American Foreign Policy Council

The Islamic State

Quick Facts

Geographical Areas of Operation: East Asia, Eurasia, Europe, Latin America, Middle East and North Africa, North America, South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa

Strength: Estimates at year's end suggested between 19,000 and 25,000*

Leadership: Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi

Religious Identification: Sunni Islam

Quick Facts courtesy of the U.S. State Department's Country Reports on Terrorism, Last Updated 2015

**These estimates only reflect membership in Syria and Iraq*

Overview

The "Islamic State," or ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), refers to a* Salafi *Islamist militant faction that traces its origins back to a* jihadist *group led in the late 1990s by the Jordanian Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Moving to Iraq in 2002, the group began as one of several militias challenging the U.S.-led military presence in the country, eventually contesting for leadership among the various mujahideen groups. Initially independent of al-Qaeda, Zarqawi swore allegiance to Osama bin Laden in 2004, and his group would become The Al-Qaeda Organization in the Land of the Two Rivers (better known as al-Qaeda in Iraq, or AQI). Strengthened by (mostly Arab) foreign fighters entering Iraq through Syria, the organization then led the Mujahideen Shura Council (MSC) made up of six* Salafi jihadist *groups. Despite al-Zarqawi's death in June 2006, the MSC became the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) in October 2006 in expectation of establishing an Islamic state in conquered territory modeled on a* Salafi *conception of the "pure" Islamic state that existed during the formative years of Islam's ascendance. This vaultingly ambitious

"Islamic State" project would be temporarily undermined by an increasingly successful American-led counter-insurgency campaign in Iraq from 2007 to 2010.

In May 2010, ISI announced the selection of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as its leader. A radical cleric from Baghdad of tribal origin and roots in Al-Samarra, al-Baghdadi would rebuild the organization from its nadir, fighting both the Iraqi government and rival Iraqi insurgent groups. Al-Baghdadi announced in a 2012 speech that the group was prioritizing the freeing of imprisoned group members and targeting police personnel. As U.S. troops departed Iraq in December 2011 the Iraqi Government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki assumed an increasingly sectarian character, deeply alienating the Sunni Arab population. ISI then launched a series of successful raids to liberate captured members from Iraqi prisons and sent fighters to establish a presence in 2011 in Syria amid an uprising against President Bashar al-Assad.

By April 2013, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi attempted to assert his control over the ISI-al-Qaeda joint project in Syria by announcing the creation of ISIS, making the al-Qaeda-affiliated Nusrah Front part of his organization. Fissures in the **jihadist** *ranks deepened as ISIS' leadership bid was rejected by both al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri and Nusrah Front* **emir** *Abu Muhamad al-Julani. Yet, as* **jihadists** *increasingly joined the ranks of ISIS, the organization succeeded in taking the major Syrian city of Raqqa in August 2013 from rival groups. Continued unrest in Iraq opened the doors for ISIS to take the major city of Fallujah in January 2014. A disavowal of ISIS by al-Qaeda in February 2014 barely seemed to slow the momentum of the group in Iraq's Anbar province.*

The shockingly swift and easy June 2014 takeover of Mosul and much of Iraq's Sunni Arab north propelled ISIS to the front and center of global media attention. The group followed these military victories by declaring its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, as Caliph Ibrahim, and aggressively demanded loyalty from all Sunni Muslims. Buoyed by an image of invincibility and authenticity, the ISIS propaganda juggernaut issued a call for Muslims worldwide to emigrate and build the nascent state. The cornucopia of military equipment captured in the fall of Mosul and the resulting flood of new recruits helped the group expand in both Syria and Iraq, but its brutal treatment of religious minorities in Northern Iraq led to the creation of a U.S.-led military coalition against it. ISIS began suffering losses, most notably when it lost control of the Mosul Dam in August 2014 and the besieged city of Amerli in September 2014. While more than 10,000 Coalition airstrikes slowed ISIS momentum in Iraq and parts of Syria, the organization demonstrated its potency by scoring major victories in Ramadi, Iraq and Tadmur, Syria in spring 2015. Meanwhile, its potent propaganda and revolutionary image of an idealized Islamic state

reborn at the "End of Days" continues to attract a steady stream of new recruits and oaths of allegiance from substantial* Salafi jihadist *groups in Libya, West Africa, and Egypt, as well as pockets of fighters scattered throughout turbulent regions of the Muslim world. By 2016, ISIS was confronting an ongoing series of important military reversals and defeats on the ground in its Syria-Iraq heartland, including the major cities of Ramadi and Fallujah and a wide swathe of strategic Northern Syria which threatened to completely cut off the Caliphate statelet land corridor from the outside world. ISIS has responded to this continued military pressure by trying to ramp up the work of its franchises and international terrorist operations worldwide. Facing enemies on every side and implacable in its methods and ambitions, the Islamic State, both on the ground and in cyberspace, has revolutionized the world of Islamism.

