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WAR ROOM

Meet ISIL's Most Dangerous Affiliates

By HARLEEN GAMBHIR | December 14, 2015

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With startling speed, the Middle Eastern terrorist organization known as ISIL has burst into the local news in Western nations, associated with attacks in Paris and now, if indirectly, with the mass shooting in San Bernardino, California.

This might have shocked Americans and Parisians for whom the group was long a distant-sounding threat, but for close observers of the organization, ISIL's global strategy should come as no surprise. In fact, ISIL has pursued an international expansion campaign from the moment it declared its "caliphate" in June 2014. While the group solidifies its proto-state in parts of Iraq and Syria, it also is expanding its would-be caliphate regionally—and preparing for the apocalyptic war it desires with the West.

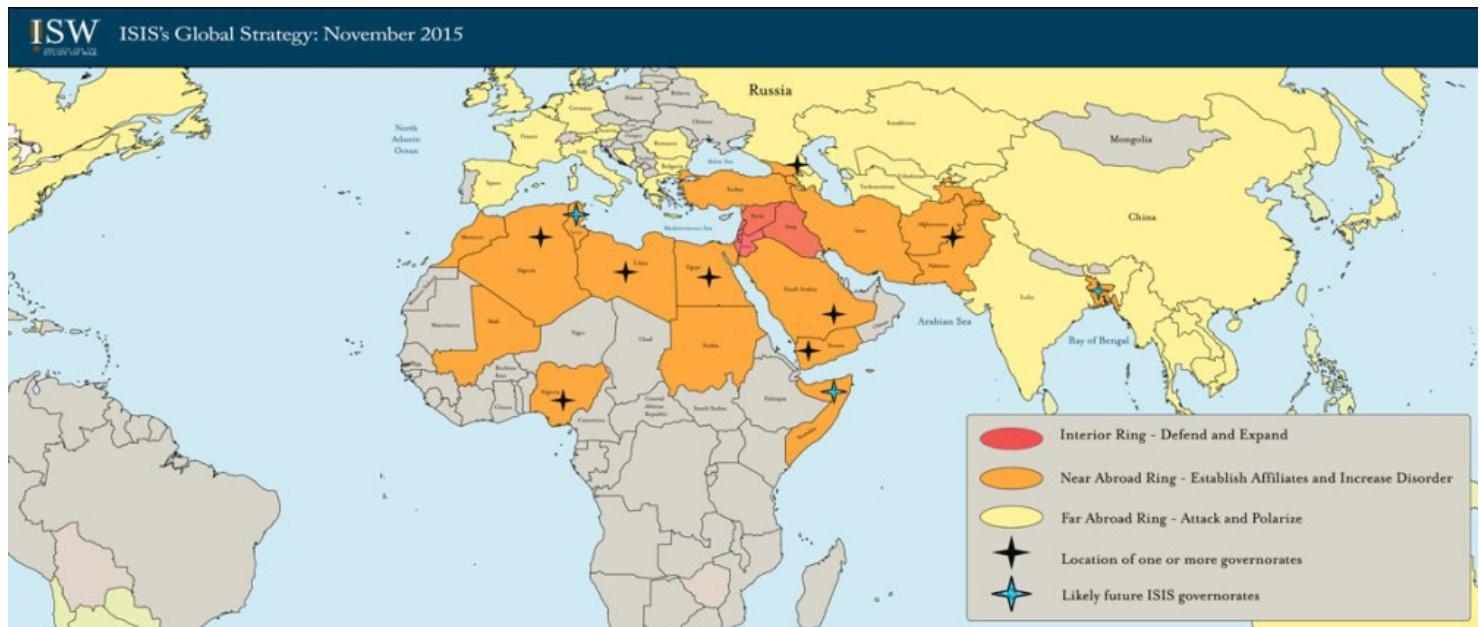
To do that, it's fostering affiliates in Muslim-majority areas and directing and inspiring terror attacks in the wider world. And for the U.S., this means that defeating ISIL will require not just combatting the group in Iraq and Syria, and countering its messaging and recruitment of foreign fighters. It also will require serious attention to ISIL's growing affiliates in other nations.

