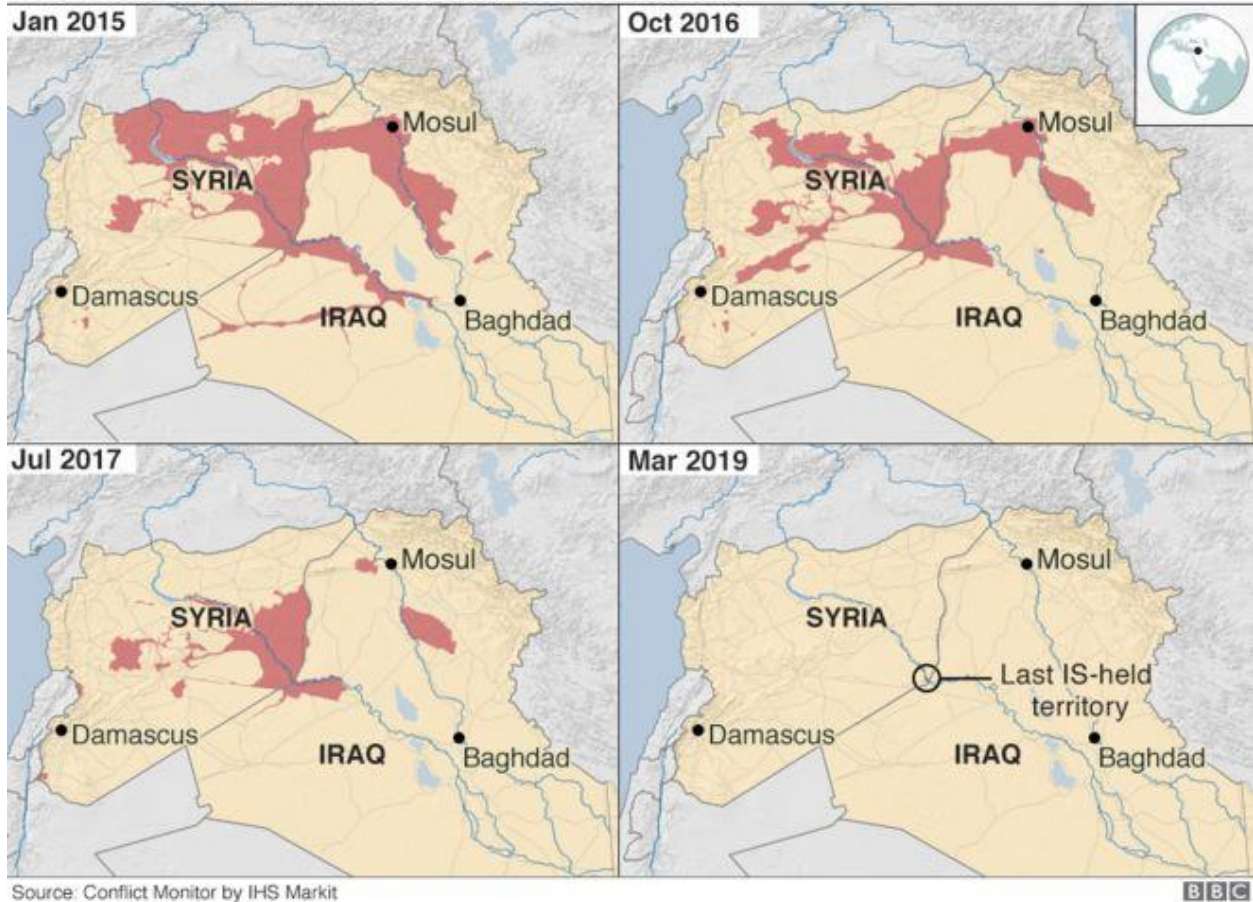
<sup>7</sup> <https://theglobalcoalition.org/en/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-45547595>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-usa-syria/obama-sends-more-special-forces-to-syria-in-fight-against-is-idUSKCN0XLOZE>

<sup>10</sup> A Review of ISIS in Syria 2016-2019, Regional Differences and an Enduring Legacy, The Carter Center Syria Project, March, 2019, p. 6.

## How the area under IS control has shrunk



### *How the Territories Controlled by Daesh in Syria and Iraq were Reduced*

However, the loss of territories and the reduction in the number of incidents do not mean that Daesh has ceased to exist. If Daesh and the territories it controlled were easy targets up until now, the fight against it will now become even more difficult in certain aspects as it is currently undergoing a serious re-organization and moving under the radar.<sup>11</sup> For example, decision-makers and the intelligence services of various countries will find it harder to find information which had previously been resting on the surface.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-45547595>

<sup>12</sup> A Review of ISIS in Syria 2016-2019, Regional Differences and an Enduring Legacy, The Carter Center Syria Project, March, 2019, p. 20.