History and Ideology

A few months after the death of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in 2006, the al-Qaeda in Iraq-led Mujahideen Shura Council (MSC) became the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). An October 15, 2006 statement announcing the new entity compared it in size to the 7th century state of Medina under the Prophet Muhammad, and called for Muslims everywhere to support the state, which would be the precursor to a resurrected Caliphate to be based in Baghdad.[1] A month later, a 20-minute audio file by Abu Hamza al-Muhajir, a veteran Egyptian jihadist who had replaced al-Zarqawi as emir of al-Qaeda in Iraq, contained his pledge of allegiance to Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, the "Qurayshi and Hashemi, descendant of Hussein, Commander of the Faithful." Al-Muhajir pledged his "12,000 fighter strong Army of al-Qa'ida" to the new leader and called on other Iraqi jihadist groups to unite under Al-Baghdadi's standard.[2] He declared that this was the beginning of a new phase "where we put down the foundations for the project of an Islamic caliphate." While ostensibly still part of al-Qaeda, the new organization revealed a revolutionary agenda that would dramatically impact 21st century Salafi jihadism.

The announcement of the Islamic State did not emerge out of a vacuum. It was designed to mimic the most "authentic" Islamic state that existed during the time of the Prophet Mohammed and the idealized period of the Righteously Guided Caliphs (622-661 A.D.). Al-Qaeda, by contrast, focused on prioritizing the conflict against the West and especially the United States, and saw the creation of the Caliphate as an eventual goal, to be pursued when conditions improved and there was consensus among the Muslim umma (community of believers).

Al-Zarqawi himself spoke in 2004 about a near-future apocalyptic state arising out of Mesopotamia. "The spark had been lit in Iraq," he said, "and its flames will blaze, Allah willing, until they consume the armies of the Cross at Dabiq."[3] In 2005, an

AQI spokesman specifically listed the "re-establishment of the Righteously-Guided Caliphate" as one of the group's principal goals, along with jihad and "renewing pure monotheism which was sullied by the filth of polytheistic elements."[4] In 2006, with increased insurgent momentum and success in Iraq, the leaders of ISI sought to make this ambitious agenda a reality.

By December 2006, the Islamic State's new proto-caliph dismissed Osama bin Laden as the "sheikh of the Mujahideen" in his inaugural speech and offered the American military safe conduct out of Iraq provided they leave their heavy weapons behind and depart within a month. Abu Omar al-Baghdadi claimed that 70 percent of Sunni tribal sheikhs supported the new organization and that more than 13 jihadist groups had joined. He even boasted that the new State sought to establish an empire stretching from Spain to China.[5] Criticism from dissident jihadists toward Baghdadi's astonishing declaration were not long in coming, with some complaining that the new entity was fighting other jihadist factions rather than infidels in order to compel their submission.[6]

The Islamic State pursued a dual strategy of fighting the Iraqi government and American forces, on one hand, and rival insurgent factions on the other. In March and April 2007, ISI clashed with the 1920 Revolution Brigade and with Ansar al-Sunna. At the same time, suicide car bombs (VBIEDs) killed hundreds in Tel Afar, Al-Hillah and at a Baghdad market.

Abu Omar al-Baghdadi's third speech, in March 2007, announced that Jews and Christians living among Muslims were now considered fair game and that Sunni Muslims who participate in the Iraqi political process were considered apostates who could be lawfully killed. Much of the rest of his remarks focused on rival Islamist groups who participated in a "fierce multi-faceted media attack on the nascent State of Islam."

A fourth speech by the ISI "Commander of the Faithful" later in 2007 extolled the great accomplishment of the Islamic State:

> "The people of Iraq today are one of the greatest nations on earth in maintaining tawheed (strict monotheism), for there is no polytheistic Sufism being propagated or shrines being visited or innovated festivals being celebrated, or candles being lit of a pilgrimage being made to a pagan totem, because the people of Iraq have destroyed all these shrines with their bare hands so Allah alone would be worshipped."[7]

The image of what ISIS would become was visible in August 2007, when the group orchestrated its bloodiest attack to-date in Iraq: a series of truck bombs in the Yazidi towns of Kahtaniya and Jazeera which killed between 500 and 900 people and injured 1,500 more.[8] While the group remained active in killing and bombing, U.S.

and Iraqi counter-insurgency operations, aided by the increasingly effective, U.S.-backed Sons of Iraq or "Sahwa" (Sunni tribes armed to fight al-Qaeda) was taking its toll.