How widespread are these affiliates? This is a crucial, if underappreciated part of the challenge ISIL now poses. Our counterterrorism research team has been tracking ISIL's activity through everything from social media to satellite imagery, and we've begun assembling a detailed portrait of ISIL's [formal affiliates](#) in Egypt, Libya, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Russia and Nigeria. Looking ahead, ISIL also appears to be preparing to establish entities in Bangladesh and Tunisia, where it has launched a spate of attacks, and another in Somalia, where some militants have declared allegiance to ISIL.

Its growth strategy is sophisticated and systematic, much like a multinational corporation expanding by acquisition. Rather than build affiliates from the ground up, ISIL co-opts and changes existing militant groups or networks, some of which have splintered from Al Qaeda. Potential affiliates must consolidate factions, select a leader and present a military plan to ISIL's leadership for approval, according to ISIL's own standards. ISIL then chooses whether to establish a wilayat, or province, in the affiliate's operating area. ISIL's leaders help these affiliates to become more brutal and effective by exporting military training and expertise. ISIL calls for international recruits to reinforce [its strong-](#)

est partners; it also provides military training and [funding](#) to some affiliates. The relationship benefits both parties. ISIL gains a responsive global network, while the affiliate receives an influx of capabilities and cash.

The affiliates are tremendously damaging to the nations where they take root, either undermining relatively stable states as ISIL did in Iraq, or exploiting governance vacuums to expand, as it did in Syria. The affiliates' military operations [increase regional disorder](#) and create security gaps that will help ISIL grow beyond Iraq and Syria. Affiliate commanders impose brutal forms of Shari'a governance on the local populace, enabling ISIL to claim that it has delivered on its promise of a trans-regional caliphate. ISIL benefits from its affiliates without needing to micromanage their operations. Not all the affiliates are created equal, though: Some pose a meaningful strategic threat, while others are barely formed. As the U.S. shapes the next phases of its policy against ISIL and its affiliates, it will need to triage by analyzing the international threat posed by each one. Our research suggests they fall into three broad tiers, plus a wild card.



Most dangerous tier: Egypt and Libya

ISIL's most dangerous affiliates are those that give the group strategic resilience: They're strong enough that they could help the group survive even if the group were to be wiped out in its home territory of Syria and Iraq. These affiliates can extend ISIL's global reach, increase the organization's fighter pool, and provide safe-haven to ISIL's leadership. They maintain strong ties to ISIL's network and have demonstrated an increase in military capability since their affiliation with ISIL. Defeating ISIL in the long term requires degrading these affiliates.

ISIL's affiliate in Egypt, Wilayat Sinai, has already conducted a major act of international terrorism. The group claimed responsibility for downing Russia's Metrojet flight 9268 over the Sinai Peninsula on October 31, killing all 224 individuals onboard.

The group's capabilities should not come as a surprise. ISIL has been giving this affiliate training and expertise since July 2014, shortly after declaring its caliphate, when the Egyptian jihadist group formerly known as Ansar Beit al-Maqdis reportedly [sent a representative](#) to ISIL's stronghold of Raqqa, Syria. This envoy pledged allegiance to ISIL and agreed to send ABM members to Syria for military training. ABM exhibited a concrete growth in capability soon after this pledge. The group launched

one of Egypt's [deadliest](#) attacks in decades on October 24, 2014, killing 33 security personnel. Three weeks later, ABM formally rebranded itself as Wilayat Sinai, or ISIL's Sinai Province.

