

ISIS's Second Comeback

Overwatch Podcast Transcript



Featuring Jennifer Cafarella and Maseh Zarif

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ISW's Research Director Jennifer Cafarella discusses her report (written with Brandon Wallace and Jason Zhou) "ISIS's Second Comeback: Assessing the Next Insurgency." Interviewed by ISW's Director of External Relations Maseh Zarif, Jennifer discusses her insights into what the group did in Iraq and Syria to survive the U.S.-led campaign and what it is preparing to do in the future. She also describes the current U.S. role on the ground, potential scenarios in the months ahead, and how the broader fight against jihadists fits into the National Defense Strategy (NDS) framework.

Maseh Zarif:

This is Overwatch, a podcast brought to you by the Institute for The Study of War. My name is Maseh Zarif, and I'm your host for this inaugural episode. I recently sat down with my ISW colleague, Jennifer Cafarella. Jennifer is the Research Director here at ISW. She, along with Brandon Wallace and Jason Zhou, conducted an in-depth study of ISIS in Iraq and Syria that culminated in a report released in June 2019. In our conversation, we talked about how ISIS prepared to survive, the situation on the ground going into the end of 2019 as the U.S. contemplates its future role in the region, and the state of the broader fight against jihadist groups. A special thanks goes to Marissa Morton, Overwatch's production and technical guru.

Maseh Zarif:

So I'd like to start with a reference point that I think a lot of folks will recall. Back in March 2019, the President announced the liberation of ISIS-controlled territory in Iraq and Syria. And your report responds to that by saying, "Yes, but ..." And one of the jarring takeaways that at least I took from the report is that, despite some of those gains, that ISIS is putting itself in a position to be able to retake terrain in Iraq and Syria. And, in a way, do so in an even bigger blitz than it did in 2014. So walk us through the core of that assessment and how you arrived at that.

Jennifer Cafarella:

Sure. So we at ISW actually have been warning since relatively early in the counter-ISIS campaign that the metric of territorial control liberated from ISIS was the wrong way, actually, to evaluate our progress against this organization and to assess the strength of ISIS moving forward. That's because ISIS is actually a hybridized military force, which means they did seize outright control of terrain and begin to govern in cities that they captured, but they retained the ability to morph back into an insurgency, basically at a moment of their choosing. Sure. So we at ISW actually have been warning since relatively early in the counter-ISIS campaign that the metric of territorial control liberated from ISIS was the wrong way, actually, to evaluate our progress against this organization and to assess the strength of ISIS moving forward. That's because ISIS is actually a hybridized military force, which means they did seize outright control of terrain and begin to govern in cities that they captured, but they retained the ability to morph back into an insurgency, basically at a moment of their choosing.

That ISIS recovery includes, according to a DIA estimate in October 2018, tens of thousands of ISIS fighters, actually, that went to ground across Iraq and Syria in preparation for this insurgency. So ISIS has a capable force. And the reason why we called attention to potential future land grabs from the Islamic State is because this organization is still committed to seizing terrain - that core aspect of its goals and its ideology has not changed. And what we found when we evaluated the conditions across Iraq and Syria now, after March 2019, was that the conditions actually are very much in ISIS's favor this time around in a way that advantages ISIS more so than the conditions ISIS faced after our withdrawal in 2011. What I mean by that is that, as an insurgency, ISIS is fighting

for the support of the population and to degrade the governing and security structures of counter-ISIS forces.

And this time around, counter-ISIS operations never won back popular support. Freeing a population from a tyrannical organization like ISIS does not inherently build credibility for the governing structure that replaces ISIS. And in this case, there were large-scale reports of abuses and retaliation against the Sunni population that had already suffered under ISIS, which creates perfect conditions for an insurgency to gain root. And we actually saw ISIS gain momentum again the fastest amidst some of those communities that had suffered those kinds of abuses. So no locally legitimate replacement has actually emerged to ISIS in Iraq and similar conditions are true inside of Syria, where the U.S. relied upon a Kurdish-led fighting force to retake ISIS's terrain. But in terms of governance, that Kurdish-dominated force is now imposing a system of governance on Arab populations that is causing resentment. And again, it's that kind of resentment against the governing entity that creates a window of opportunity for ISIS to reenter these communities.