Abu Omar's fifth speech threatened Iran with a two-month deadline to stop aiding Shi'a in Iraq or face war. The threat extended to any Sunni Arab country doing business with Shi'a. His sixth speech, in September 2007, castigated Sunnis, both politicians and tribesmen, working against the Islamic State and threatened terrorism against Sweden for the publication of cartoon depicting the Prophet Muhammad as a dog:

> "Every sniveling coward dares to insult us, from the worshippers of the Cross, to the worshippers of the Devil (Yazidis), even the worshippers of the cow. Our honor and blood have become the cheapest thing in all the world and when we try to arise from our slumber to regain our glory and the dignity of our past, we are stabbed in the back."[9]

Abu Omar's next speeches seemingly referenced a group with a powerful idea that was flailing to maintain relevance. His eighth, in December 2007, decried Arab nationalism as an invention of Arab Christians aimed at weakening Islam: "to Hell with the proponents of darkness who want the return of the Ba'athist Army." In the hopes of fanning the dying embers of jihad, his ninth speech was dedicated to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Meanwhile, the death toll in Iraq in January 2008 had fallen to its lowest mark in almost three years.[10] Perhaps as a sign of desperation, the group seemed to have used two women suffering from mental illness as suicide bombers in another Baghdad market attack in February 2008.[11]

The Islamic State's "Minister of War," Abu Hamza al-Muhajir, resurfaced in October 2008 with a revealing 44-minute interview. Al-Muhajir explained that establishing the Islamic State had always been a dream of Iraqi jihadists, but that conditions had been ripe for the establishment of an entity that would embody and protect Iraq's (and the region's) Sunni Arab Muslims. He seemed to make clear that the decision to try and establish a "state" was only made after the death of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. He also revealed that the military commander of the Islamic State had been a former Colonel in Saddam's army, and that the point of jihad was to secure a State in order to enforce God's law following the precedent of Muhammad in Medina.[12]

Abu Omar al-Baghdadi marked the second anniversary of the Islamic State in October 2008 in a defiant speech, given the increasing success of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) at the time. He boasted that it was better to kill one rafidah (Shi'a) than a hundred Crusaders.[13] The election of a new American president in November 2008 engendered still another speech directed at the President-elect and at the Christians more broadly, calling on them to purge their religion of the "corruptions" instituted by Emperor Constantine at Nicaea.

Despite increasing success by the ISF, the Islamic State continued to strike out with its deadliest operation of the year on April 23, 2009, a dual suicide bomb attack that killed around 130 in Baghdad and Diyala. A June 2009 communique followed, expressing frustration at the nationalist orientation of some Sunni jihadist groups, which had still refused to join ISI.

A month later, Abu Omar condemned Iraqi authorities and those who cooperate with them, especially the Sunni Arab Islamist Iraqi Islamist Party (IIP). He urged Sunnis to repent, join Salafi Islam "for the age of nationalism, pan-Arabism and Ba'thism is gone for good." He warned about the threat posed by Shi'a seeking to extend a belt from Tehran to Beirut by spreading influence in Sunni-majority areas. An August 2009 coordinated attack in Baghdad featured several car bombs and mortar shells hitting government ministries, killing over a hundred and wounding over 500 in what was described as the worst attack since the Yazidi bombings two years before.

Leveraging intelligence provided by a high-ranking ISI prisoner, U.S. and Iraqi forces succeeded in killing both ISI War Minister Abu Hamza al-Muhajir and Abu Omar al-Baghdadi on April 18, 2010. U.S. Vice-President Joe Biden called it a "potentially devastating blow" to the group. A subdued statement on May 16 announced the naming of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as the new leader of the Islamic State of Iraq.

While the Islamic State of Iraq was announced in 2006 at a period that seemed to be especially propitious for success, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (Ibrahim Awad al-Badri al-Samarrai) took over an organization in disarray, with its top leaders killed, disunity in the ranks of Sunni Arabs, and the seeming growing success of both the Iraqi Security Forces and the Sunni Awakening Movement in Anbar Province.

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was a long-time radical Salafi cleric whose extended family had both ties to the Ba'ath Party and military of Saddam Hussein and to the larger constellation of Salafi networks in the region. A Salafi jihadist before the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, he eventually rose to become the head of the Islamic State's important Sharia Committee and member of its most senior councils.[14] He now set a course to revive the organization's fortunes, doubling down on terrorist attacks, focusing on peeling away dissident Sunnis and expanding its territory. [15]

On August 25, 2010 a string of suicide bomb attacks hit Iraqi cities from Mosul to Basra during the month of Ramadan. The coordinated attacks were described by ISI as an "earth-shaking wave" carried out by "battalions of monotheists" for the sake of the "blessed prisoners." These actions were led by the "Commander of the Faithful, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi." The ISI statement also included a mention of support to jihadist Al-Shabaab fighters in Somalia.[16] An even higher-profile attack occurred October 2010, with the massacre of Christian worshippers attending a Mass at the Syrian Catholic Cathedral in Baghdad.[17] The Islamic State press release that followed sought to tie the killing, which may have been a failed hostage taking, to events in Egypt involving the supposed conversion of some Coptic women to Islam.[18]

