In the past four years, we have seen a sharp increase in the number of conflicts taking place throughout the world. This increase is mainly due to a large number of conflicts involving the Islamic State (IS). In 2018, 12 out of 52 conflicts involved IS, and approximately 20% of all battle-related deaths occurred in IS-related conflicts. But what will happen now that IS has been taken down in Syria? Without their stronghold, will they be able to continue their expansion into other countries? Based on two recent studies on IS fighting in Syria, we argue that IS strategies can also work effectively in other settings.
Even with the decline of IS in 2018, the share of battle deaths attributed to IS. In 2017, this share amounted to 40%. This share indicates the share of battle deaths that are related to IS conflict and other conflicts. We see an increase in battle deaths during the period in which IS is expanding. The orange dotted line shows the increase in battle deaths related to IS, and that they have been decreasing over time.

When IS becomes involved in existing conflicts, the conflicts become more complex. This typically takes the form of increased polarization. The Mindanao conflict in the Philippines provides an illustrative example of this. The Mindanao conflict has been ongoing for years and has experienced several successful bilateral ceasefires and peace agreements. Nevertheless, several peace agreements have led to splintering due to dissatisfaction with the outcome among factions of the rebel groups. In 2016, IS started recruiting jihadists to go to the Philippines, and there was thus a large influx of foreign fighters to the country. In addition, rebels from the local Islamic groups such as Abu Sayyaf also joined. IS has claimed responsibility for several bloody terrorist attacks in the Philippines since 2016.

Third-Party Involvement

Over the past few years, we have seen a development towards an internationalization of civil conflicts, i.e. internal conflicts where an external government gets involved, usually supporting the government side in the conflict. From 2013 to 2018, the number of conflicts with external state involvement increased from 22% to 35%. Importantly, IS involvement can be seen as a form of third-party involvement or internationalization of conflict as well, but rather by a non-state actor supporting other non-state actors.
Previously, other Islamic organizations have done something similar, for example Al Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), which has been involved in conflicts in Algeria, Mauritania and Mali, or the spread of Al-Shabab from Somalia to Kenya. However, these previous cases have been geographically concentrated involvements, while in contrast, IS has a much broader scope. This is a fairly new trend that could potentially alter how we see conflicts at an aggregated level. The questions that arise from this development are: what will happen now that IS has fallen in Iraq and Syria? Has IS been able to secure a strong enough foothold in these other conflicts that they are able to continue interfering in conflicts outside their core areas? Or, are they dependent on having a territorial and institutional stronghold, which until recently Syria has represented? To shed some light on these questions, we look at a couple of studies that analyze IS priorities when attacking in Syria and Iraq.

**Light or Fight?**

Rustad, Gates and Butler (2019) examine the relationship between patterns of attack and economic development using nightlight emissions as a proxy for economic activities. When a rebel group gets strong enough to control territory, we might expect to see the rebels produce a variety of collective goods that benefit the people of the controlled territory. Some groups, however, invest in guns or tanks, walls or locks. These are considered non-productive fighting efforts and have very different implications. The productivity levels of the rebel group can tell us something about their strategies.

Rustad, Gates and Butler (2019) find that IS-controlled territory is negatively correlated with high levels of nightlight emissions. This indicates that fewer resources are allocated to the production of goods in territory under IS authority. Thus, the statistical analysis of light emissions in Syria and Iraq shows that IS devotes most of its resources to fighting and not to economic development, as represented by light emissions. As long as IS has resource capacity to keep fighting, we can expect the fighting to continue.

This means that, if IS employs the same tactics in other countries as well, they can engage in an ongoing asymmetric war for a long period of time, even if their military power is relatively small.

**Contested Territories**

IS, for a time, was widely regarded to be a potent global threat. From early 2013 to early 2015, IS expanded steadily, conquering more and more territory. Since about April 2015, the territory controlled by IS has shrunk. By August 2018, all that remained of IS territory were a few small patches in remote regions of Syria and Iraq, primarily confined to fragmented territories near the south-eastern parts of Syria on the north banks of the Euphrates river. Figure 4 shows the territorial expansion and decline of IS between 2015 and 2018. This development has significantly affected the capabilities of IS to fight, and IS have been forced to seek alternative forms of irregular violence such as guerrilla warfare and terrorist activities.

Several conditions benefited IS during its territorial expansion between 2013 and 2015. First, IS is built around a strict puritanical form of
Sunni Islam, where IS promotes the use of religious violence to form a Sunni Islamic state, the Caliphate. Gates and Tollefsen (2019) show that the territorial aspirations of IS are built upon targeting locations in Syria where there is ample availability of potential recruits. Their findings show that Sunni dominated areas are more likely to be conquered by IS. In these areas, recruitment (both voluntary and forced) is more likely to be successful, and resistance is likely to be lower than in government and Kurdish strongholds. Local recruits may offer a motivated group of fighters that might hold grievances against the Syrian government and maintain a personal history of exclusion from Alawite elites.

While local recruits have been an essential source of fighters for IS, foreign militants have provided ideologically motivated fighters. These have been recruited from countries globally and have entered IS-controlled territory by crossing nearby borders.

Border areas have played an important role in IS’s fight. Not only are they a means for foreign militants to enter the fray from neighbouring countries, they also provide opportunities for smuggling resources. Further, border points also make strategic settlement areas, as they tend to be remote places where government power is often weak.

It is well documented that, early on in the Syrian Civil War, IS made significant efforts to take control over areas rich in petroleum. Throughout the conflict, IS have occupied oil fields and have generated significant revenues from oil sales (Lee 2018). As many have noted, IS became the wealthiest terrorist group in history, partly from its smuggling and sale of oil from Syria and Iraq. Through this revenue stream, IS have secured large incomes to support their fight to establish the Caliphate. Thus, its territorial ambitions are tightly linked to oil resources and to borders necessary to smuggle resources out of the country for external trade.

Porous border areas such as the one between Syria and Iraq offer remote hinterlands where weak government forces are less able to project their force. Gates and Tollefsen (2019) show that IS are more likely to take control over settlements further away from Damascus and Kurdish dominated areas. Border areas were critical in the initial phase of territorial control by IS, where IS conquered villages in the south-eastern parts of Syria after crossing the border from Iraq. These factors highlight the importance of proximity to borders for IS.

Conclusion

While IS has significantly weakened in Syria and Iraq, new knowledge about IS expansion and insurgencies can be applied to other countries where IS is operating. A key driver of IS expansion was the availability of foreign fighters and unemployed Baathist military trained personnel from Iraq. They initially operated in remote areas and seized control over petroleum fields to secure funding for further expansion. If we look at the list of countries with significant IS activity in 2017, Libya, Chad, Niger and Nigeria have petroleum resources. The same countries also encompass large swatches of uncontrolled hinterlands as well as excluded groups, factors that are considered to increase the likelihood of rebel insurgencies.

Thus, it is important for policy makers to regard IS as a conflict actor whose reach extends beyond Syria and Iraq, and to take seriously the prospect that IS may continue to make its mark on the international conflict scene for many years to come.