



## 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 with a few thousand remaining fighters in Iraq and Syria and an unknown number of supporters in other countries. Since late 2017, U.S. military officials have stated that the Islamic State has lost approximately 98 percent of the territory it once held in Iraq and Syria. This has changed the nature of related threats, prompting some reconsideration of U.S. approaches.

The Islamic State's forerunner was the late Abu Musab al Zarqawi's organization in Iraq, which became Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and later the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). After expanding into war-torn Syria in 2013, the group declared the establishment of a "caliphate" in June 2014 and changed its name to "the Islamic State." After IS leaders claimed several attacks in the Middle East and Europe, U.S. officials publicly described the group as having embraced an "external operations agenda." U.S. officials judge that the group has either directed or inspired terrorist attacks globally, including in the United States.

In February 2018, the U.S. intelligence community assessed that "ISIS core has started—and probably will maintain—a robust insurgency in Iraq and Syria as part of a long-term strategy to ultimately enable the reemergence of its so-called caliphate." U.S. intelligence officials expect that the group is "likely to focus on regrouping in Iraq and Syria, enhancing its global presence, championing its cause, planning international attacks, and encouraging its members and sympathizers to attack in their home countries."

### Groups Affiliated with the Islamic State

Since 2014, some armed groups have recognized the Islamic State and pledged loyalty to IS leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi. Groups in Yemen, Egypt, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Libya, Afghanistan, and Nigeria have used the Arabic word "*wilayah*" (state/province) to describe themselves as constituent members of a broader IS-led caliphate. Their objectives, tactics, and leadership structures vary and are evolving over time. U.S. intelligence officials expect the group to seek to leverage the capabilities and operations of its affiliates to demonstrate resilience in the coming year.

### The Split with Al Qaeda

Al Qaeda leader Ayman al Zawahiri publicly severed ties with the Islamic State in February 2014, citing brutal IS tactics, infighting between the Islamic State and other Sunni groups, and a long-running dispute over areas of operation. At the time, IS leaders said their organization "is not and has never been an offshoot of Al Qaeda," and described previous IS conduct toward Al Qaeda as deference rather than obedience. Media reports and third-party analyses have explored competition between the Islamic State and Al Qaeda for prominence and support, but it is unclear if Al Qaeda will directly benefit from the stark reversal of the Islamic State's fortunes in its main areas of operation. U.S.

intelligence officials judge that Al Qaeda remains "a major actor in global terrorism."

### The Domestic Threat

U.S. officials consider the Islamic State a direct threat to U.S. and allied interests overseas and in December 2017 acknowledged the group's likely desire and capacity to inspire attacks inside the United States. The December 2015 shooting attack in San Bernardino, California, and the June 2016 shooting in Orlando, Florida were attributed to purported IS supporters who have not been reported to have operational links to the organization. U.S. intelligence officials reported in February 2018 that the group "almost certainly will continue to give priority to transnational terrorist attacks," and that "U.S.-based homegrown violent extremists (HVEs) will remain the most prevalent Sunni violent extremist threat in the United States."

### Strategy to Counter the Islamic State

The Trump Administration has reviewed and amended U.S. plans to defeat the Islamic State in its areas of control in Iraq and Syria. U.S. strategy leverages the contributions of multinational and local partner forces to reduce the geographic and political space, manpower, and financial resources available to the Islamic State. U.S. intelligence officials cite IS territorial losses, force attrition, and reduced recruiting as indicators of the group's decline, but warn of its potential resilience and the potentially high costs of long-term efforts to stabilize liberated areas. Congress continues to review and require updates of the Administration's strategy and plans. The U.S.-led coalition has pursued a range of measures, including:

**Military Operations.** U.S. and coalition forces' operations against IS forces have declined in intensity and frequency since September 2017, reflecting the end of major combat operations in Iraq and the isolation of remaining IS fighters in remote areas of Syria.

**Syria.** On October 17, 2017, U.S. military officials announced that U.S.-backed forces had completed their operation to retake the IS self-declared capital at Raqqa. In 2018, coalition operations continued against IS remnants in eastern Syria. In areas closer to the Iraq-Syria border, operations have brought Syrian government forces and their allies closer to U.S. forces and U.S. partners, resulting in at least one instance of armed confrontation. Administration officials emphasize that the primary purpose of U.S. operations in Syria is the defeat of the Islamic State.

**Iraq.** In December 2017, Iraqi leaders proclaimed victory in their U.S.-backed military campaign against the Islamic State after recapturing territory near the Syrian border and sweeping desert areas in western Anbar Province. Millions of displaced Iraqi civilians have begun to return home. Stabilization efforts are underway but are challenged in some areas by insecurity, costs, and unexploded ordnance. Firm U.S. and Iraqi plans for continued U.S. training and

support for Iraqi counterterrorism operations are not expected until after Iraqis form a new government based on the result of May 2018 national elections.