Al-Baghdadi's profile remained low while ISI continued to carry out terrorist attacks in 2011. One particularly notorious attack, however, targeted Iraq's best-known Sunni mosque in Baghdad during Ramadan.[19] With the American military departure complete in December 2011, the government of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki began to unravel some of the hard-won gains in forging a multi-sectarian consensus,[20] and terrorist actions claimed by the Islamic State began to grow. In January 2012, large scale attacks against Shi'a civilians struck during the Arbaeen rituals in three Shi'a holy sites.[21]

Al-Baghdadi re-appeared in an audio message on July 21, 2012 announcing an extended campaign to free all jihadist prisoners and capture territory. This effort, dubbed "Destroying the Walls," presaged a series of coordinated attacks whose lethality and sequencing showed that the group was bouncing back after the departure of U.S. forces.[22] The use of VBIED "waves," often aimed at Iraqi Shi'a neighborhoods, was now a standard tool in the arsenal of the Islamic State.[23]

The growing popular revolt against the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in 2011 led to the outbreak of increasingly savage and sectarian fighting there. The first al-Qaeda fighters, sent from the Islamic State in Iraq, arrived in Syria that year and began organizing. The new Syria-focused organization, the Nusrah Front, was announced in January 2012 and was led by a veteran Syrian jihadist named Abu Muhammad al-Julani who had spent years fighting in Iraq. According to one source, al-Julani came from a middle class family in Damascus and the "Al-Julani" kunya referred not to the Golan Heights of Syria but to the Al-Julani neighborhood of Fallujah where he had distinguished himself.[24]

Blessed by al-Qaeda Central's leadership and ISI, al-Julani grew his organization, often working in concert with other Islamist rebel factions. By April 2013, the Islamic State sought to reassert its control over the Nusrah Front, which it claimed to have funded and created, an assertion of control rejected by al-Julani and by al-Qaeda's leader Ayman al-Zawahiri. Battle-tested and ruthless, the now newly-renamed ISIS took the major Syrian city of Raqqa, not from the Assad regime but from other rebel groups including the Nusrah Front.[25] With Raqqa swollen with internally displaced persons (IDPs) from other parts of Syria, for the first time the Islamic State had full, uncontested control over a major population area. Jihadists, both Arab and foreign, flocked to the group, among them the famed Chechen jihadist Abu Omar al-Shishani and his hardened fighters.[26]

ISIS launched eight separate attacks on Iraqi prisons from July 2012 to July 2013, two of which resulted in the release of at least 600 prisoners.[27] The successful attack on the Abu Ghraib facility in July 2013 released, among others, the ISIS Minister of War, Abdul Rahman al-Bilawi.[28] The group's new military campaign, announced in July 2013 and titled "Soldiers Harvest," aimed at intimidating and wearing down Iraqi Security Forces, especially in Sunni majority areas of Iraq that ISIS sought to

control. ISIS spokesman al-Adnani claimed that the operation actually began in Syria but also seemed to focus on Iraq's Ninewa and Northern Diyala areas.[29] Overall, the situation in Iraq steadily deteriorated, with the level of violence in 2013 reaching levels not seen in five years.

In December 2013, ISIS succeeded in entrapping and killing the leadership of the Iraqi Security Force's 7th Division in a synchronized attack involving multiple suicide bombers near Rutbah.[30] That same month, seemingly oblivious to the storm brewing, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki cracked down on Sunni critics in Anbar province.[31] In January 2014, a resurgent ISIS rapidly took over the Iraqi city of Fallujah.[32] This major ISIS achievement, coming after its overall resurgence and success in Syria, was dismissed by President Barack Obama as "various local power struggles and disputes" by rival jihadists.[33] By this time, however, the number of foreign fighters in Syria, most of them part of ISIS, exceeded the number that had gone to fight in Afghanistan against the Soviets.[34]

While ISIS videos featured all sorts of telegenic European and exotic recruits from Chile or Cambodia, the group's leadership remained overwhelmingly Iraqi and Syrian, except for notable field commander Al-Shishani.[35] A core of that leadership came from the officer corps of Saddam Hussein's former army.[36] One other prominent exception was the firebrand ISIS cleric from Bahrain, Turki al-Bin'ali, who aggressively confronted the enemies of the Islamic State among the regional ulema (group of Muslim scholars).[37]

ISIS' encounter with Syria and its friction with al-Qaeda's sclerotic leadership led to a revolution in the way it produced propaganda. Previously, much of its video production was focused internally on events inside Iraq.[38] While the elements of soaring ambition, extreme sectarianism, and vivid violence had always been hallmarks of ISIS propaganda, this was now coupled with polished technical means and an expanding social media network. Many of the themes encapsulated in ISIS propaganda were not new, but their impact grew substantially the deeper the organization embedded itself in the Syrian conflict.[39] The Islamic State's media campaign first dealt at length with Syria in January 2013.[40] Its long running series "Windows Upon the Land of Epic Battles" ran from 2013 to 2014, documenting the organization's growth and success and its melding of the battlefields of Iraq and Syria into one.

