

The Islamic State

The Islamic State (IS, also known as ISIL, ISIS, or the Arabic acronym *Da'esh*) is a transnational Sunni Islamist insurgent and terrorist group. At its 2015 height, the group controlled large areas of Iraq and Syria, including some cities, from which it launched attacks in the region and beyond. While the group no longer controls territory outright in Syria and Iraq, U.S. military officials warn that it has maintained a low-level insurgency and has worked to expand its global presence via a burgeoning number of affiliate groups. The 2021 Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community (IC) warned that the Islamic State and sometimes rival Al Qaeda “have shown great resiliency” and together remain the “the greatest Sunni terrorist threats to U.S. interests overseas.”

Origins and Leadership

The Islamic State grew out of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), formerly known as Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). In 2011, some ISI members traveled to Syria to establish a new Al Qaeda affiliate there, known as the Nusra Front. In 2013, then-ISI leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi announced that ISI and the Nusra Front had merged into the Islamic State of Iraq and Al Sham (ISIS/ISIL). Al Qaeda rejected Baghdadi’s move to subsume the Nusra Front under his leadership, and severed ties with the group in 2014. Baghdadi later declared the establishment of a “caliphate” and renamed the group, calling it the Islamic State. In March 2019, the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) captured the group’s last territorial outpost in Syria. Baghdadi was killed in a U.S. raid on his compound in northern Syria in October that year. He was succeeded as IS leader by Amir Muhammad Said Abd al Rahman al Mawla, often referred to as Abu Ibrahim al Hashimi al Qurayshi.

Current Status: Syria and Iraq

The Islamic State continues to wage a low-level insurgency across Syria and Iraq, with an estimated force of 8,000 to 16,000 fighters. U.S. officials indicated in early 2021 that the group continued to spread its ideology among vulnerable populations, including IS family members at Al Hol camp and other internally displaced and conflict-affected communities. The U.S.-led counter-IS Coalition operates in northeast and southeast Syria; IS activity continues in areas where the Coalition is not active.

Select Global Affiliate Groups

Since 2014, local armed groups in various countries have affiliated with the Islamic State. Their goals, tactics, and leadership structures vary and have evolved over time, and the threats they pose to U.S. interests also vary. After the group’s territorial defeat in Iraq and Syria, U.S. officials warned that IS leadership aimed to expand elsewhere, notably in Africa. As of 2021, the U.S. State Department has designated nine groups worldwide as IS affiliates and Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs).

Middle East/North Africa

Islamic State Sinai Province, formerly known as Ansar Bayt al Maqdis, pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in 2014. Based in Egypt’s North Sinai, the group claimed responsibility for the 2015 bombing of a Russian passenger plane, which killed 231 people, and is believed to have carried out a 2017 attack on a mosque in the Sinai, which killed more than 300 people. In 2021, the group has continued to target Egyptian security personnel.

Islamic State in Libya. IS-Libya was established in 2014. U.S. airstrikes significantly weakened the group, helping oust it from its last stronghold in the city of Sirte in 2016. In late 2020, U.S. military officials assessed that IS-Libya posed “only a minimal threat to U.S. interests in Libya.”

Islamic State Khorasan Province was established in Afghanistan in 2015 by Pakistani, Afghan, and Central Asian militants. The group has condemned peace talks between the United States and the Taliban, and has sought to recruit disaffected Taliban members. In late 2020, the group carried out two high profile attacks in Kabul.

Sub-Saharan Africa

Islamic State West Africa Province was formed in 2015 as an offshoot of the Nigerian Islamist armed group Boko Haram, and has grown to surpass it in size and capacity. It operates in Nigeria, Niger, Cameroon, and Chad.

Islamic State Greater Sahara emerged in 2015 as an offshoot of Al Murabitoun—itsself an offshoot of Algerian-led Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. The group operates in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso; a 2017 ambush by the group in Niger killed four U.S. soldiers. IS media has portrayed the group as part of or subordinate to its West Africa province, but the groups may operate independently.

Islamic State Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), was established in 2019 as a re-branding of the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), a long-active insurgent group. ADF attacks in 2020 killed 849 civilians, according to U.N. reporting.

Islamic State Mozambique, known locally as Al Shabaab (no relation to the Al Qaeda-affiliated Somali group of the same name), affiliated with the Islamic State in 2019. Since 2017, the group has killed nearly 1,400 civilians and caused the displacement of more than 700,000 people in northern Mozambique. IS media refers to IS-DRC and IS-Mozambique jointly as the Islamic State Central Africa Province; the State Department describes the affiliates as distinct groups.

South and East Asia

Islamic State Philippines, now known as Islamic State East Asia, is comprised of remnants of the Abu Sayyaf Group and other local militant groups. The group pledged

allegiance to the Islamic State in 2014; as of 2020 it continued small scale attacks on Philippine security forces.

