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# Daesh: Which outlook for Iraq in 2023?

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## Authors

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**Summary :** In a report published on the 9th of February 2023, the UN affirms that the threat of Daesh remains high. According to senior UN officials, the terrorist group continues to exploit the local fragility and the inter-communitarian tensions in the Middle-East and in Africa. Virginie Sauner analyses the Iraqi current perspectives of this global threat who still remains "particularly worrying."

A UN's press release from the 9th of February 2023 reminds the world that the threat of Daesh on the world didn't decline. Weixiong Chen, acting executive director of the Counter-Terrorism Executive Directorate (CTED) said during a Security Council meeting that the terrorist group "continues to exploit the local fragility and the inter-communitarian tensions in Iraq, Syria and some parts of African, such as in terrorist recruitment".<sup>1</sup>

Daesh's DNA is Iraqi. The terrorist organization finds his origins in the political, social and communitarian context which was specific to Iraq in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century: the progressive decay of the country, a result of 2003 American intervention in Iraq. Daesh knew how to answer to Iraq's Sunni Arabs' resentment and distinguished itself from others radical Sunni Arab organizations by its ability to establish domination and control on a physical territory, the self-proclaimed "Caliphate".

In December 2017, Daesh has been military and territorially defeated in Iraq. However, the Islamic State Organization remains active. Their members, fighters and leaders, have the advantage knowing the territory and local actors. The reintegration to society of "Daesh Families" is far from achieved, the destitution of the Sunni Arab population remains in some provinces, the Al-Hol camp located in Syria is a jihadist "incubator"<sup>2</sup>, the Syrian-Iraqi border is extremely porous and the regional tensions as well as those between the Baghdad central government and Erbil remain high. All these elements are factors who explains the resilience of Daesh in Iraq. Certainly, many leaders of terrorist organization were killed in 2022 and the intensity of the threat seems weakened. However, the group remains active and are involved in the Iraqi instability.

## **Part 1 – state of the art of the presence and actions of Daesh in Iraq**

In 2022, Iraq is – after Nigeria – the second country in which Daesh led the greatest number of terrorist attacks (with a total of 484 attacks). If the African continent became the epicenter of the Islamic State's activity, the latter remains very active in its zone of origin, in Syria and Iraq. 833 people have been victims of these attacks in Iraq in 2022. Each Daesh operation has done in average two victims in the country (compared with 37 in the Sahel region for example)<sup>3</sup>. This difference can be explained by the type of attacks perpetrated. In Iraq, they are limited to insurrectional guerrilla-type actions, led at a small scale. Daesh's activity peak took place between April and May 2022, within the frame of the "revenge campaign", launched after the death of Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi and Abu Hamza el-Muhajer, both killed in Syria during military operation lead by USA in February 2022.



Iraq Karim Wasfi performs in Mosul's war-ravaged Old City. Wasfi is known for turning up with his cello to play in the aftermath of bombings in the capital Baghdad. ©GEAI LAURENCE/SIPA

This 2022 trend seems to be continuing in 2023. For example, on the 16<sup>th</sup> of February, in the al-Tarmia district located about 30km north of Baghdad (in the Salah ad-Din province), a Daesh jihadist killed four Iraqi soldiers by triggering his explosive belt, following nearly seven hours long firefight between terrorist organizations and the Iraqi armed forces<sup>4</sup>. The decrease in the number of attacks in some Iraqi regions can be explained by a strategic choice: the use of these zones as one of transit. The Nineveh province is currently used to transit fighters, weapons and materials to cells at the East of the country.

The anti-terrorist struggle against Daesh in Syria and Iraq is led by the US Central Command (Centcom) and the *Combined Joint Task Force - Operation Inherent Resolve*. It is supported by the local forces: the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the Iraqi Security Forces. The regular actions conducted have the purpose to defeat durably Daesh<sup>5</sup>. In 2022, 191 operations have been conducted in Iraq against Daesh (killing at least 220 fighters killed and jailing 159 fighters). During January 2023 alone, 33 operations were conducted by all partner forces in Iraq, in which nine fighters were killed and 29 were jailed. At the same time, some operations in Syria led to the killing of high-ranking officials in the organization. Daesh, although weakened in the region, remains active. The terrorist group has shown in the past its capacity to recover, to reorganize itself, recruit and change its strategy. Many factors explain it.

## Part 2 -Which outlook for Daesh in Iraq in 2023?

Daesh continues and will continue to recruit people because its ideology persists. There is an estimation of around 6 000 to 10 000 active fighters for ISIS. Movement across the porous border are quite frequent.

The camps and jails located in the Northern part of Syria as well as Iraq are a real breeding ground for the recruitment to the terrorist organization. In a press release issued on the 29<sup>th</sup> of December 2022, CENTCOM reported that approximately 10,000 Daesh fighters were held in Syria, and 20,000 in Iraq<sup>6</sup>. These numbers explain the scale and the stakes of the

attacks (such as the "Breaking the Walls" operation) that were carried out to free the jihadists. Each soldier liberated is an additional soldier that allows Daesh to strike a blow, both mediatic and strategic, while challenging the security forces in charge of managing these prisons. The chaos which followed the violent earthquake during early February 2023 could worsen the situation. 20 Daesh jihadists have reportedly escaped from the "black prison" of Rajo in Northern Syria.

The "Cubs of the Caliphate" are the organization's third source of current and future recruitment. Around 25 000 Daesh children are jailed in the Syrian al-Hol camp. They are the prime target for radicalization. Many NGOs are calling states to organize the return of these children to their countries of origin. According to *Human Rights Watch*<sup>7</sup>, Iraq has actually currently repatriated approximately 2,850 children.

Regardless of their affiliation with Daesh, rehabilitation and the reintegration of Sunni Arab population who have been displaced in the camps after the defeat of Daesh is a major priority for viable and sustainable peace. In June 2022, more of 80% of the six million people displaced during the period of the self-proclaimed Daesh caliphate have returned home<sup>8</sup>. 1,2 million of Iraqis are actually displaced within their country, of which 180,000 are in 26 camps (25 in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region and one in the Nineveh Governorate). A recent report of United Nations Development Program (UNDP)<sup>9</sup> has shown, from based on interviews, that the increase in Daesh activity hinders the willingness of communities to allow the return and rehabilitation of these families. With every new attack, the rejection of their return becomes stronger. The administrative obstacles and the daily-life material difficulties are other elements of the reality of these families. Daesh continues to present itself as the only possible alternative for them.

The first few weeks of the year 2023 have shown a resurgence in the activities of Daesh in the Syrian-Iraqi region. The evolution of the terrorist group's presence and threat will depend on several factors. First, how long will U.S. multifaceted support to local security forces last? Furthermore, the ongoing tensions between Baghdad and Erbil continue to create a grey area, to the benefit of Daesh. The management and security of prisons in northern Syria is another major issue: because they are places of radicalization, but also because the release of its fighters is a major objective of the terrorist organization at a time when recruitment seems more difficult. Finally, economic and social development is a prerequisite for the rehabilitation and reintegration of Iraq's Sunni Arab population, whether or not they are affiliated with an extremist organization. Daesh will remain present and threatening as long as the Sunni Arabs continue to feel injustice, humiliation and persecution.