The February 2014 disavowal of ISIS by al-Qaeda leader Ayman Zawahiri seemed to slow the organization down. A loose coalition of Islamist rebels succeeded in driving ISIS away from the Idlib and Aleppo areas shortly thereafter.[41] Al-Qaeda now fully realized that ISIS was nakedly challenging it for supremacy of the worldwide jihadist movement and doing so on the highest profile of all battlefields.[42] ISIS' propaganda and military objectives dovetailed in "Clanging of the Swords, Part IV," a lengthy video exercise in psychological warfare preparing the ground for a military offensive in Northern Iraq by terrifying ISF recruits.[43]

On June 4, 2014 an ISIS operation to take Mosul was launched under the command of former Abu Ghraib detainee Abu Abdurahman al-Bilawi, who ended up being killed early in the fighting. Within a week, the city had fallen and several ISF divisions had disintegrated. Tremendous stores of U.S.-supplied weapons and materiel were captured. Determined and ruthless ISIS fighters, outnumbered 15 to one, had gained an astonishing victory.[44] Subsequently, the northern town of Tal Afar fell, as did much of Anbar Province, including several key border crossings. Mosul's ancient Christian community was extinguished in one fell swoop as all Christians were expelled en masse.[45] As many as 500,000 Iraqi citizens from a variety of religious and ethnic communities were displaced by ISIS victories. Tikrit and the oil refinery town of Baiji also fell as ISIS forces moved south toward Baghdad but intervention by Iranian-supported militias prevented the fall of the strategically significant city of Samarra.

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi then took the fateful step the Islamic State had repeatedly hinted at since 2006, restoring the institution of the Caliphate and declaring himself Caliph over all the Muslims. In a unique appearance for the cameras at Mosul's Nuri Mosque on June 29, 2014, "Caliph Ibrahim" called for Muslims to join the new Caliphate.

An official ISIS document, released in Arabic and English, announced that "it is incumbent upon all Muslims to pledge allegiance to the Khalīfah Ibrāhīm and support him (may Allah preserve him). The legality of all emirates, groups, states, and organizations, becomes null by the expansion of the Khilāfah's authority and arrival of its troops to their areas."[46]

A key element of both its actions on the ground and its propaganda continued to be ISIS' bitter hatred and violence towards Shi'a Muslims. This took the form of concrete action as well. In its single worst massacre up to that point, the group killed as many as 1,100 unarmed Shi'a Iraq Air Force cadets at Camp Speicher in Tikrit in June 2014.[47]

The ISIS media package was now complete. A call to emigrate to, defend, and build an Islamist utopian state, strongly associated with apocalyptic discourse, was coupled with an emotional appeal to righteous violence and an austere, rigid and fierce identity attractive to modern youth looking for purpose in life.[48] ISIS' use of social media even included professionally-produced anasheed, or a capella songs by male voices permitted by the traditionally-intolerant Salafi Islam.[49]

As resistance to the ISIS offensive in central Iraq stiffened in August 2014, ISIS succeeded in massacring hundreds of Sunni tribal fighters who fell into its hands in Anbar province,[50] and then turned its attention to northern Iraq, largely populated by Iraq's Kurdish minority. ISIS advances against Kurdish Peshmerga (militia) and evidence of genocide practiced against the Yazidi religious minority in the Sinjar region

eventually drew the United States into the conflict with a campaign of air strikes carried out as part of a new strategy to "degrade and ultimately destroy" the Islamic State.[51]

As ISIS military advances in Iraq slowed and were even reversed in some cases (the strategic Mosul Dam was re-taken from ISIS, the threat to the Iraqi Kurdish capital of Irbil was eliminated, and the besieged Shia town of Amerli was relieved), the group turned its attention, and its new military equipment, toward Syria. An August 2014 uprising by the Sunni Arab Shaitat tribe in Deir ez Zour was brutally suppressed, with ISIS killing nearly one thousand men in a graphic warning to Arab tribes in the region.[52]

In September 2014, an ISIS offensive to take the Syrian town of Kobani, controlled by the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), on the Turkish border dragged on for months and eventually led to an ISIS defeat in January 2015. The fighting and multiple airstrikes aimed at helping Kurdish fighters, however, reduced most of the city to rubble. While checked in its advance on Baghdad, ISIS succeeded in massacring hundreds of captured Sunni Tribal fighters in Anbar province in late 2014.[53]

Meanwhile, ISIS responded to new U.S. and Coalition operations by orchestrating a series of high-profile beheadings of Western and Japanese hostages, including journalists and aid workers, over the next few months. Beginning with the beheading of American journalist James Foley in August 2014 and ending with the killing of two Japanese hostages in January 2015, seven individuals were killed in polished video productions aimed at projecting an impression of power and vengeance.