And we have to therefore interpret or estimate that ISIS's presence within these communities is part of ISIS's plan to retake terrain because that has never changed. And therefore, it's important for us to forecast out how might ISIS actually go about trying to seize terrain. We know that they will try, and we know that they're already back within the cities that we recaptured, and so the focus of our report was to call attention to this major security and political challenge, and to remind people that we may have retaken the physical caliphate but ISIS's intent to recreate it is very much intact and ISIS does have the capability and a plan to do so in the near term.

Maseh Zarif:

I think that the governance conditions and the broader political context that you're describing now, and the history of ISIS presence, Al Qaeda in Iraq, I think that's a really important point. So what I think I hear you describing is that, if you go back to the period before 2014 and look at some of the factors that helped ISIS make its advances and its surges, you had everything from a predatory government in Baghdad, you had Iran and the types of conditions that it was creating, sort of driving a lot of communities into the arms of extremists, and so on. So what you're describing now is much more worse in terms of the types of centrifugal force that's creating within Iraq and Syria. Is that-

Jennifer Cafarella:

Absolutely.

Maseh Zarif:

... fair?

Jennifer Cafarella:

Because all of those problems that you outlined that enabled ISIS to seize so much terrain from 2011 to 2014, those conditions are still in place, because we didn't do anything to try to solve those. Early on in the counter-ISIS campaign, we made statements and some political efforts to shape the Iraqi Government's policies toward some of the Sunni communities, and we tried of course to broker international negotiations in Syria. But those didn't go anywhere.

And so the actual outcome of our response to ISIS was military. And we did badly damage the ISIS fighting force in the process, they took high losses, but we didn't change any of the original conditions that enabled ISIS to seize terrain in the first place. And in fact, a lot of those conditions have gotten much worse, to include the Iranian cooptation of Iraqi institutions and the further expansion of Iran's proxy network across both Iraq and Syria, to include the Assad regime's war crimes against its own populations aided both by Iran and Russia.

All of which demonstrate to the Sunni population that they have nowhere to turn in either Iraq or Syria. We haven't provided an alternative. We only added to the conditions of devastation that these populations have to live through on a daily basis. And until and unless we develop a non-military side to our strategy, we're going to continue to have to fight ISIS again and again and again, or its successors.

Maseh Zarif:

Right. So you talk a little bit about their use of prison breaks to try to rebuild their strength, both in terms of drawing in fighters, but then also leadership, and so on. What is the risk that we're facing today in terms of the captured ISIS fighters that are in prisons and camps?

Jennifer Cafarella:

Absolutely. Both the Al Qaeda affiliate in Syria and ISIS are actually successors of the same organization, Al Qaeda in Iraq. So those kinds of tactics and the lessons learned from the experience fighting U.S. forces during the Surge, that is all retained in both separate organizations. Al Qaeda in Syria, which includes Iraqi commanders that fought during U.S. operations in Iraq, as well as ISIS now, which has split off from Al Qaeda but retains, again, a lot of that leadership cadre. One of those core tactics is the use of prison breaks to replenish the fighting force with fighters and, most dangerously, operational-level and tactical-level military commanders that can add the ability to wage more capable military operations and to knit those operations together into more capable campaigns to further degrade the Iraqi Security Forces or our Syrian partners over time.

So we haven't yet seen major prison break operations in Iraq or Syria from ISIS. However, as you mentioned, there is a large detained population of both ISIS fighters across Iraq and Syria, and the families of ISIS fighters. And I don't think the families get discussed enough. There is also still an ideologically committed sort of cadre of ISIS wives and indoctrinated children living in IDP camps - internally displaced persons' camps - across Iraq and Syria. These populations are not receiving the kind of humanitarian assistance that they need. In some cases in Syria, we have newborn babies actually dying in these camps because there's just not aid, there's not food, the basic services are not there.

