



# Why the Islamic State's Loss of Territory May Encourage ISIS Fighters to Try and Enter the United States

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The "Islamic State of Iraq and Syria" (colloquially known as either ISIS or the Islamic State) is falling apart, and that may pose a significant border security threat to the United States. Here's why:

## What Is ISIS and Who Are Its Fighters?

ISIS is probably the most widely known jihadist terror group after Al-Qaeda.<sup>i</sup> The area under ISIS control was ruled according to a brutal, fundamentalist interpretation of Shari-ah law and the world has rapidly become familiar with the Islamic State's rough justice and gory execution methods.<sup>ii</sup> In addition, the Islamic State is notorious for encouraging so-called "lone-wolf" terrorists, as well as funding and directing well-coordinated terror attacks, in the West.<sup>iii</sup>

The majority of the individuals who formed ISIS were Iraqi Sunnis formerly loyal to Saddam Hussein.<sup>iv</sup> That core group was supplemented with Syrian Islamists who saw ISIS as a means to overthrow Syrian dictator Bashar Al-Assad.<sup>v</sup> Iraqis and Syrians remain the largest national groups represented within ISIS.

Ironically, despite its unflinching cruelty, the Islamic State also attracted a large number of adherents from across the globe.<sup>vi</sup> These supporters, known as "foreign fighters," to distinguish them from local Iraqi and Syrian ISIS members, pledge their allegiance to the Islamic State and enlist in its military units. The vast majority of these foreigners came from Muslim countries like Jordan, Tunisia and Saudi Arabia.<sup>vii</sup> But large numbers also came from Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Sweden and the U.K.<sup>viii</sup> All of these individuals pose a serious national security threat to the countries of the West<sup>ix</sup>. But the threat to the United States is the most significant.

# The Danger Continues: ISIS Doesn't Need Territory to Survive

Thanks to a coordinated effort led by the United States, the Islamic State is now rapidly losing territory.<sup>x</sup> By some estimates ISIS has lost 60 percent of its land and 80 percent of its revenues – derived mainly from oil sales.<sup>xi</sup> Many analysts are predicting the imminent demise of the Islamic State as a territorial entity.<sup>xii</sup>

Nevertheless, while the Islamic State may be diminished geographically, the ideology that led to its creation shows no signs of dying out. Like many rebel groups that have attempted to carve a home territory out of existing nations, ISIS coalesced as a philosophical/political entity before it ever conquered a single square foot of land. Accordingly, it does not require territory to remain a viable threat, as long as it is able to inspire members to engage in terrorist acts to further the group's long-term aim of acquiring a permanent Shari-ah law state.<sup>xiii</sup>

Should ISIS be deprived of its land holdings, it will simply begin operating within the territory of other states.<sup>xiv</sup> For those states that border Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State core group may well continue to present a viable insurgency threat. However, for the states of the West, ISIS will become a border security threat. Then, the tough job for Western security forces – keeping Islamic State personnel from fleeing to Western democracies – will have just begun.

## For ISIS Dispersal Equals Survival

The defeat of the Islamic State as a territorial entity will very likely create four crucial security problems for the West generally and the United States in particular:

1. As a non-state entity, ISIS will be unable to engage conventional forces in direct combat, so it will shift its focus to terror plots in those Western countries that it perceives as being responsible for its defeat.<sup>xv</sup>
2. Without a territory to administer and retain, ISIS will have a surplus of personnel with combat and/or terror training. It will deliberately disperse those individuals across the globe, in order to expand its terror networks and to retain a core group of ideologically-committed and well-trained fighters.<sup>xvi</sup> Should it encounter a chance to seize new territory, ISIS will rely on this cadre to re-group and re-organize.
3. Most ISIS members who hail from repressive states will not wish to return to their countries of origin. If they do, they run the risk of being arrested, tortured, and possibly executed by local security forces. Therefore, they will attempt to conceal both their identities and their participation in Islamic State activities and gain admission to western democracies.<sup>xvii</sup>
4. Many ISIS members who are Iraqi or Syrian nationals will not wish to remain in their home countries for fear of being apprehended and executed by national security forces or militia groups with differing politico-religious viewpoints.<sup>xviii</sup>

## The ISIS Vetting Problem

While Western intelligence and security agencies have been able to accumulate some information regarding individual foreign fighters, they do not possess any kind of master index of ISIS's international recruits.<sup>xx</sup> Similarly, the countries of the West have very little intelligence on individual Iraqi and Syrian members of ISIS, aside from the group's leaders.