The group's encounter with Christian populations led it to revive the practice of the jizya tax on non-Muslims as part of a plan intended to humiliate "protected" religious groups.[54] As it slavishly sought to imitate aspects of the period of formative Islam, it also boasted about the revival of sex slavery, principally of Yazidi girls and women, adding that "we will conquer your Rome, break your crosses, and enslave your women."[55]

The image of ISIS as a jihadist colossus "here to stay and spreading" was powerful in continuing to attract foreign fighters and the allegiance of jihadist groups scattered throughout the Muslim world. A 2014 UN report claimed that more than 15,000 foreigners from more than 80 countries had joined ISIS "on an unprecedented scale."[56] On September 24, 2014, an Algerian jihadist group that had pledged loyalty to ISIS beheaded a French hostage.[57] ISIS-affiliated groups claimed actions in its name in Lebanon, Gaza and Libya.

While oil production and smuggling into Turkey and Syria have proved to be major sources of financing for the group, other, less well-known, streams of revenue exist as

well. These include kidnapping and looting, including the sale of pilfered antiquities and personal property, combined with new tax revenue schemes in the burgeoning ISIS empire.[58]

The principal message of ISIS to Muslims elsewhere continued to be that they should immigrate as soon as possible to the Islamic State, as long as borders remained open. Failing that, foreigners should pledge allegiance (give bayat) to the ISIS Caliph and carry out lone wolf attacks.[59] A spate of such attacks was carried out in Western Europe, Canada, the United State and Australia throughout 2014 receiving high-level publicity.[60]

By early 2015, the physical borders of the Islamic State seemed to have stabilized, stretching from the outskirts of Aleppo in Syria down to central Iraq. The group controlled two large cities, Raqqa and Mosul, and many smaller towns. Several million people, mostly Sunni Arab Muslims, lived under their black banner and the nascent State worked aggressively to promote an image of success. It also sought to prove its capacity to build a functioning state that could implement Islamic law literally, whether through public punishments or acts of charity and governance.

Thousands of Coalition airstrikes had exacted a toll on ISIS in Iraq and Syria, making defeat possible where there were counterforce units on the ground, such as Kurdish Peshmerga or Iraqi Security Forces and militias. Yet foreign fighters continue to flock to ISIS-controlled Syria in a steady if not overwhelming stream.

While much of its propaganda has focused on building rather than destroying, ISIS sought to continue to manipulate the news cycle by producing unusual or visually arresting "morality plays" that would attract attention, even if negative, by documenting acts such as the killing of homosexuals by throwing them off of buildings or the burning alive of a Jordanian Air Force pilot.[61]

The continuing potency of ISIS in its heartland of Syria and Iraq was graphically underscored in May 2015, when the group succeeded in seizing the historic Syrian town of Palmyra, where it wantonly vandalized much of Palmyra's famed antiquities.[62] Shockingly, given Coalition airpower and ISF attention, ISIS also managed to seize the capital of Anbar province in Ramadi.[63] The military victories disrupted a budding narrative that the group was at least contained if not in decline.

Despite those victories, ISIS was unable to prevent advances by Kurdish forces in Northern Syria, which succeeded in taking the key gateway city of Tel Abyad in June 2015, thereby making it somewhat more difficult for recruits to reach ISIS in Syria.[64] Kurdish fighters backed by coalition aircraft also tightened their hold on the region of Kobani and the city of Al-Hasakah. In response, ISIS sought to expand south and west towards Syria's largest cities and rampaged through Eastern Homs province.[65]

The online appeal of ISIS continued despite the enhanced efforts of Western governments and social media companies to blunt it. One prominent U.S. media account related in detail how ISIS supporters in Europe and the Middle East were able to "turn" a young American woman living in isolated, rural Washington State through the use of social media.[66] And a detailed study of the organization's media activities in April 2015 found ISIS releasing 123 different media items in Arabic in a given week, portraying the group as "winners, competent and pious."[67] An aggressive media campaign in June 2015 pushed the creation of the new ISIS gold dinar as a blow to Western capitalism and the U.S. economy.[68]

ISIS efforts in 2015 to expand its scope in the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf were underscored by suicide bomb attacks on Shi'a mosques in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. The organization called for Shi'a to be killed anywhere possible in Saudi Arabia.[69] Saudi authorities arrested hundreds of ISIS supporters inside the Kingdom, supposedly disrupting other terrorist plots.[70]

The high-profile crisis of a flood of refugees desperately seeking to enter Europe, most of them Muslims and many of them from Syria, provoked a flurry of ISIS messaging against the phenomenon in September 2015. Portraying it as a betrayal of Islam, ISIS spokesmen and fighters vehemently called on Muslims to turn immediately to the "Land of the Caliphate" rather than to the "House of Unbelief," where they run the risk of being humiliated or converted to Christianity.[71] Similar campaigns from ISIS tried to take advantage of events in areas outside its rule with varying degrees of success. A series of videos supporting Palestinian knife attacks against Israelis seemed to have had no discernable impact but a similar string of polished video material from various ISIS states encouraging the Somali Al-Shabaab to switch allegiance from Al-Zawahiri to Al-Baghdadi did presage a change in loyalty of at least one Al-Shabaab faction in October 2015.[72]

