



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 maintains a low-level insurgency and has worked to expand its global presence via a burgeoning number of affiliate groups. The 2022 Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community (IC) stated that “ISIS leaders remain committed to their vision of building a self-styled global caliphate headquartered in Iraq and Syria and are working to rebuild capabilities and wear down opponents until conditions are ripe for seizing and holding territory.”

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 died in a U.S. raid on his compound in northern Syria in October 2019. He was succeeded as IS leader by Abu Ibrahim al Hashimi al Qurayshi. In February 2022, a U.S. military operation in Idlib resulted in the death of Qurayshi, also known as Hajji Abdullah. In March the group named a new leader. Some reports identified him as Juma Awad al Badri, an Iraqi national and brother of former IS leader Baghdadi.

Current Status: Syria and Iraq

The Islamic State continues to wage a low-level insurgency across Syria and Iraq. In 2021, U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) assessed that, “ISIS likely has sufficient manpower and resources to operate indefinitely at its present level in the Syrian desert.”

Islamic State Detainees. The SDF continue to hold about 10,000 IS fighters in detention facilities across northern Syria. In January 2022, U.S. air and ground forces in Syria joined SDF partner forces in a lengthy battle to retake a prison seized by IS fighters. It was the largest U.S. military engagement with the Islamic State since 2019. The SDF also retains custody of about 57,000 people linked to the Islamic State (mostly women and children) at the Al Hol IDP camp. U.S. military officials have warned of ongoing IS radicalization and recruitment efforts at the camp.

Select Global Affiliate Groups

Since 2014, local armed groups in various countries have affiliated with the Islamic State, with varied and evolving goals, tactics, and leadership structures. 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. The State Department’s *2020 Country Reports on Terrorism* reported that, “ISIS affiliates outside Iraq and Syria caused more fatalities during 2020 than in any previous year [...] Deaths attributable to ISIS-affiliated attacks in West Africa alone almost doubled from around 2,700 in 2017 to nearly 5,000 in 2020.” As of 2022, 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, killing 231 people, and is believed to have carried out a 2017 attack on a mosque in the Sinai, killing more than 300 people. In 2021, the group continued to target Egyptian security personnel.

Islamic State in Libya. IS-Libya was established in 2014. U.S. airstrikes 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.” In mid-2021, the group claimed responsibility for a suicide bombing at a checkpoint that killed two security personnel.

Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) was established in Afghanistan in 2015 by Pakistani, Afghan, and Central Asian militants. ISKP opposes the Taliban, and has accelerated attacks in Afghanistan since the Taliban’s return to power in 2021. U.S. officials in March 2022 assessed that ISKP “could establish an external attack capability against the United States or its allies in twelve to eighteen months.”

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 elevated IS-GS to its own “province” in 2022.

Islamic State Democratic Republic of the Congo (ISIS-DRC) was established in 2019 as a re-branding of the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), a long-active Ugandan-origin insurgent group. ADF attacks in 2021 killed more than 1,200 people in DRC, up almost 50% from the previous year, according to U.N. reporting. The group also carried out large urban attacks in Uganda in late 2021, a departure from recent years in which it appeared to operate solely in DRC.

Islamic State-Mozambique (IS-M), a local group that affiliated with the Islamic State in 2019, launched an insurgency in 2017 that has killed about 1,700 civilians and displaced 784,000 people. In 2021, IS-M attacked the town of Palma, killing dozens. Palma hosts a U.S. government-backed natural gas processing facility that Total, a French firm, is developing. After the attack, Total suspended the project pending a restoration of secure operating conditions.

South and East Asia

Islamic State Philippines, also known as ISIS-East Asia (ISIS-EA), is comprised of remnants of the Abu Sayyaf Group and other local militant groups. ISIS-EA, which pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in 2014, has around 300-500 mostly Filipino and some foreign fighters. The group has carried out sporadic attacks in Mindanao and Sulu in the southern Philippines.

Islamic State Bangladesh pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in 2014. The group's largest operation was a 2016 attack on a bakery popular with expatriates that killed 20. Since then, the group has continued sporadic attacks largely targeting Bangladesh police.

The Domestic Threat

The 2022 IC Annual Threat Assessment reported that the threat posed by the Islamic State to U.S. persons and interests "probably will remain greatest in regions where the group has an operational presence; ISIS's ideology and propaganda, however, almost certainly will continue to inspire attacks in the West, including in the United States."

Select U.S. Policy Tools

Military Operations

In 2014, the U.S. Department of Defense 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. In 2020, OIR entered its final phase, during which the Coalition seeks to enable partner forces to operate independently against IS remnants.

Global Partnerships

In 2014, the United States formed the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS with 83 partner governments and institutions. Most coalition members did not participate in the military campaign against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, but U.S. officials sought their cooperation to counter the flow of foreign fighters, IS financing, and IS propaganda. A subgroup of foreign ministers continue to meet 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 in northern Syria. U.S. military personnel also deployed to Iraq to advise and train Iraqi forces, gather intelligence on the Islamic State, and secure U.S. personnel and facilities. In December 2021, U.S. military personnel with a combat role withdrew from Iraq, with an undisclosed number remaining at the invitation of the Iraqi government to provide advice and assistance alongside coalition partners.

Current Funding and the FY2023 Request. Congress has authorized U.S. train and equip programs for Iraq and Syria through December 2022, and has appropriated defense funding for train and equip programs in both countries through September 2022. The Administration's FY2023 defense request seeks \$541 million for the Counter-ISIS Train and Equip Fund (CTEF), including \$358 million for Iraq and \$183 million for Syria. This reflects an increase from the prior two years (\$500 million and \$460 million enacted for CTEF in FY2022 and FY2021, respectively). The Defense Department reports that it intends to enlarge the number of vetted Syrian groups and individuals in FY2023 by 3,500 personnel, primarily to recruit and train new detention facility guard forces.

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, including more than \$1.3 billion in stabilization assistance for Syria since 2011. The State Department describes such assistance as "a critical element in the OIR mission because it mitigates the economic and social cleavages previously exploited by ISIS, closes gaps in local authority capacity, and supports civil society to advocate for citizen needs."

Sanctions

The United States seeks to limit the Islamic State's ability to finance its operations, in part by preventing the group and its affiliates from accessing 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 act and requires financial institutions to seize assets related to questionable transactions. 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.

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