### **Training, Equipping, and Advising Partner Forces.**

**Syria.** Since late 2015, U.S. Special Operations Forces personnel have been deployed in northern Syria, acting primarily in an advisory and planning capacity with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a coalition of Syrian Kurdish and non-Kurdish forces. The U.S. military directly supplies and advises the SDF, working closely with it to retake territory from the Islamic State in north-east Syria. As of December 2017, U.S. and coalition personnel had trained more than 12,500 fighters and delivered weaponry and ammunition for more than 40,000 partner personnel. U.S. advisers have worked with Arab anti-IS forces in At Tanf, near the Jordanian border. As of late 2017, an estimated 2,000 U.S. personnel were in Syria. President Trump is reviewing U.S. deployments.

**Iraq.** U.S. military personnel have deployed to Iraq to advise and train Iraqi forces, gather intelligence on the Islamic State, and secure U.S. personnel and facilities. Deployed forces include advisers and trainers for the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and the Kurdish *peshmerga*, along with support and force protection personnel. As of late 2017, approximately 6,000 U.S. military personnel were deployed in Iraq, with rotations temporarily increasing that number. Coalition partners have deployed about 3,500 advisers and trainers for the ISF. As of December 31, 2017, more than 127,500 Iraqi security personnel had received training, including Kurdish *peshmerga*, and tribal fighters.

### **Current Funding and FY2019 Requests**

The continuing resolution (CR) for FY2017 (P.L. 114-254) and the Consolidated Appropriations Acts for FY2017 (P.L. 115-31) and FY2018 (P.L. 115-141) make available defense and foreign operations funds for efforts to combat the Islamic State, respond to related crises, and stabilize liberated areas, as requested by the Trump and Obama Administrations. The Trump Administration has requested additional funds to continue U.S. programs across multiple lines of effort in multiple countries in FY2019 and beyond.

**Syria and Iraq Train and Equip Programs.** The underlying authorities for the Department of Defense Syria and Iraq train and equip programs have been extended through the end of December 2018 and 2019, respectively [Sections 1209 and 1236 of P.L. 113-291, as amended]. Appropriations acts have made funds available that could support these programs beyond these dates. The Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2017 (Division C of P.L. 115-31) provided \$980 million for a Counter-ISIL Train and Equip Fund (CTEF) available until September 30, 2018. The act makes available an additional \$626.4 million that may not be obligated or expended until 15 days after the President submits a required report “on the United States strategy for the defeat” of the Islamic State organization. Congress authorized and appropriated an additional \$1.8 billion for the programs in the FY2018 NDAA and Omnibus Appropriations Act and required a new strategy report for Syria. President Trump is requesting an additional \$1.15 billion for the programs in FY2019.

**Continued Support to Syrian Opposition Groups.** The State Department requested more than \$480 million in

FY2016 and FY2017 funding to provide nonlethal support to vetted, moderate armed opposition groups, other opposition actors, and communities in opposition-held areas of Syria. The Trump Administration requested \$191.5 million in Overseas Contingency Operation funding for State Department-administered programs in Syria for FY2018, including \$150 million in Economic Support and Development Fund (ESDF)-OCO monies. Section 7041(k) of Division K of P.L. 115-141 allows certain accounts to fund “non-lethal assistance for programs to address the needs of civilians affected by conflict in Syria” but does not specify an amount for these programs. The explanatory statement accompanying the appropriations act limits the use of funds for non-lethal assistance programs to “areas not controlled by the Government of Syria.” For FY2019, the Trump Administration seeks a further \$174.5 million in ESDF and demining monies for programs in Syria.

**Post-IS Stabilization and Reconstruction.** The December 2016 CR (P.L. 114-254) provided \$1.03 billion in Economic Support Fund-OCO monies to remain available through FY2018 for programs “to counter the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, other terrorist organizations, and violent extremism, and address the needs of populations impacted by such organizations.” The Administration has directed more than \$265 million for stabilization in Iraq since 2015. Section 7041(j) of P.L. 115-141 authorizes the use of \$500 million in FY2018 funds from various foreign assistance accounts for a “Relief and Recovery Fund” (RRF) for aid to “areas liberated from, at risk from, or under the control of, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, other terrorist organizations, or violent extremist organizations in the Middle East and Africa.” These funds could presumably support stabilization efforts inside Syria. The FY2019 request seeks \$40 million in RRF funds.

**Humanitarian Funding.** The United States has provided nearly \$7.7 billion in Syria-related humanitarian assistance since 2011 and more than \$607 million for humanitarian assistance in Iraq since August 2014. Funding to support continued humanitarian efforts in response to the Iraq-Syria crises is drawn from global accounts such as Migration and Refugee Assistance (MRA) and International Disaster Assistance (IDA) accounts. P.L. 115-141 provides \$2.4 billion in MRA-OCO to respond to refugee crises, including in the Near East. The act also provides for \$2.6 billion in IDA and \$1.5 billion in IDA-OCO. Humanitarian needs are expected to persist in both countries for years.

**Military Funding.** As of July 31, 2017, the total cost of U.S. military operations related to the Islamic State since the beginning of strikes on August 8, 2014, was \$18.5 billion. Congress has appropriated billions in additional defense funding for counterterrorism operations and IS-related war costs in FY2017 and FY2018 appropriations acts. For FY2019, the Trump Administration has requested \$13.9 billion in Operation Inherent Resolve related funds, not including train and equip funds described above.

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