Global Reach

ISIS' own ranks were augmented by an informal network of online Salafis, operating in Western languages and in Arabic, which had already been growing. ISIS' embrace of social media platform Twitter in 2013, to a degree al-Qaeda had never entertained, enabled the organization to reach larger populations faster.[73] The number of pro-ISIS Twitter accounts almost doubled from 2012 to 2013, and then more than doubled again in 2014.[74] As ISIS expanded into Syria, it presented more material in various languages, including English, German, French, Russian, Azeri, Kurdish, and Chechen. The group's Al-Hayat Media Center (HMC), dedicated to producing propaganda in languages other than Arabic, eventually even produced material in the Uighur dialect of China.[75]

ISIS' battlefield successes turbocharged its media appeal, leveraging a wave of enthusiasm among Salafi-jihadists worldwide despite the condemnation from most mainstream Sunni Muslim clerics, as well as by supporters of al-Qaeda.[76] Influential Islamist cleric Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, conservative Sunni leader Yusuf al-Qaradawi, and even the pro-Caliphate movement Hizb ut-Tahrir all criticized the establishment of the ISIS Caliphate.[77] The organization, however, was undaunted. A new online English-language magazine, Dabiq, recalling the apocalyptic battlefield of Islam's past, now appeared.[78] Its first issue trumpeted the return of the Caliphate. The publication promised to focus on the key ISIS themes of *tawhid* (monotheism), *manhaj* (truth-seeking), *hijrah* (migration), jihad (holy war) and *jama'ah* (community)."[79]

The seeming success of the ISIS caliphate has reverberated worldwide throughout the ranks of jihadist movements, with many pledging allegiance to the organization. The network's supposed 33 provinces stretched from Africa to Pakistan, although more than half are within the confines of historic Iraq and Syria and some existed only on paper. In December 2014, Ansar Beit al-Maqdis, operating out of Egypt's Sinai Peninsula and increasingly challenging the Egyptian military, pledged its loyalty.[80] In March 2015, Boko Haram, in the midst of a major insurgency against Nigeria and neighboring countries stretching back more than a decade, formally announced that it was now the caliphate's West Africa Province.[81]

ISIS supporters in chaotic Libya had real success on the ground in 2015. After eventually being driven by rival jihadists from Derna, the group was able to take over the region of Sirte including Muammar al-Qaddafi's home town of the same name, where it sought to both govern and expand by building on the framework established by previous groups like Ansar al-Shariah.[82] ISIS in Libya supported two major terrorist attacks in neighboring Tunisia, at the Bardo Museum in March 2015 and at seaside resorts in Sousse in June 2015. Both attacks sought to kill foreigners and deliver major blows against Tunisia's economy.

The ISIS Libya branch was involved in two more media massacres, a February 2015 video showing the killing of 21 Coptic Christian workers, ostensibly in retaliation for alleged Coptic mistreatment of Coptic women who had supposedly converted to Islam (the same excuse used in the October 2010 attack on the Syrian Catholic Church in Baghdad) and the April 2015 killing of 30 Ethiopian Christians.[83]

ISIS also scored an important advance in the Russian Caucasus with the announcement of the Kavkaz Wilaya of the Islamic State in June 2015. A non-Chechen, Rustam Aselderov, an ethnic Dargin from Daghestan, assumed leadership of an entity aimed at fighting the Russian Government and its local allies and also in rivalry against a rump pro-Al-Qaeda Caucasus Emirate.[84] This reality mirrors the situation in Syria, with rival factions of Caucasus fighters, mostly Chechens, pledging loyalty to bitterly opposed rivals in both ISIS and the Nusrah Front and serving as one more pretext for Russian military intervention in Syria as of September 2015.[85]

As pressure increased in its Syria-Iraq heartland in 2015-2016, the Islamic State sought to respond by highlighting the work of potential franchises and outlets in South Asia. ISIS focused on the work of local Jihadists in Bangladesh moving towards its orbit who launched a wide-ranging campaign against religious minorities, secularists, and Muslims seen as insufficiently pious or Sunni.[86] Considerable efforts were also extended to prepare for a newly branded ISIS Wilaya in the Southern Philippines, again by absorbing and reorganizing existing jihadist fighters under the ISIS banner.[87] ISIS global organizing was accompanied by an ongoing high-profile, high volume media campaign across multiple platforms, geographic areas and languages.[88]

Recent Activity

By late 2015, several obvious trends began to emerge that would reshape the development of ISIS as a movement. Military pressure on the ground from various actors began to shrink ISIS rule in its heartland in Syria and Iraq. The Syrian Arab Army, reinforced by massive Russian support and that of Iranian-supported units (including Hezbollah) succeeded in relieving the long-besieged airbase at Kweiris, east of Aleppo, in November.[89] This was followed by an offensive in early 2016 that recaptured most territory lost by Assad forces in eastern Homs to ISIS in the summer of 2015, including Palmyra and Al-Qarytayn.[90]

