



The Cambridge Security Initiative

ISLAMIC STATE'S STRATEGIC PRIORITIES IN 2020: RETURNING TO LOCAL ACTIVITIES

JANUARY 2020

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The Islamic State's (IS) Arabic language propaganda provides a useful lens into its strategic priorities and local recruitment narratives. Revealingly, the focus in this literature is overwhelmingly on the group's local and regional Islamic enemies, rather than the West. Whilst taking advantage of any opportunity to claim victory, it is clear that the principal target in the Islamic State's hierarchy remains Iran, in line with its longstanding sectarian agenda against Shi'a power, and other rival Sunni groups.

As we enter a new decade, IS's territorial defeat in Iraq and Syria raises significant questions about the group's future and its strategic concerns. As well as encouraging a spate of attacks in the West, IS has maintained a narrative of success by pointing to its expansion in Afghanistan, the Sahel, and notably West Africa, which has afforded it continued presence on the global stage.

However, current instability in the group's ideological heartland in Iraq and Syria as a result of the [Turkish strike on Syria](#), the death of Iranian military general [Qassim Suleimani](#), and the possible withdrawal of American troops from Iraq suggest that 2020 will see a rejuvenated insurgency in the local origins of the movement, with sectarian concerns at the forefront of strategic planning. IS is increasingly focused on discrediting Sunni rivals such as al-Qa'ida, as well as the group's traditional Shi'a enemies. Therefore, IS presented the death of Iran's most powerful military figure, whilst at the hands of U.S. forces, as a step towards their inevitable success in an existential struggle in which they are destined to emerge victorious.

OUTLOOK

2020 is likely to see IS renew its focus on local and regional priorities building on heightened activities in both Iraq and Syria in 2019. Despite losing its last territorial outpost in Syria, the group claimed over 600 attacks in the Levant, taking advantage of a vacuum in Syria to [break its followers out of prisons and IDP camps](#); the group is undoubtedly preparing for similar insurgent action in Iraq as Baghdad's security capacity inevitably recedes. In addition, it is highly likely that competition for ideological primacy with other Sunni groups, such as al-Qa'ida, the Taliban, and Hamas, will continue to feature high on the IS leadership agenda, with a focus on more agile and flexible insurgent tactics that allow the group to maintain some narrative of success in the face of territorial defeat.