That inability to provide for this population ensures continued radicalization, but it also interacts with this ISIS tactic of liberating captive populations. They've signaled that they intend to liberate the families of the fighting force detained in the future in addition to liberating fighters from prisons. And we actually have increasing worrying signs from one of the camps, the Al-Hawl Camp in Northeastern Syria, where there's a large population of indoctrinated children in particular. And pro-ISIS media outlets have started sharing videos of these kids within the camps raising ISIS flags and chanting in favor of ISIS, demonstrating that ISIS is still counting this population as part of its organization and incorporating it into its strategy moving forward.

Maseh Zarif:

So the focus of the report is on Iraq and Syria primarily. But I wonder if you can touch a little bit on how what ISIS is building in that theater interacts, or if it does at all, with ISIS's global presence. Obviously we have ISIS having declared multiple affiliates abroad. We've seen its attack campaigns around the world, including in Europe and other places. Can you talk to us about the connection?

Jennifer Cafarella:

Yeah. This is actually something we agonized about at length when writing the ISIS paper, because we needed to package a reasonable-sized assessment that was threatening to blossom into something like fifty pages.

Maseh Zarif:

Right.

Jennifer Cafarella:

So we focused in on Iraq and Syria. But in order to develop that assessment, we had to zoom out and understand how the ISIS organization globally has evolved since 2014, and how it adapted to the pressure in Iraq and Syria. And I think the key thing to understand in the context of the report is that the ISIS leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, is the commander of a global insurgent organization. He has never lost that global focus. He did lose his physical caliphate. That's a big loss for him actually. It doesn't destroy his military force, but it did pose some problems for him. So he reinvigorated his global expansion in part as a way to create sufficient momentum outside of Iraq and Syria, that the ISIS brand would remain strong. And his image as a global religious and military leader would continue to grow even as he needed to sort of reset the table.

One of the core developments since 2014 has been that ISIS is gaining sufficient local capability in some of its, what it calls provinces abroad. It was able to shift out elements of its organization that used to be dependent on terrain in Iraq and Syria, such as its external attack nodes. And ISIS was able to send basically attack nodes to places like Libya, now to Somalia, and elsewhere to generate attacks against Europe and other Western targets from outside of Iraq and Syria, thereby reducing the vulnerabilities within that terrain where counter-ISIS operations were gaining terrain the fastest.

We may not have the same opportunity we had in 2014 again, where we could have, if we pursued a more aggressive military strategy, collapsed the caliphate fast enough within Iraq and Syria to prevent us from needing to do sort of a global supporting campaign to prevent ISIS from sending resources or overstretching us with operations elsewhere. Now, entering late 2019, I'm actually very concerned that it's no longer going to be sufficient for us to fight just in Iraq and Syria, that we're going to have to develop some way of applying more global pressure on the organization simultaneous while focusing on disrupting the reconstitution within that core terrain in Iraq and Syria.

Maseh Zarif:

Right. This is a really important point, because I think the sort of outside-in support that some of the global networks are providing, I think there's often an impression that once ISIS sort of declares or plants a flag somewhere globally that, in our minds, if it doesn't look like Iraq and Syria in 2014, then it isn't necessarily a big threat or a big challenge or something that needs to necessarily be prioritized. But what you are describing is a totally different dynamic that I think we're going to have to grapple with.

Jennifer Cafarella:

Absolutely. And the seizure of outright territorial control is sort of the high watermark for ISIS being present in an area and gaining an almost enduring presence, that they can actually seize and hold terrain. But there is always a long and capable military campaign that proceeds the outright seizure of terrain. And I think sometimes we become distracted by the physical manifestation of an ISIS presence where we look for outright control.

And if they don't have it, we assume that they're not doing very well. And we lose sight of sort of the forest for the trees, which is the campaign that ISIS waged from 2011 to 2014, before seizing control in Iraq and Syria, included large numbers of military operations. It imposed incredible casualties on the Iraqi population and the Iraqi Security Forces. And it's that kind of insurgent campaign that we see underway across the board in ISIS's global provinces, to include the new provinces that has created in places as far-flung as the Democratic Republic of the Congo and India. And so that ability to wage insurgent campaigns that globally should worry us very

much, even though ISIS does not yet outright govern terrain in those provinces abroad.

Maseh Zarif:

So one of the other aspects of the forward-looking challenge that you describe is the role of U.S. forces in this theater. Now obviously, the gains that have been made on the ground are considerable and they're very real. The work that the U.S. military did in partnership with local forces did retake a territory from ISIS. But you described those gains as being tenuous. So can you describe a little bit just what the U.S. role on the ground is now?

