



The Islamic State: Caliphate Interrupted but not Defeated

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The Islamic State's loss of the territory does not mean that has been defeated. Rather, it presents several new challenges to those trying to contain the threat of the Islamic State.

After months of a sustained, international military campaign against the organization, the Islamic State is now in retreat, relinquishing towns, territories and populations once under its control across Iraq and Syria. At its height, the organization was estimated to control or influence a territorial space between [12,000 to 35,000 square miles](#), areas approximating the size of Belgium or Jordan, respectively.

Though the crumbling of a self-proclaimed caliphate represents a victory in many ways to many different actors—the Assad Regime, the Iraqi government, the Russian government and the United States—IS' significant loss of the territory and populations does not mean that the Islamic State has been defeated. Instead, the loss of territorial control presents several new challenges to those seeking to contain the IS threat.

The importance of territory in conflict

Today, as in previous civil wars, control of territory has fundamentally shaped the nature of conflict. Not only is territorial control a [preliminary objective and launch pad](#) for many rebel groups globally and historically, it also influences insurgent behavior in several significant ways. From shaping how rebels deploy violence, the targets of said violence, whether rebels provide some sorts of services or develop governing institutions, and the beneficiaries of these

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services, territorial control, or the lack thereof, is a profound shaper of conflict dynamics. As the Islamic State shifts from being in control of significant swathes of land and peoples, to a landless network of raiders, the organization's behavior seems increasingly likely to change, and in some ways, has changed already.

In a recent paper published in the Journal of Politics, my co-author, Yu-Ming Liou, and I argue that the reason for this is that territorial control in and of itself is a military resource. Beyond simply influencing the politics and people in a region or town, the control of territory means the ability to defend and hold a place from counterinsurgent attack. The absence of the state is critical for rebels. With a space for themselves, free of enemy interference, insurgents can train and move around freely. They can begin unhindered propaganda campaigns that may have local or [global reach](#). They can initiate contacts with supportive foreigners or foreign governments abroad. They can stash equipment and materiel for later use. They can recoup and recover in relative safety after a raid or ambush. Territorial control on its own serves to boost the military strength of an insurgent organization.

But territorial control is not simply about the acquisition of space: it frequently includes the acquisition of people, under control of the rebel group, but not a part of the insurgency. The relationship between rebels and civilians living within the territory rebels control are inherently intertwined, and as Mao famously quipped, [civilians are the sea in which the insurgent fish should swim](#). Where territory is itself a military resource, civilians can also provide intelligence and [information](#), medicine, technical expertise, weapons or financial aid, [compliance](#), and importantly, [recruits](#).

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The resources civilians offer, however, are not always so easily won. Rebels may use coercion or violence to get what they wish from civilians, generating resentment and shrinking the pool of potential recruits and resources providers. On the other hand, insurgents can **incentivize cooperation** by limiting violence and predation of civilians, as well as providing goods or services, quasi-state institutions, education, health care, security and justice. When rebels control territory and civilians, they move from being **roving bandits to stationary bandits**, incentivized to provide some form of governance.

Thus, when rebels capture territory and control civilians, it generally affects their behavior in two key ways: rebel predation of civilians, and rebel governance to civilians. **Strong rebels** and rebels that control territory are less likely to rely on **indiscriminate violence**. They also tend to **avoid terrorism**. Similarly, given that most rebels want to eventually rule over the civilians they control as a legitimate sovereign, many insurgent groups are more likely to provide social services and develop **governing institutions** once they capture territory and populations. In fact, according to **an original dataset** on rebel education and health care provision, about one-third of all insurgencies provide some form of governance.

Among rebel groups that control territory, however, this figure almost doubles. Though not all rebel groups want to rule over all civilians living in the territory they capture (for instance, IS engaged in mass killing and **genocide against the Yazidis**, and allegedly **offered Christians a chance to pay taxes or flee**), for those civilians who rebels view as being future citizens of the state its creating or leading, the foundations of governance are frequently established in the roots of war. As an example, those who lived within IS territory claimed they were living in a **“golden era,”** better than the governance that had preceded the

Islamic State's control. These services ranged from running **utilities** and hospitals, to building schools and developing a **curriculum** that comports with the Islamic State's ideological precepts.

