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MILITARILY DEFEATING THE ISLAMIC STATE

Bottom Line Up Front:

- The Islamic State is facing a near-total collapse of its territorial holdings in Syria and Iraq.
- On September 5, forces of the Assad regime broke the 3-year siege of the eastern city of Deir al-Zour.
- On Syria's border with Lebanon, Islamic State fighters for the first time made a deal to escape with their families rather than fight to the death.
- The question of what comes next is pressing, as the Islamic State continues to implode.

After more than three years controlling major population centers and territory in Syria and Iraq, the so-called Islamic State is collapsing under the sustained pressure of numerous, often rival armies. While the terrorist group's military defeat was in some ways inevitable, it certainly hasn't been easy. [Local forces](#), along with their [civilian populations](#) in Syria and Iraq have paid an extremely heavy price. However, once the various military forces in both countries improved their leadership, logistics, training, and tactics (and gained substantial ground and [air support](#) from the U.S. or Russia, depending on the group), the Islamic State was doomed as an occupying force capable of seizing and governing territory. The phase of [toppling the group](#) and stripping away all pretenses of its being an actual state is nearing its climax.

In Iraq, the Islamic State still maintains some level of control in the desert areas of western Anbar Province, but has essentially lost all the major population centers it held in some form or fashion since 2014. The [retaking of Mosul](#) by Iraqi forces in

July was a very difficult military endeavor, and parts of the city have been flattened. Physical rebuilding and social reconstruction will take years, likely with the Islamic State still engaging in high-level terrorism, including car bombings and assassinations. West of Mosul, the rapid and total collapse of the group's defense of Tal Afar was somewhat unexpected, given it has few areas to which it can retreat. In Syria, the Islamic State faces the loss of its two remaining major population centers, with their self-declared capital of Raqqa of great practical and symbolic importance. Units of the Syrian Democratic Forces are battling Islamic State fighters in Raqqa and have retaken 60% of the city. The U.S. is providing substantial and direct support, in the form of Special Operations Forces (SOF) deployed as advisors and force multipliers, and heavy air support. That air support has recently seen an increase in civilians being killed or wounded, with air strikes hitting the wrong targets in a very compressed and confused battlefield. It will still take weeks or months of heavy fighting to decisively dislodge the Islamic State from Raqqa, where many foreign fighters likely remain. In the western Qalamoun area, near Syria's border with Lebanon, Islamic State fighters for the first time made a deal to escape with their families rather than fight to the death - an indication morale is weakening. While the fates of senior leaders including self-styled Caliph [Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi](#) aren't publicly known it is assumed he and others are still alive somewhere along the border between Syria and Iraq.

The Assad regime has also, in recent days, made substantial progress against the Islamic State in the eastern region of Deir al-Zour. For three years, the group tried to take the city and a small garrison of regime forces to the south; an estimated 93,000 people survived hellish conditions, alleviated periodically though U.N humanitarian airlifts. Deir al-Zour is important to the Islamic State as it is located along the Euphrates River, where the group is finding itself squeezed by forces on all sides. With substantial Russian air support, the Assad regime is expected to press its offensive against throughout the province. As with every other territorial conquest against the Islamic State, the question of how to rebuild broken cities and societies looms over every tactical success; in Syria these questions are further complicated by a still on-going civil war.

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