

Islamic State (ISIS)

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), variously known as the Islamic State of Iraq and The Levant, or the Islamic State, is a radical, Sunni jihadist organization currently active in Iraq and Syria. ISIS is a successor organization of Al Qaeda in Iraq and was formally established in 2006, at which time it became known as the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). ISIS is currently led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, an Iraqi born in Samara in 1971 who took part in the post-2003 Iraqi insurgency following the Anglo-American-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003; he was also a member of Al Qaeda in Iraq. Al-Baghdadi has been the acknowledged leader of ISIS since 2010.

Origins of ISIS

As with Al Qaeda in Iraq, ISIS sought to expel all foreign troops and personnel from Iraq and wage war against the Shia-dominated, secular government of Iraq. These organizations have not only battled coalition and Iraqi armed forces, but they have also engaged in myriad acts of terrorism and war crimes that have frequently involved civilians. ISIS, however, had ambitions beyond these activities. It sought to establish an Islamic regime, based on strict Sharia law, within Iraq and Syria. It even hoped eventually to extend its reach into the Levant, which encompasses Lebanon, Palestine, and Jordan.

By 2010, Baghdadi had emerged as a top leader of Al Qaeda in Iraq. However, his vision of founding an Islamic emirate clashed with the more modest goals of that group, and so he began to assemble his own rebel group. Thereafter, he co-opted several other jihadist organizations, most notably the Mujahideen Shura Council (MSC), and began recruiting followers who shared his more expansive vision. Observers believed that Baghdadi enjoyed success in recruiting fighters (many are foreigners, and some even hailed from Western Europe and the United States) because he was a charismatic military strategist and battlefield commander rather than a theologian.

ISIS Control of Iraqi and Syrian Territory

By the spring of 2013, ISIS had become a potent force in both Iraq and Syria. In Syria, ISIS has taken full advantage of the bloody civil war there, which has been raging since early 2011. ISIS rebels have been battling Syrian government forces defending the regime of President Bashar al-Assad, as well as other anti-government rebel groups. Many Syrians have come to despise ISIS because of its violence toward civilians, attacks on other rebel groups, and its uncompromising positions, which include the subjugation and enslavement of women. In early 2014, Western-backed Syrian rebels and even other Islamist groups launched a major campaign to expel ISIS from Syria. It met with only modest success, however, and since that time ISIS extended its reach within Syria, to include areas populated by the Kurds.

ISIS had an even greater impact in Iraq, however, and by the summer of 2014 it was threatening the very existence of the Iraqi government of then-president Nuri al-Maliki. Throughout 2013, ISIS made major advances in northern and western Iraq. By late January 2014, ISIS and affiliated groups had managed to seize control of all of Anbar Province. In early June 2014, the group enjoyed even bigger gains, taking Mosul (Iraq's second-largest city) as well as Tikrit. ISIS forces reached to only some 60 miles north of Baghdad and were attempting to drive further south.

The fall of Mosul stunned the Iraqi government and much of the international community. By mid-June, the United

States and other Western nations were involved in urgent negotiations to determine how they should aid Maliki's government and prevent all of Iraq from falling into the hands of the ISIS. Unfortunately, the corrupt, ineffectual, and rabidly anti-Sunni Maliki regime proved virtually incapable of halting ISIS's advance, and many components of the Iraqi Army simply bolted and fled in the face of ISIS offensives.

Resistance to ISIS

During the summer of 2014, the Barack Obama administration began formulating a comprehensive strategy to reverse ISIS's advances. This would come to include cobbling together a multinational coalition, including a number of Arab states, to participate in air strikes against ISIS targets, arming moderate Syrian rebel groups combating ISIS fighters, sending more military hardware to the Iraqi government, dispatching some 3,000 military "advisers" to Iraq, and commencing airstrikes against ISIS. These began on August 8, 2014, and the U.S.-coalition air campaign against ISIS in Syria commenced on September 23. Those operations, codenamed Operation INHERENT RESOLVE since October 15, 2014, continued into 2015. At the same time the Obama administration had announced its intent to defeat ISIS, it was lobbying for Maliki to be replaced as Iraqi prime minister. Under great internal and international pressure, he finally resigned on September 8 and was succeeded by Haider al-Abadi, who pledged to pursue conciliatory policies in Iraq and to work cooperatively with the United States and its coalition partners in order to subdue the ISIS insurgency.

By late December 2014, there were signs that the anti-ISIS effort was beginning to show some incipient signs of progress. Although Syrian officials reported that ISIS had killed 1,878 people (the vast majority of them civilians) between June 2014 and January 2015, Kurdish fighters recaptured the Syrian border town of Kobani on January 26, 2015. They also pushed ISIS out of the Iraqi city of Sinjar, a development that was hailed as a turning point in the war against ISIS.

Continued Growth and Violence

The threat from ISIS was considerably larger than its military operations in Iraq and Syria might suggest. Indeed, the group routinely violated basic international law and human rights by kidnapping innocent foreign civilians, beheading them, and then releasing the videos of the executions on the internet. And in addition to targeting innocent civilians, ISIS also engaged in the severe repression of women in areas under its control, including the kidnapping, sexual exploitation, and enslavement of women and even young girls.

On April 1, 2015, the Iraqi government declared a major victory over ISIS forces after having driven the group from Tikrit. Throughout the spring of 2015, Iraqi forces, aided by air support from the United States and other coalition governments, aggressively pursued ISIS. Meanwhile, since the summer of 2014, Iran has been launching air strikes against ISIS targets within Iraq. Iran has also sent special militia forces, known as the Quds Force, to Iraq to engage ISIS on the ground. The United States and Iran, although fighting on the same side in this instance, have repeatedly declared that the two nations are not coordinating their military operations. Iranian militia units played a major role in the retaking of Tikrit.

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Further Reading

BBC News. "Profile: Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant." Accessed June 13, 2014. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-24179084>; Brisard, Jean-Charles, and Damien Martinez. *Zarqawi: The New Face of al-Qaeda*. New York: Other Press, 2005.

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