The Islamic State and territory

Over the past several months, **the Islamic State has consistently lost territory** across both Iraq and Syria. Facing incursions from the Iraqi military as well as the Syrian government and its allies, the Islamic State's grasp on space and domination over people has diminished. As a result of this change, several IS behaviors may also begin to shift, and the lack of territory does not correspond to a lack of threat.

The governance IS provides will likely dissipate. It is challenging to provide governance without some form of territorial control, and with the Islamic State on the run from military forces bearing down, IS will increasingly face challenges to providing services within the remaining spaces it controls. Though the lack of services for civilians may not seem particularly consequential, clean water and electricity are essential for healthful and hygienic living and the practice of more advanced medical treatment, like surgeries.

The rise of the Islamic State and its initial popularity was also tied to the lack of **sufficient goods and services**—a lack of governance by the Iraqi government. Without the Islamic State's organization and provision of goods, people's needs might not only go underserved, triggering a humanitarian crisis, but the governance vacuum could be filled by equally ruthless and dangerous actors, and **terrorism expert Bruce Hoffman has suggested** that a blow to the Islamic State could be a boon to Al-Qaeda operatives in the region. Foreign

governments and domestic actors ought to be acutely aware of making the day-to-day living of civilians as normal as possible, as quickly as possible.

Second, civilians may increasingly find themselves as the targets of violence, rather than state military or security forces. The underground, clandestine nature frequently associated with a lack of territorial control makes IS movements harder and harder to track, and has been linked to [terrorist violence](#). As an example, the Islamic State, which does not territorial control in Europe, typically relies on [attacks on civilian targets](#) by affiliates as a means of attack there. Just last week, the [Islamic State killed over a dozen people in Barcelona](#) by using a car to mow down a busy street of pedestrians (a style of attack replicated by white supremacist terrorists in the United States).

On the other hand, in Syria and Iraq, the Islamic State has been able to rely on [conventional](#) or [guerrilla](#) tactics to achieve its goals. Consequently, the lack of territorial control and potential increase in the use of terrorism by the Islamic State, civilians may increasingly find themselves in the crossfire of IS attacks. Already, Though the Islamic State endeavors to survive and endure, and can do so by moving its operations online and underground despite territorial losses, it nevertheless keeps the image of the caliphate alive by [repurposing videos and media that](#) “depict the Islamist state it sought to establish as an idyllic realm destined to be restored.”

The Islamic State might also create or be given some form of Just like controlling territory in the country a rebel group seeks to one day rule, a sanctuary or foreign base is also a safe space that confers military benefits to the insurgency. However, when rebels have foreign sanctuary, they are removed from the civilians they might some day hope to govern, and [incentives to moderate their behavior declines](#). Ultimately, then, when rebels control

territory separated from those they wish to govern, it has all the benefits of acquiring territory, without any of the costs (or benefits) of also acquiring civilians. [In our paper](#), we find that when civilians have access to a sanctuary in a foreign territory, they are more likely to engage in violence against civilians, killing over twice as many civilians than the average rebel group.

Conclusion

In sum, as IS transitions from controlling territory to a more clandestine network, civilians' lives and livelihoods remain in the crosshairs. [Weak rebel organizations](#) and rebel organizations that lack territorial control are more likely to engage in [terrorism](#) and [indiscriminate violence](#).

Civilians could lose access to critical goods and infrastructure services, thereby putting them at risk for a humanitarian crisis. Unbound by territorial space, IS could prioritize deadly terrorist attacks outside the realm of Syria and Iraq, focusing instead on Europe and North America, in addition to the Middle East and North Africa. Military forces may have wrested the Islamic State from its self-proclaimed caliphate, but the battle may be far from over.

Image credit: [Dying Regime/Flickr](#).

Megan A. Stewart, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor of Transnational and International Security at American University's School of International Service. Her research lies at the nexus of two distinct areas: civil war processes and state formation. Megan is currently completing her book manuscript, *Governing for Revolution*, which explains variation in rebel governance and incorporates both quantitative and qualitative methods,

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