The limited information that Western powers have obtained on either category of ISIS fighters is typically derived from Islamic State administrative documents seized during combat operations.<sup>xx</sup> However, because most ISIS fighters operate under an Arabic *nom de guerre*, those documents can be incredibly difficult to decipher.<sup>xxi</sup>

This means that vetting travelers to determine whether they have fought with ISIS is difficult, if not impossible. It also means that large numbers of ISIS members will be invisible to immigration authorities when they inevitably flee the Iraq-Syria border area and try to obtain admission to Western countries.<sup>xxii</sup>

In order to avoid arrest and detention, returning foreign fighters will probably attempt to explain an extended period away from their country of citizenship by claiming that they were attending to sick or dying relatives who live abroad. Meanwhile, local ISIS members can be expected to blend into groups attempting to flee Iraq and Syria and seek refugee status in the West. Indeed, on numerous occasions they have already stated that this is their intent.<sup>xxiii</sup>

## The United States Will Be the Dispersal Destination of Choice for ISIS Fighters

The United States is liable to become the premier destination for former Islamic State fighters. America's relatively open immigration policies and our willingness to confer immigration status upon individuals who have not been fully and completely vetted will make us an attractive target for individuals intent on continuing ISIS' mission. As such, ISIS' loss of territory poses a direct threat to the security of American immigration programs.

Three specific immigration programs are prospective targets for exploitation by dispersing ISIS fighters:

### THE VISA WAIVER PROGRAM

As FAIR has repeatedly noted, access to the Visa Waiver Program (VWP) – which allows visa-free travel from most of Europe – is a significant advantage for persons who seek to enter the United States in order to engage in terror-related activity.

Given the large numbers of ISIS foreign fighters who hold citizenship in VWP countries like France, Germany and the U.K., there is a strong likelihood that many will attempt to access the

U.S. using their European passports. The failure of immigration authorities to properly monitor VWP entrants makes it relatively easy for those with nefarious intentions to disappear into immigrant communities in the United States, with little likelihood of being found and removed prior to committing a terrorist act.

## THE REFUGEE PROGRAM

ISIS has successfully exploited the flow of refugees exiting the Middle East to insert terrorist operatives into Europe.<sup>xxiv</sup> The net result of lax European refugee screening and loose border security was a series of well-coordinated attacks on Paris, Brussels and Barcelona planned, directed, and carried out by ISIS members and affiliates.<sup>xxv</sup>

However, the Islamic State's ongoing terror campaign has brought it under increased scrutiny by European security and intelligence agencies. And many European governments have begun pushing back against EU demands that they accept large numbers of refugees. As a result the window of opportunity for ISIS members to sneak into Europe as refugees may be narrowing. It is only logical to assume that the Islamic State will shift its focus, inserting fewer former fighters into refugee flows headed to Europe and more into groups likely to be resettled in the United States.

Although United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) claims that all applicants for refugee status are being thoroughly vetted, this is simply untrue. Successful vetting is dependent upon access to information that is reliable and verifiable. And, as noted above, the entire West has severely limited information relating to the identities of individual Islamic State adherents. Accordingly, USCIS cannot verify the identities of these applicants. Therefore, it cannot conclusively determine whether an applicant for refugee status aided, abetted, or joined ISIS.<sup>xxvi</sup>

## MARRIAGE-BASED IMMIGRATION

Transacting a fraudulent marriage to a U.S. citizen or green-card holder is one of the easiest routes to lawful permanent residence in the United States.<sup>xxvii</sup> Terrorists are aware of this and there are numerous examples of terror group members marrying Americans in order to gain access to the United States.<sup>xxviii</sup> As the Islamic State is decisively driven off its territory, it is reasonable to expect an increase in ISIS members attempting to access the United States through marriage fraud – especially given its established record of violently exploiting women.

## Conclusions

The defeat of the Islamic State as a territorial entity is a significant and welcome milestone in the War on Terror. However, the deprivation of ISIS' physical land-holdings does not signal an end to the terrorist threat presented by the organization.

Now, more than ever, ISIS will attempt to disperse its members to Western democracies and the U.S. will be the preferred target. Accordingly, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS)

should make every attempt to implement President Trump’s “Extreme Vetting” program as quickly as possible. In addition, DHS and the Department of State should refuse to grant any type of immigration benefit to anyone who cannot be effectively screened.

In the face of a dire threat like ISIS, the default position in all immigration decisions should be the national security and public safety interests of the American public, not the interests of foreigners whose motives for entering the United States may prove deadly. As such, DHS should consider asking Congress to eliminate the Visa Waiver Program; prioritize the processing of refugee applicants who can be effectively screened; and increase its efforts to detect and prosecute marriage fraud.

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