



BIPARTISAN POLICY CENTER

ISIS Crisis Crash Course

The Islamic State

Background

What is ISIS?

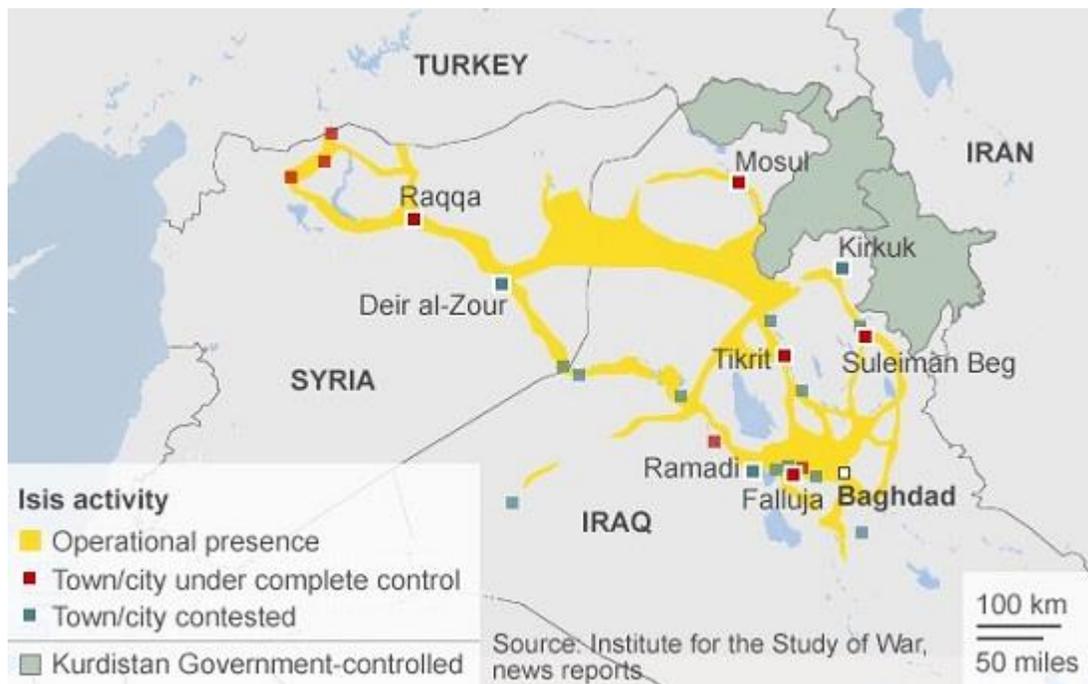
- Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), also referred to as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) or, as it now calls itself, simply the Islamic State (IS).
- A jihadist organization that aims to form an Islamic state (caliphate) over the region stretching from Turkey, to Syria, to Egypt, to Jordan and to Lebanon, if not beyond.

Where did it come from?

- The group, formed circa 2000, has had many names and iterations, including, most recently, as al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). The group rebranded itself in 2013 adopting a new name that reflected a more ambitious objective.
- In February 2014, al-Qaeda expelled ISIS after rejecting al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri's demand that it restrict its activities to Iraq.

What are its capabilities?

- Fighters: estimated at 17,000, including roughly 100 Americans and 500 UK citizens.
- Money: reports have put the group's wealth as high as \$2 billion.
- Territory: a snaking band in eastern Syria and western and northern Iraq that amounts roughly to the size of Belgium:



The Threat

ISIS's Threat to the Region

- ISIS threatens to dismember Iraq and create a Sunni Islamist state that could launch military operations at other neighboring states—including Lebanon and Jordan.
- The ascendancy of this extremist organization has profound implications for the security and stability of the region. It exposes just how fractured and unsettled the Middle East is and threatens to spark a broader sectarian conflict.

ISIS's Threat to the Homeland (US/EU fighters)

- Government officials to worry that some Americans or Europeans fighting with ISIS might return to the United States to carry out attacks, but this has yet to occur. And it may never occur.
- As of early September, while the U.S. Government regards the potential threat from ISIS as serious, according to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the U.S. knows of no specific, credible threat from ISIS to the homeland.

