From the center to the peripheries: Where are ISIS and al-Qaeda cells hiding?

After the fall of the Islamic State group's self-proclaimed "caliphate" and the killing of prominent al-Qaeda figures, it appeared at several junctures that the threat posed by the two organizations had receded to the margins.

But recent reports say what has receded is not the networks as a whole, but rather their old center. There is no longer a single capital or leadership capable of bringing all branches together, but instead distant provinces, local cells, and financing and smuggling networks operating within fragile states.

This shift is confirmed by a recent analysis by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, CSIS. Its May 2026 report concluded that the "terrorism landscape" is no longer governed by a single dominant threat, as it was after Sept. 11 or at the height of ISIS's "caliphate."

There is no single dominant threat today, but rather a mix of formal groups, loose networks, and lone actors. In the Middle East and Africa in particular, al-Qaeda branches and ISIS provinces remain among the most prominent sources of

danger, at a time when “counterterrorism” is declining in priority compared with other security files.

So the question is no longer: Has the “caliphate” returned? Rather: Where have the networks remained? Why have Africa and the Sahel become a more dangerous center? And what gaps allow ISIS and al-Qaeda to endure even after the center’s decline?

Where did ISIS and al-Qaeda remain after the center declined?

For ISIS, the dream of a “state” evaporated after it lost its strongholds in Mosul and Raqqa between 2017 and 2019. But it did not disappear; rather, it reverted to its networked form: cells and “provinces” operating with varying capabilities.

In Syria and Iraq, the group lives in the shadows, moving through small cells in the desert and border areas, and exploiting the fragility of the prison and camp file, as well as attempts to move fighters and funding between the two countries to keep its network viable.

A UN report points to a network known as “Al-Ibrah,” which facilitated the movement of fighters and logistical support across the Iraq-Syria border, with estimates that about 50 fighters a month crossed through Anbar before tighter border monitoring narrowed that route.

These details show that ISIS’s survival does not always require territory under its control, but rather corridors, intermediaries, and transport and financing networks.

In Khorasan, however, the picture is different. ISIS’s branch there, based primarily in Afghanistan and extending its threat toward Pakistan and Central Asia, has gained a reputation as the organization’s most dangerous external branch.

Despite coming under security pressure, it has retained the ability to recruit, propagandize, and plan cross-border attacks, benefiting from a complex border environment and propaganda networks in Central Asian languages.

In Africa, ISIS branches have remained among its most active arms.

ISIS West Africa Province, ISWAP, carried out more than 500 attacks between January and October 2025, according to a UN report.

The ISIS branch in the Sahel continued its activity, particularly in Niger and border areas, though to varying degrees compared with the Lake Chad branch.

In Somalia, the ISIS branch remains smaller than al-Shabab and under security pressure, but it operates through mobile cells, mountain sanctuaries, and smuggling routes.

Al-Qaeda, for its part, also underwent a long restructuring after the killing of its most prominent leaders. The parent organization lost much of its capacity for centralized planning, but maintained its presence through branches more deeply embedded in local conflicts.

In the Sahel, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin, JNIM, stands out as the most dynamic branch, combining armed action with local alliances, taxation, and pressure on supply routes.

In Yemen, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula has remained capable of carrying out attacks and developing more complex tactics.

In Somalia, al-Shabab remains the most prominent "jihadist" force in the Horn of Africa.

The UN report described the threat emanating from ISIS, al-Qaeda, and their branches as complex and multipolar, rather than concentrated in a single arena.

Why do these organizations persist after the center declines?

What enables these networks to survive is not a single location or central leadership, but fragile environments repeated from the Sahel to Syria, Iraq, Khorasan, Yemen, and Somalia. There are three main gaps that give ISIS and al-Qaeda room to maneuver, which we summarize in the following points.

1. State vacuums and local conflicts

The African Sahel was not a secondary theater for these groups, but in recent years it has become a clear model of a survival environment.

The issue is not limited to a security vacuum, but to the convergence of coups and state weakness, the withdrawal or decline of the French and broader Western presence, organized crime, and local conflicts between herders and farmers or between marginalized communities and central authorities.

In Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, JNIM found an environment that allowed it to present itself as a force for protection, arbitration, or local punishment in place of the state. Its operations are no longer merely isolated attacks, but have turned into sustained pressure on supply routes, trade, and isolated towns.

The United Nations indicates that the group continued expanding its areas of influence and imposed a fuel blockade around Bamako. It also benefited financially from kidnapping, ransom, taxes, zakat, road tolls, and mining and trade activities, meaning it does not live on weapons alone, but on a parallel local economy that fills the state vacuum.

The pressure has extended to Gulf of Guinea states. In northern Benin, the expansion is clearly visible in the Alibori region, where the number of attacks

rose from 22 in 2021 to 176 in 2024, according to ADF Magazine, citing data and experts. This reveals the spread of the threat from the inland Sahel to the edges of coastal states.

Northern Benin is seeing a rise in attacks as JNIM expands (AFP)

At the same time, the presence of ISIS West Africa Province remained concentrated around the Lake Chad basin and northeastern Nigeria, while the ISIS branch in the Sahel remained more closely tied to border areas between Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso.

In both cases, military power alone does not create this presence; it is aided by deeper local conditions: poverty, drought, the marginalization of some communities, and a trust gap between residents and local armies.

In some areas, a young man joins the organization not because the ideological project alone convinces him, but because the group offers money, protection, revenge, or a path to survival in an area abandoned by the judiciary and services. Here, the group shifts from a transnational organization into a de facto authority in the peripheries the state has retreated from.

The 2026 CSIS report adds another reason, arguing that the decline in US investment in counterterrorism in favor of other security priorities gives these groups more room to maneuver, especially in areas that are no longer at the

center of international attention.

2. Borders, smuggling, and financing

Today, these organizations do not need a capital to survive; movement corridors, intermediaries, smuggling networks, and funding sources are enough. In the Sahel, the expanses between Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Benin, and Togo stretch as belts of movement for fighters and smugglers.

In Iraq and Syria, the Al-Ibrah network revealed that the movement of fighters and logistical support did not end with the fall of the “caliphate,” but shifted into less visible routes more dependent on intermediaries and smuggling.

In Afghanistan and Pakistan, the complex border environment allows ISIS-Khorasan to survive under security pressure without disappearing.

Financing, meanwhile, makes survival possible even when territorial control declines, as groups in the Sahel rely on revenues from gold, fuel, road tolls, zakat, smuggling, and kidnapping.

A UN report also uncovered ISIS financial networks extending into countries such as Côte d’Ivoire, Madagascar, and Togo, making clear that financing is no longer confined to a single theater, but moves through fronts and multiple regional networks.

The same equation recurs, in different forms, in other countries. In Yemen, war and multiple centers of authority have given al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula wider room to maneuver, while the UN report spoke of bolder activity by the group and the use of tactics including explosives, drones, and complex attacks.

In Somalia, al-Shabab remains able to exploit political division and weak government control, while the smaller ISIS branch tries to survive through financing, smuggling, and mountain sanctuaries.

3. Prisons and camps

Prisons and camps remain one of the most dangerous gaps associated with ISIS in particular. After the group’s center collapsed, thousands of fighters and families remained in camps and detention centers, especially in northeastern Syria, where fragile administration, funding, and security are turning into a future risk.

In northeastern Syria, the collapse of the al-Hol system exposed the fragility of the detention file. According to the Irregular Warfare Initiative, al-Hol camp held about 25,000 people at its peak.

Then, by late February 2026, it became nearly empty, with about 20,000 people unaccounted for or without a clear path for documentation and reintegration,

while about 5,700 detainees were transferred from northeastern Syria to Iraq.

This chaos does not mean the immediate return of an “ISIS state,” but it creates an environment the group can exploit for propaganda, recruitment, and reconnecting networks.

Camps and prisons are not necessarily command centers, but they can become a human and symbolic reservoir, especially when children, women, and former fighters are left without a clear judicial or social path.

In the end, ISIS and al-Qaeda today do not return from a single capital or from a unifying central leadership, but from the peripheries that states leave without security, justice, or an economy.

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