Meanwhile mostly Kurdish forces under the U.S.-supported Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which also included some Arab, Turkmen and Syriac Christian militia fighters, continued to press their advantage against ISIS in northern Syria. After advances in Al-Hasakah, U.S. airdrops of weapons helped in the taking of Al-Hawl (November 2015), the strategic Tishrin Dam on the Euphrates (December 2015), and Al-Shahhadah (February 2016). By June 2016, an SDF offensive had quickly encircled the key town of Manbij (which once had so many foreign fighters that it was dubbed "Little London"[91]) and threatening the last remaining open supply corridor for ISIS to the Turkish border. Continued military pressure and economic losses also led ISIS to halve its soldiers' salaries and take other emergency financial actions in 2016.[92]

In Iraq, the Iraqi Security Forces, including a large and controversial Popular Mobilization Unit (PMU) militia element, slowly expanded operations to retake Anbar Province from ISIS.[93] By December 2015, the heavily damaged provincial capital of Ramadi was back in government hands. The ISF took the towns of Hit (April 2016), Al-Rutbah on the Amman-Baghdad highway (May 2016) and, finally, the highly symbolic city of Al-Fallujah (June 2016), which had been held by ISIS for more than two years. The ISF then shifted to areas south of Mosul, eventually taking the Qayyarah airbase in July 2016 after a months-long offensive. Also lost in July was the Islamic State's most famous foreign commander, Abu Omar al-Shishani, who was killed in an airstrike.

Long bruited as a potential "Caliphate backup site" should Raqqa and Mosul fall, anti-ISIS forces also made some progress in Libya in an offensive launched against Sirte in April 2016. But success there has been slow and bloody, and the country remains a theater of jihadist activity.[94]

But if military progress has been slow but steady on the ground against the "physical" caliphate, ISIS as an idea and a way of violence still seemed powerful and resilient in 2016. An ongoing, in depth study of ISIS supporters in the United States launched by George Washington University in December 2015 documented relatively small but still unprecedented levels of ISIS mobilization among Americans.[95] This research was underscored in the popular mind by high profile ISIS inspired terrorist attacks in San Bernardino (December 2015) and Orlando (June 2016). In both cases, following an ISIS template, the perpetrators pledged loyalty to ISIS "Caliph" Al-Baghdadi during the actual attack. The Orlando shooting was the deadliest terrorist attack on U.S. soil since September 11, 2001.[96]

While the online "virtual" caliphate is more contested than ever before (by social media companies, civil society, and government), while the scope of some ISIS amplifiers has been scaled back, the group's propagandists still have the ability to surge in the media space at will and get their message out. Thus, as pressure has increased on Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, the Islamic State and its defenders have found effective alternative online safe havens such as Telegram, Justepaste.it and Internet Archive. And despite progress in this field by anti-ISIS forces, the virtual ISIS footprint is still massive.[97]

If ISIS military victories have been increasingly hard to come by, a spate of spectacular terrorist operations have to date maintained the perception that the Islamic State is still both viable and lethal. In the Middle East, the toll has been stunning. From the downing of a Russian Metrojet flight over Sinai in October 2015 to repeated attacks in Istanbul and Ankara in 2016 to constant, multiple suicide bombings in Syria and Iraq against government forces, other rebel groups, and religious and ethnic minorities, the Islamic State has ably used these operations as the caliphate's own version of heavy artillery, airstrikes, and high profile media events.[98]

Attacks beyond the Middle East have garnered even more attention for ISIS, mostly distracting from bad news of military reverses in Syria and Iraq. It is now clear that the Islamic State did use the massive refugee flows from Syria to smuggle in operatives into Western Europe.[99] But while the planning and structure of attacks in Paris (November 2015) and Brussels (March 2016) may differ greatly from seemingly more individual, inspired efforts in Orlando or Nice, France (July 2016), the extensive media attention and the spike in fear and anger are the same.[100]

Particularly noteworthy was the month of carnage that was Ramadan (roughly early June to early July) 2016. ISIS spokesman and head of external operations Abu Muhammad al-Adnani's call for Ramadan attacks in a May 22nd audiofile was resound-

ingly answered.[101] By the end of the month, after successful high profile attacks in Orlando; Magnanville, France (where an ISIS killer livestreamed his murders); Istanbul; Dhaka, India; Baghdad, and Medina and a score of thwarted attacks elsewhere, ISIS officially claimed to have killed or injured more than 5,200 people during Ramadan (almost 2,000 of them Shi'a Muslims).[102]

Today, the Islamic State "core state" is indeed under growing military pressure. But a wounded ISIS remains a deadly, high profile reality—one capable of repeatedly lashing out at its many enemies, and of boasting about it.

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