U.S. and International Response

American Strategy Against ISIS

- On September 10, President Obama announced, "America will lead a broad coalition to roll back this terrorist threat. Our objective is clear: We will degrade, and ultimately destroy, ISIL through a comprehensive and sustained counterterrorism strategy."
- Elements of U.S. Strategy:
 - Systematic campaign of airstrikes against ISIS targets, both in Iraq and Syria;
 - Support for forces fighting ISIS on the ground;
 - Utilize counterterrorism capabilities to prevent ISIS attacks;
 - Provide humanitarian assistance to those affected by the crisis.

Airstrikes in Syria

- On September 23, the President announced that the United States, for the first time, had carried out air strikes within Syria. "America's armed forces began strikes against ISIL targets in Syria... I made clear that as part of this campaign the United States would take action against targets in both Iraq and Syria so that these terrorists can't find safe haven anywhere."

Arab Partners

- President Obama recognized Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Qatar for partnering with the United States.
- After meetings between Secretary Kerry and Arab leaders in Jeddah, ten Arab nations signed a communiqué pledging to provide military support and humanitarian aid, and to halt the flow of funds and foreign fighters to ISIS: Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Turkey was present at the Jeddah talks, but declined to sign the document.

The Khorasan Group

Background

What is the Khorasan Group?

- A relatively small al-Qaeda unit made up of fighters with mixed jihadist affiliations, which grew out of al-Qaeda's old core group in Afghanistan.

What are its capabilities?

- Fighters: Roughly 50 fighters (estimates are as high as 100);
- Money: They do have fundraising and recruitment campaigns but it is unclear how much they have amassed;
- Territory: 8 locations outside the city of Aleppo, Syria;
- They have been working with al-Qaeda's Yemen affiliate to test ways to slip explosives past airport security.

The Threat

Threat to the Region

- The Khorasan group has connected with al-Nusra in Syria, although reports suggest its focus is on external attacks.

Threat to the Homeland

- Michael Leiter, the former director of the National Counterterrorism Center and now an NBC News analyst: "Khorasan is less of a threat to the region and more of a threat to the U.S. homeland than ISIS...Unlike ISIS, the Khorasan group's focus is not on overthrowing the Assad regime. These are core al-Qaeda operatives who ... are taking advantage of the Syrian conflict to advance attacks against Western interests."

Policy Considerations

Shifting Allegiances

- The Middle East may be the only place in the world where the transitive property of alliances does not hold: the enemy of your enemy could very well still be your enemy.
- The ISIS threat, and the sectarian fractures it has enflamed, is putting the U.S. on the same side as some of its adversaries and alienating it from some allies:
- The strongest proponents of defeating ISIS are Syria and Iran, no friends of the United States.
- Traditional U.S. partners, like Turkey, are much less eager to confront ISIS. Turkey said that neither its airspace nor its U.S. air base was used in the airstrikes on Syria. Though initially reluctant to pledge military support against ISIS, Turkish President Erdogan recently suggested that Turkey could provide "military or logistical" support to U.S.-led efforts.
- Unless the U.S. manages these complex relationships smoothly, it could contribute to further shifting of the Middle East geostrategic landscape.

Political Solutions

- ISIS's success stems, at least partly, from exploiting Iraqi Sunnis political grievances against and political alienation from the Shiite-dominated government in Baghdad.
- Addressing the root cause of Iraqi instability will require, once again, convincing Iraqi factions to come together in a representative government.
 - The U.S. will need credible partners that can convince Sunnis and also Kurds to come to the table.
- The alternative is the disintegration of Iraq.

Military Solutions

- Even if Iraqi Sunnis turn on ISIS, a military campaign will be needed to defeat the group. It is critical that President Obama define the objective, scope, and participants in such an effort.
 - Objective: is it to stop the further advance of ISIS? To push the group out of Iraq? Or to destroy it entirely?
 - Scope: will operations be limited to Iraq? Include ISIS bases in Syria? What about transit points for ISIS fighters, weapons, and funds in places like Turkey? Can the above objectives be accomplished using air power alone or is a ground campaign needed as well?
 - Participants: what partners can the United States turn to? Will they include the most willing but least palatable—Iran and Syria—or the more critical but less willing—such as Turkey?
- Given recent reductions to the defense budget, including sequestration, it will be important to ensure that any U.S. military action against ISIS is properly resourced through additional appropriations, in order to avoid further burdening the base DOD budget.