

As the national threat level is lowered, what could the future hold?

Following the downfall of Islamic State's self-proclaimed leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in the Idlib province in Syria, the dismantling of ISIS has begun. It has been estimated that 2,500 foreign Islamic State militants are currently detained in prisons in northern Syria¹. The control of the prisons has been taken over by Turkey following their incursion and military activity against Kurdish military groups in the region. A number of foreign fighters are reported to



Foreign ISIS fighters have used disguises to escape

have escaped from prison, however there are no accurate records of numbers or current location of escapees. Turkey's Interior Minister, Suleyman Soylu, has stated that countries need to accept their nationals back on home soil. They are pressing for repatriation of prisoners and applying pressure as they refuse to accommodate the foreign fighters any longer.

The repatriation process has begun of British, French, German, Belgian, Irish, US and other foreign ISIS militants.

It has been estimated that between 800-900 British nationals² travelled to Syria to join the ranks of ISIS with around 425 having returned to the UK by June 2018³ facing little to no legal repercussion. Out of the 800-900 British nationals, a reported 20% were killed or missing in action⁴ therefore an estimated 250 detained ISIS fighters are expected to return to the UK. From a European perspective, a projected 5,000 EU nationals travelled to Iraq and Syria to fight under the Islamic State banner - with 1,900 French nationals, 900 Germans, the aforementioned 800 to 900 UK nationals, 500 Belgians and 300 Swedish citizens answering the Islamic State's call to arms⁵.

On 4 November 2019, the UK lowered the threat level from Severe (an attack is highly likely) to Substantial (an attack is likely).

With the death of its leader and the declaration that ISIS is defeated, are we any safer from terrorist attacks in the UK and Europe?

The remnants of ISIS are seeking to establish a new foothold in Iraq or Syria. At the time of al-Baghdadi's killing he was found in the Idlib province in north-western Syria, an area under the control of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a jihadist group that split from Al-Qaeda in 2016 to pursue a more violent campaign in Syria. Al-Baghdadi had been located by US intelligence in the house of one of the leaders of HTS⁶. It is entirely plausible that al-Baghdadi, witnessing the collapse of ISIS, reached out to Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and subsequently Al-Qaeda to form an alliance.

Al-Qaeda's network and infrastructure combined with Islamic State's funds could produce a larger and more united terrorist organisation.

ISIS were allegedly turning over \$1 million a day in profit through the sale of crude oil from captured oil fields⁷. Islamic State are not believed to possess the level of infrastructure that Al-Qaeda required to mount an attack similar to that of 9/11, however the two groups could benefit from each other's existence to further their cause against a common enemy.



The Securitas Intelligence Unit (SIU) believe that the lowering of the threat level in the UK is likely to be a short to mid-term measure until the risk posed by returning fighters and/or the next stages of ISIS and Al-Qaeda activity may be realised in UK and Europe. The SIU recommend security managers maintain a constant level of vigilance and state of preparedness around terror related incidents and readiness of their response plans.

¹ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/trump-syria-isis-prisoners-escape-kurds-turkey-invasion-a9182391.html>

² https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Women-in-ISIS-report_20180719_web.pdf

³ https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Women-in-ISIS-report_20180719_web.pdf

⁴ <https://www.ft.com/content/b8aab6ba-3c18-11e9-b72b-2c7f526ca5d0>

⁵ Please note that all figures given are approximate as some ex-fighters have avoided detection by finding alternate routes in and out of Syria/Iraq.

⁶ <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2019/11/02/islamic-state-after-the-death-of-abu-bakr-al-baghdadi>