Now ISIL has transferred signature capabilities to Wilayat Sinai, which has steadily increased the frequency, scope and effectiveness of its attacks against Egyptian security forces. In particular, Wilayat Sinai [expanded its vehicle-borne IED campaign](#) in the North Sinai in the spring of 2015, increasing its use of ISIL's signature tactic. VBIEDs require significant expertise to deploy successfully, suggesting that ISIL's leadership provided Wilayat Sinai with resources and training. Wilayat Sinai also initiated a [house-borne IED \(rigging a house with concealed explosives\) campaign](#) against Egyptian security personnel in the summer of 2015, resembling the "Soldier's Harvest" campaign ISIS conducted to [degrade Iraqi Security Forces](#) in 2013. The group has increasingly claimed attacks on [Egypt's mainland](#) since this past summer, signaling its intent to attack the Egyptian state as a whole rather than just security forces in the Sinai Peninsula.

In Libya, meanwhile, ISIL's affiliates on the central coast [control territory, administer Sharia law](#), and run militant [training camps](#). These affiliates are exploiting Libya's civil war to recruit and expand. ISIL initiated operations in Libya through the al-Battar Brigade, a jihadist group that fights with ISIL in eastern Syria. ISIL-trained militants returned home to Libya and [pledged allegiance](#) to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in October 2014. ISIL subsequently sent several senior leaders to Libya to cultivate the group, including Iraqi Abu Nabil al-Anbari, who recently was [killed](#) by a U.S. airstrike.

In Libya, ISIL's affiliates quickly adopted the organization's brutality and methods of social control. They imposed Shari'a law in the coastal town of Derna, lashing thieves and burning cigarettes before its expulsion by local militias in June 2015. ISIL's affiliates also demonstrated a rapid growth in military capability, in part through the successful recruitment of other terrorist groups. The affiliates seized more than 100 miles of Libya's coast, including the major city of Sirte. The group is launching terror and guerrilla attacks in Tripoli and Benghazi. It also threatens Libya's oil reserves.

Of even greater concern, ISIL affiliates are making Libya a hub for foreign fighters, as Syria is now. Iraqi leaders and Syrian fighters reportedly have to come to aid ISIL's Libyan affiliates. The affiliates also have attracted recruits from Tunisia, Egypt, Sudan and Nigeria, among other places. Tunisian foreign fighters trained by ISIL in Libya launched major terror attacks killing dozens of foreigners in Tunisia in March and June. Foreign fighter flow to Libya will likely empower ISIL to extend its reach further into Northern and Western Africa. ISIL also may exploit refugee flows from Libya as a means of entering Europe.

Second Tier: Afghanistan-Pakistan, Yemen and Saudi Arabia

ISIL's "second tier" affiliates, while less established than those in Libya and Egypt, pose a near-term threat because they can change the trajectory of wars raging in the Middle East and Central Asia. They stage asymmetric attacks that intensify local rivalries and force actors to change their calculus in conflicts that are already difficult to manage. Defeating ISIL requires containing these affiliates. ISIL's affiliate in Afghanistan and Pakistan, Wilayat Khorasan, is capitalizing on Afghanistan's worsening security situation to threaten coalition and Afghan government forces. The group controls populated locations and seeks to attack major cities like Kabul and Jalalabad. ISIL established Wilayat Khorasan in January 2015, after jihadist commanders from multiple areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The group has experienced significant success, exploiting Afghan security forces' lack of capability to expand presence. Western officials claim funding from ISIL's central leadership enabled these gains.

As in Libya, ISIL's affiliate in Afghanistan has taken on the social control methods of ISIL in Iraq and Syria. Wilayat Khorasan executes tribal leaders opposed to its actions, forcibly marries local women,

and shuts down schools. The group has launched repeated attacks on Jalalabad, a major provincial capital. Wilayat Khorasan poses a growing threat to coalition forces in Jalalabad, as shown by its successful targeting of a UNICEF convoy in the city on September 10. The group will likely stress the AAfghan security forces in other areas of northern and eastern Afghanistan, compounding existing security threats from the Taliban.