Jennifer Cafarella:

Sure. So the U.S. is still deployed to both Iraq and Syria to support our partnered forces in what's generally referred to as stabilization phase of our campaign against the Islamic State. The problem right now is that it is unclear whether the U.S. actually has the political will to do what is necessary against ISIS in Iraq and Syria, in terms of both militarily, whether we have the will to continue to commit the resources needed to disrupt the forming insurgency, or if we have the political will, which I would argue it's pretty clear we don't, to take meaningful action to resolve the wider governance challenges in both countries. So what that means is we have forces deployed in harm's way in both Iraq and Syria that have a mission they can't achieve with current levels of resources, that don't seem to have the support of the nation behind them in continuing to fight this terrible organization, and that don't actually have a reasonable exit strategy.

What's the plan for wrapping up our operations in Eastern Syria and deploying home? The President has said he's going to withdraw and then has walked back from the withdrawal decision. And now we're trying to prevent a Turkish invasion. None of that actually bodes well for the success of the counter-ISIS mission writ large because we're losing sight of the requirements to defeat the Islamic State. We've become distracted by the threat of a Turkish invasion - rightly so, we need to prevent that from happening in my view, it would be counterproductive - but we also have the counter-Iran strategy now colliding where that's the only thing anybody can think about or focus on. Again, for good reasons, but it means there isn't clarity for what our mission is in Syria in the east right now.

And there isn't clarity on how we're going to ensure in Iraq that we actually can enable the Iraqi Security Forces to defeat this insurgency before it seizes terrain again. And so I think it's that wider set of challenges that need to be resolved here in Washington first, actually, and then need to empower and enable those forces that are deployed to do what they do best, and do what they do better than anybody else in the world.

Maseh Zarif:

So imagine that at some point over the next few months, for a variety of reasons, the United States decides to withdraw its military forces from Syria, primarily. We'll sort of say Iraq is a little bit more of a grey area. But certainly from Syria. What would you expect to start happening on the ground? What would some of the effects be?

Jennifer Cafarella:

Sure. So one of the first things I expect to see if the U.S. does pull up stakes and leave Eastern Syria is a fracturing of our local partner, the SDF. It's really our role in Eastern Syria, our presence there, that attracted this Arab buy-in and that continues to cohere the SDF into an organization that I don't think will survive our withdrawal.

So I expect to see local tribal elements start to peel away from the SDF and go a number of possible ways. One way is to support the ISIS insurgency. Another way actually is to defect to Russia and the Assad Regime and the

Iranians, which we've already started to see. We also simply could see infighting under all of this different military pressure. I think it's unreasonable to expect this fragile organization to endure, which will create a very large opportunity for ISIS to exploit these seams.

Both in terms of the seams of the relationships between tribes and the relationships between different populations to each other, but also then exploiting the security seams, the gaps in the provision of security, which will enable ISIS at the lowest end of the spectrum to accelerate its campaign of Vehicle-Borne IEDs, assassinations, et cetera. But potentially at the higher end of the spectrum actually start to take terrain again.

Maseh Zarif:

What about the idea of, as U.S. forces stepping back from the theater, potentially other partners in NATO or from elsewhere sort of step into backfill the U.S. Could that ... Can you imagine a scenario where some configuration of partner and allied U.S. forces step into that breach and sort of mitigate against some of these effects that you're describing?

Jennifer Cafarella:

I think there's definitely a very important role for our NATO allies in the stabilization mission and what actually should be a counter-insurgency mission in Eastern Syria. And I'm heartened to see that the administration seems to be getting some buy-in from our European allies to provide more support to our operations in the east.

But I think we'd be kidding ourselves if we expected anybody else to sort of step up and lead that effort, because it is the American commitment on the ground, actually, that creates the opportunity, both militarily and politically, for European states to support the U.S.-led mission. So I don't think we can outsource this requirement successfully to any of our partners, be those European allies or partners in the region.