A similar situation also arose earlier in Iraq when Daesh lost control over territories. However, due to various reasons, they did not manage to translate this into a political victory.<sup>13</sup>

According to the document presented to the UN Security Council on February 7, 2019 by the Secretary General of the UN, Antonio Guterres, Daesh still has from 14,000 to 18,000 fighters in Iraq and Syria, 3,000 of whom are foreigners. The global coalition names similar numbers as well.<sup>14</sup>

It should be pointed out that despite territorial losses, the motivation of the jihadists does not wane. They try to keep pace with the on-going changes and conduct their fight in a new environment; at the same time, they transform their methods of combat (including the intensive use of new technological achievements).<sup>15</sup>

The part of the January 29, 2019 US Intelligence Community's Worldwide Threat Assessment, which talks about the Middle East, is noteworthy. An entire chapter therein is dedicated to Daesh and the threats originating from it, both on the local (Iraq and Syria) as well as the global (US and the West in general) levels.<sup>16</sup>

According to the document, thousands of fighters are still among the ranks of Daesh and it has branches all over the world through which it continues its fight in various countries.<sup>17</sup>

*Map Depicting the Activities of Daesh and Al-Qaeda according to the Worldwide Threat Assessment Document*

### **Conclusions:**

- Daesh has not been destroyed completely. It has just lost control of territories. Hence, the threats coming from Daesh have not disappeared either locally or globally (the main target, above all, is the West).
- The ideology of Daesh and other jihadist organizations remains strong as a result of which they do not find it difficult to attract new forces and financial resources to strengthen their organizations.
- The reasons causing radicalization and extremism in the Middle East have not been eradicated – injustice, inequality, corruption, sectarianism, flawed political and economic models. Hence, the neutralization of extremism and radicalization in this region is not to be expected in the nearest future.

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/03/turkey-syria-islamic-state-defeat-joy-might-be-premature.html>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-45547595>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.gfsis.org/files/library/pdf/Georgian-2677.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> Statement for the Record, Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community, 29 January, 2019, p. 11, <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/2019-ATA-SFR---SSCI.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> Statement for the Record, Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community, 29 January, 2019, p. 11, <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/2019-ATA-SFR---SSCI.pdf>

- There is no common vision globally or locally with regard to what the post-ISIS Syria and Iraq are supposed to look like which also makes it more difficult to bring the fight to completion.
- After losing control over territories, part of Daesh's fighters has mixed in with the population and no one knows when they will become active again. Another part moved to other jihadist organizations (above all, to the Al-Qaeda affiliated Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in Syria) and the third part moved to other countries where Daesh also has networks.
- For Georgia, the post-ISIS period contains the following threats and challenges:
  - a) On this new stage, the future fate of Georgian citizens in the ranks of Daesh is still unclear. The most recent news about the death of a Georgian citizen in combat in Syria became known on March 12, 2019.<sup>18</sup> According to Georgian legislation, citizens who participated in combat in Syria and Iraq face prison upon returning to Georgia. This is why they might attempt to enter Georgia or other states through illegal means. In such a case, as the events connected with Chataev and his team showed, the security of our country faces serious challenges.
  - b) The issue of the return and re-integration of the family members (spouses, children) of Georgian citizens fighting with Daesh remains problematic. To date, up to 40 children and ten women have returned to the Pankisi Gorge, all of whom are left without any psychological support.<sup>19</sup> It is an unfortunate fact that programs for their reintegration and psychological support still do not exist.
  - c) Part of Georgian citizens fighting with Daesh up until now might decide to move to the Al-Qaeda affiliated Hayat Tahrir al-Sham or other smaller jihadist organizations which, in the long-term perspective, will be as problematic for Georgia, as their membership in Daesh was.

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<sup>18</sup> <https://on.ge/story/34915-%E1%83%A1%E1%83%98%E1%83%A0%E1%83%98%E1%83%90%E1%83%A8%E1%83%98-%E1%83%99%E1%83%98%E1%83%93%E1%83%94%E1%83%95-%E1%83%94%E1%83%A0%E1%83%97%E1%83%98-%E1%83%9E%E1%83%90%E1%83%9C%E1%83%99%E1%83%98%E1%83%A1%E1%83%94%E1%83%9A%E1%83%98-%E1%83%93%E1%83%90%E1%83%98%E1%83%A6%E1%83%A3%E1%83%9E%E1%83%90>

<sup>19</sup> <https://reginfo.ge/people/item/12922-siriidan-pankisshi-dabrunebuli-40-mde-bavshvi-psiqologiuri-daxmarebis-gareshea-darchenili>