In Yemen, ISIL began its campaign with five simultaneous suicide bombings on March 20, killing more than 140 people in one of the deadliest attacks in the country's history. Since then, it has played a critical role in exacerbating the country's civil war. Within five days of the attack, U.S. Special Forces left the port city of Aden, Iranian-backed al Houthi rebels had advanced to Yemen's southern coast, and Saudi Arabia had announced Arab coalition operations against the al Houthis. ISIL's affiliates have launched repeated suicide attacks in Yemen's capital and are attempting to foster increased sectarian tensions in a battle that is already consuming several of the United States' regional partners.

Finally, in Saudi Arabia, ISIL's affiliates have significant potential to threaten Western interests and accelerate regional sectarian war. These affiliates launched multiple high-casualty suicide attacks during 2015. The group targets Shi'a civilians and Saudi security forces, aiming to simultaneously ignite religious tensions and weaken the Saudi state. The affiliates might act on ISIL's repeated threats against American military and economic interests in Saudi Arabia as well.

Third Tier: Algeria and Russia's North Caucasus

ISIL's "third tier" affiliates are those that have not yet demonstrated significant capability or connection to ISIL's leadership. ISIL has declared provinces in both Algeria and Russia's North Caucasus, and maintains some links with jihadists on the ground, but has not coordinated meaningful military or social control operations. ISIL likely established these affiliates hoping to activate them when domestic conditions change enough for them to exploit instability. These groups haven't conducted notable attacks this year, but the Russian group has stated its intent to conduct attacks in retaliation for Russia's air campaign against ISIL in Syria, and may well develop the ability to do so.

A Capable Outlier

The group known as Boko Haram, or Wilayat Gharb Ifriqiyya, does not fit within any of the three tiers previously defined. Boko Haram is capable, lethal and active. ISIL's leadership has been inconsistent in its claims of affiliation with the group, however. ISIL's central media structure claims very few of Boko Haram's attacks overall—a divergence from its practice of framing affiliates' attacks as its own. These inconsistencies suggest that ISIL's leadership and Boko Haram are only loosely linked, or that ISIL only maintains strong relationships with a part of Boko Haram. ISIL may seek to deepen this relationship as a means of expansion into new areas of Africa.

ISIL enjoys the support of even more jihadist groups than those described. Militants linked to and supportive of ISIL conduct attacks in countries bordering Iraq and Syria, including Turkey, Lebanon, Israel, Palestine and Jordan. ISIL may use these networks to eventually connect its regional affiliates with its caliphate in Iraq and Syria. As mentioned, ISIL will probably declare affiliates in Bangladesh, Tunisia and Somalia relatively soon. Meanwhile, extremist in places like Indonesia and Malaysia continue to broadcast their support for ISIL through kidnappings and beheadings.

What now? Our research suggests that the U.S. needs to adapt its anti-ISIL strategy to account for each element of ISIL's global strategy, or it risks strategic surprise. The U.S. and its allies must disrupt ISIL's international terror plots, degrade and contain ISIL's regional affiliates and defeat ISIL within Iraq and Syria.

The U.S. needs to launch or assist more effective campaigns to contain ISIL's most dangerous affiliates. This means changing the incentive structures for regional partners that are currently exacerbating, ignoring, or even capitulating to ISIL's affiliates. In Egypt, the military's broad crackdown in Sinai has been counterproductive, fueling the insurgency rather than containing it. Neither of Libya's rival governments is willing to prioritize action against ISIL.

To gain leverage over how these countries conduct counterterrorism operations, the U.S. should provide its unique capabilities such as targeted strikes and surveillance. The Obama administration reportedly is considering a Pentagon proposal to do just that—to create regional counterterrorism "hubs" that can coordinate intelligence and Special Forces campaigns against trans-regional threats like ISIL and Al Qaeda. This system will be especially critical as Russia expands its counterproductive "counterterrorism" operations across the Middle East and Central Asia.

The U.S. must adapt to the new regional reality quickly. ISIL's affiliates are smaller and less powerful than ISIL's force within Iraq and Syria. But they are growing each day and are racing to ignite sectarian conflict and trigger state collapse. Ignoring ISIL's affiliates will not preserve resources. It will increase regional disorder in the long term—and will make defeating ISIL even more difficult than it is now.

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