Maseh Zarif:

So I want to ask you to think about the next few months before us into the end of 2019. And imagine that everything sort of stays a steady state in terms of the U.S. posture, in terms of other dynamics on the ground. I want to ask you about both positive signs and negative signs that you're looking out for. So on the positive front, what would you have to see to say, "You know what? I actually think this is getting better."

Jennifer Cafarella:

Sure. So I'll take Syria and then Iraq. The signs I would look for are an actual deal with Turkey for some kind of safe zone or no-go zone, or some kind of zone that deescalates the potential for a Turkish invasion. That would be a major victory. I know the Administration is pursuing that as aggressively as they can. That would be a big development actually in favor of an acceptable outcome in Eastern Syria.

I would also look for a restructuring within the Syrian Democratic Forces to provide more authority and autonomy to the Arab components, especially in Deir ez-Zour Province, where the ISIS insurgency is gaining momentum the fastest. The way I like to characterize this is, the Kurdish-dominated areas of Northern Syria were the center of gravity, so to speak, of our campaign to defeat the physical caliphate, because it was from the Kurdish areas that the most capable fighting force was generated, and that was from where we projected our campaign against the Islamic State.

But in the current phase, where we need to stabilize the areas we've taken and prevent an insurgency, the center of gravity has to be actually at the far southeast, the Arab tribal areas that nobody really wants to own because

they're difficult to govern, they're not well-developed, and it requires a lot of effort to get down there and to stay down there. But that actually should be the center of gravity for our effort. And so I would look for signs that the U.S. and our coalition partners are prioritizing the Deir ez-Zour River Valley in the southeastern parts of that province in order to dampen the most worrisome geographic zone for the insurgency. I think anybody expecting a negotiated settlement of this war is barking up the wrong tree. So I would not look for progress, frankly, at Geneva or with these so-called constitutional committee lists.

Unfortunately, I think this is a war that will most likely continue for the next decade or more, because the war is too entrenched right now and the political conditions are just ... are so in Assad's favor right now, because he's killed anybody moderate, that I don't think we should look for progress on that front. I'd stay focused on progress on the ground, which we actually can achieve.

Signs of progress in Iraq are frankly a little harder for me to identify, because of the intersection between the counter-ISIS requirements and the Administration's counter-Iran strategy, given that I still don't entirely understand what, if anything, the Administration is trying to do in Iraq to counter Iran. Frankly, I don't know that the Administration has clearly articulated a policy for Iraq in general.

So that's leaving a lot of unknowns in terms of what we're even trying to do. But I would look for signs that the U.S. has made actually an enduring commitment to stay in Iraq and to support the Iraqi Security Forces and counter-ISIS operations. There has been some indications that maybe the U.S. is considering walking away, et cetera. And I actually think it's very important that we do not abandon Iraq, even under Iranian military pressure.

Maseh Zarif:

It seems like a really important point, because the idea of pushing back on Iran in places like Iraq, but then also in Syria and other parts of the region, they drive not only at the Iran policy objectives that the Administration has laid out. But they actually contribute to the mission of trying to combat Islamic extremists of the Sunni variety - groups like ISIS and AQ. So those two things should not be viewed as independent, I think is a good point.

Shortly after your report was released, a reporter read back a particular line from your report to the lead American official for the Anti-ISIS Coalition. I want to read the exact line that was read to Ambassador James Jeffrey. It was that, "ISIS likely has the capability to seize another major urban center in Iraq or Syria." Period. And Ambassador Jeffrey pushed back on that line. But in all fairness, he didn't have the full context of the report. He didn't have the nuance with which a long study like this presents that type of a line. So I want you to imagine that Ambassador Jeffery is in the room with us, how would you tell him what it is that you meant by that line or what you didn't mean by that line?

Jennifer Cafarella:

Sure. Well, I'll start by saying that I stand by that sentence, which I wrote deliberately. And I remember writing it at the time saying, "This is ... I'm pulling no punches on this one." But it's what I assessed to be the case. And I'm not going to back down on that. And the reason why I think it's important to offer first the assessment in black-and-white terms, and then provide the context as you've noted, is because the context is important for interpreting sort of the black-and-white assessment but shouldn't water it down. I think ISIS has enough forces, enough momentum, enough money, enough weapons and ammunition to seize another urban center if they wanted to. Now, I don't mean to say that they're going to take a shot at Mosul tomorrow. Right? That's the really high watermark.