Islamic State Bangladesh pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in 2014. It claimed responsibility for a 2016 attack on a bakery popular with expatriates that killed 20. The group has continued to target Bangladesh police.

The Domestic Threat

The 2021 IC Annual Threat Assessment reported that while the Islamic State seeks to conduct attacks inside the United States, sustained counterterrorism pressure has degraded its capability to do so. The IC assessed that, “U.S.-based lone actors and small cells with a broad range of ideological motivations pose a greater immediate domestic threat.” It a “ISIS-inspired attacks very likely will remain the primary ISIS threat to the U.S. homeland this year, rather than plots operationally supported or directed by ISIS.”

Select U.S. Policy Tools

Military Operations

In 2014, the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) established Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) to formalize U.S.-led coalition operations against IS forces in Iraq and Syria. While the campaign to retake the Islamic State’s territorial “caliphate” in Iraq and Syria was largely carried out by local Syrian and Iraqi partner forces, the United States provided airstrikes, artillery, advice, and intelligence support. By September 2020, the total cost of OIR had reached \$49.4 billion. It also had entered what U.S. military officials described as its final phase, during which the Coalition seeks to enable partner forces to operate independently against IS remnants.

The United States has conducted other military operations that include counter-IS missions. These include Operation Freedom’s Sentinel, which targets Al Qaeda and IS forces in Afghanistan, and includes training, advising and assisting Afghan National Defense and Security Forces; and Operation Pacific Eagle-Philippines, which supports the Armed Forces of the Philippines in their fight against ISIS-East Asia and other terrorist groups. In the Sahel, DOD provides logistical and intelligence support to France’s Operation Barkhane, which targets local IS and Al Qaeda affiliates.

Global Partnerships

In 2014, the United States formed the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS with 83 other partner governments and institutions. Most members of the coalition did not participate in the military campaign against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, but U.S. officials sought their cooperation on transnational efforts to counter the flow of foreign fighters, IS financing, and IS propaganda. U.S. officials also leveraged the coalition to highlight Arab and Muslim opposition to IS ideology. A sub-group of foreign ministers continue to meet regularly as part of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS Small Group.

Training, Equipping, and Advising Partner Forces

The United States has trained local partner forces in Iraq and Syria with the goal of limiting the size and duration of

the U.S. military presence required to counter the Islamic State. Since late 2015, U.S. personnel have been deployed in an advisory and planning capacity with the SDF, a coalition of Syrian Kurdish and non-Kurdish forces, in northern Syria. U.S. military personnel are also deployed to Iraq to advise and train Iraqi forces, gather intelligence on the Islamic State, and secure U.S. personnel and facilities. Congress extended the underlying authorities for the DOD Syria and Iraq train and equip programs through the end of 2021 (§ 1209 and § 1236 of P.L. 113-291), as amended.

The Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021 (P.L. 116-260) provided \$710 million for the Counter-ISIS Train and Equip Fund available until September 30, 2022, and made funds available under DOD’s Global Train and Equip authority (10 U.S.C. 333) to support forces involved in operations against the group. The act also makes funds provided under the Nonproliferation, Anti-terrorism, Deming and Related Programs account available for the Counterterrorism Partnership Fund for programs in areas liberated from the Islamic State or other terrorist groups.

Post-IS Stabilization

The United States has provided stabilization assistance in areas of Syria and Iraq liberated from the Islamic State in an effort to prevent the group’s re-emergence. The Trump Administration sought to shift funding responsibility for stabilization projects to Coalition partners, to mixed effect. Congress has made funds available for Syria stabilization and the Biden Administration could restore stabilization funding for Syria as part of a broader policy review.

Sanctions

The United States seeks to limit the Islamic State’s ability to finance its operations, in part by ensuring that the group and its affiliates cannot access the U.S. financial system. The State Department designated the above affiliates as FTOs and as Specially Designated Global Terrorists (SDGTs); U.S. and foreign financial institutions that knowingly conduct or facilitate any significant transaction on behalf of these groups could be subject to U.S. sanctions. 18 U.S.C. 2339B, prohibiting persons under U.S. jurisdiction from providing material support or resources to designated FTO, makes punishable any such providing and requires financial institutions to seize assets related to questionable transactions—with substantial financial penalties for failure to do so. IS affiliates also are subject to U.N. sanctions under U.N. Security Council Resolution 2368 (2017), which requires member states to apply an asset freeze, travel ban, and arms embargo to any individual or entity on the ISIL (Da’esh) & Al Qaida Sanctions List.

Outlook

In March 2021, U.S. officials stated “ensuring the global defeat of ISIS will entail effectively countering ISIS branches and networks outside of Iraq and Syria, and we as a coalition recognize that.” Containing affiliates may pose challenges, as many of these groups initially emerged in response to local conditions, and in some cases predate the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.

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