They didn't even seize Mosul first in 2014, right? They first seized Fallujah, and then a whole bunch of terrain in Syria, et cetera. But I do think that ISIS could muster a very considerable urban assault on a city if they chose to do so. And I think we need to face that fact. It doesn't mean that's inherently how ISIS will choose to fight, right? It doesn't mean that they are going to try to take a city. But it should give us pause that they could.

We're focused on the wrong metrics of ISIS's strength. We have been since the start. And I think it's very important for us at ISW to continue to state the truth as we understand it, and to highlight the range of options that ISIS actually has, in order to help our military forces and our diplomats think through how to take earlier action to prevent those kinds of most dangerous developments from happening. It is a core purpose of our forecasting to empower and equip our colleagues in government to do something about it ahead of crisis. So that's the purpose of stating things like this. And that's what I would hope to say to Ambassador Jeffery, if he were in the room with us today.

Maseh Zarif:

I want to get your take on a statement from General Mark Milley, the incoming Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. As part of his confirmation process, General Milley was asked by the Senate Armed Services Committee how he would manage and approach risk on counter-terrorism given the Department of Defense's prioritization of great power competition with Russia and China, which is an outcome of the 2018 National Defense Strategy. And he said, quote: "Terrorism is a long-term challenge that we'll face for the foreseeable future. While we may need to defeat particular groups such as ISIS in Syria and Iraq, we will more often seek to disrupt terror groups' operations that contain their reach rather than defeating them decisively." Thoughts?

Jennifer Cafarella:

Sure. So I share the General's definition of the scope of the problem. We're in a generational-long fight. I don't think we could set out to defeat global Islamic jihad as a, first of all ideology, of course, but even as a movement. There has been too much proliferation of these groups. They're too strong. They're too distributed across the world, actually, at this stage for us to just set out tomorrow and say, "We're going to defeat them all in every place that they are located." We couldn't do that. So that would be a bad goal. However, I do think we have to be careful not to define down the scope of the problem, to say that only the groups that are planning actively to conduct attacks against the West, we're only going to operate against those groups. And our goal is only going to be to disrupt them, not to defeat them.

I think we have to find some way to balance an approach that does prioritize global attack nodes, because that's what saves lives, but that also recognizes that this is as much a political movement as a military one. Again, I think we've lost sight of that. And I offered that example, because I think sometimes we can become at risk of defining success on that basis, right? How many key leaders did we kill? How many raids did we conduct? And miss sight again of the forest for the trees, that if these organizations are able to convince large numbers of populations that their jihad, their fight, is the only way for these populations to have basic freedoms, basic dignity, et cetera, we're in for a world of hurt. And that is a terrorism problem.

But it's also a problem that intersects immediately with the other requirements stated in the National Defense Strategy in terms of containing Russian aggression, in terms of preventing the next major state-on-state conflict. Because the conditions of chaos and violence that these jihadist groups create is teaching lessons to our state rivals like Russia and like China, who are learning and are deliberately investing resources in deploying to Syria, for instance, in the case of the Russians. And developing new ways of fighting wars that actually adopt many of the more irregular tactics of groups like Al Qaeda or the Islamic State.

That kind of adaptation is going to define the next great power conflict, not some kind of quasi-conventional scenario where we're dealing with Russian conventional maneuver elements. And I think the National Defense Strategy loses sight of what we can and should learn from the current counter-terrorism operations and civil wars that we're engaged in. And I think there's an urgent requirement for us to refocus and to stop siloing these things, because our adversaries have already done that, and they're ahead of us in that effort. And I do fear that the U.S. could become disadvantaged in the next great power conflict if we don't recognize that counter-terrorism is not inherently some kind of separate thing from preparing to fight the next great power war.

Maseh Zarif:

Thank you for that, Jenny. We'll definitely be circling back on this topic in future episodes because I feel like we've only scratched the surface. So thank you so much for joining today.

Jennifer Cafarella:

Absolutely.

This podcast is produced by ISW's Educational Programs and Outreach Coordinator Marissa Morton

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