



September 11, 2014

The Islamic State: Q&A

What is the Islamic State?

The Islamic State (IS) is a transnational Sunni Islamist insurgent and terrorist group with more than 10,000 fighters across Iraq and Syria. Its forerunner is Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQ-I), which was formed in 2004 to combat the U.S. military presence in Iraq. In April 2013, group leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi announced his intent to merge his forces in Iraq and Syria with those of the Syria-based Jabhat al Nusra, under the name the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/ISIS). (Al Baghdadi reportedly was detained by U.S. forces in Iraq from 2005 to 2009). Jabhat al Nusra and Al Qaeda leaders rejected the merger, underscoring growing tensions among Sunni extremists in the region. In June 2014 ISIL declared the establishment of an Islamic caliphate stretching from Aleppo province in Syria to Diyalah province in Iraq and changed its name to the Islamic State.

What areas does it control?

The Islamic State operates in northeastern Syria and northwestern Iraq, reportedly controlling towns and cities along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers—including Mosul and Fallujah in Iraq and Raqqah in Syria. In Iraq, the Islamic State has reportedly capitalized on disaffection among key Sunni Arab individuals and groups (such as tribes and former Saddam Hussein regime elements) to lead an insurrection against the country's Shiite-controlled central government.

How is the Islamic State financed?

The Islamic State is thought to be largely self-financing, relying on oil sales and criminal and extortion networks. Group members reportedly sell heavy and light crude oil from oil fields under their control to local merchants or traders who smuggle the oil across the border or in some cases sell it back to the Syrian government. In both Syria and Iraq, the Islamic State derives revenue by imposing "taxes" on local populations and demanding a percentage of the funds devoted to humanitarian and commercial operations in areas under its control, including farms and local businesses. In addition, it has looted banks and demanded protection money from Christians and other non-Sunnis who wish to remain on land controlled by the Islamic State. The group also obtains funding by ransoming and releasing hostages, particularly from European countries. External financial support for the Islamic State and other extremist groups in Iraq reportedly has come from a network of private individuals located primarily in the Arab Gulf states. The Islamic State takes in as much as one million dollars per day from illicit oil sales, smuggling, and ransom payments.

How is it related to Al Qaeda?

Al Qaeda leader Ayman al Zawahiri publicly severed ties with the group in February 2014. Since then, IS leaders have stated their view that their group "is not and has never been an offshoot of Al Qaeda," and that, viewing themselves as a state and a sovereign political entity, they have given leaders of the Al Qaeda organization deference rather than pledges of obedience. A number of media reports suggest possible competition between the Islamic State and Al Qaeda for prominence and support. Al Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al Nusra reportedly has had occasional direct clashes with the Islamic State in Syria, and some figures from Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) have reportedly voiced support for the Islamic State.

What, if any, threat does it pose to the United States?

In September 2014 public remarks, National Counterterrorism Center Director Matthew Olsen stated that the Islamic State poses an "immediate and direct threat" to American personnel in Iraq. In August, IS militants beheaded two American journalists captured in Syria. Olsen also stated that "we have no credible information that ISIL is planning to attack the U.S.," but he highlighted potential threats posed by foreign fighters with Western passports. According to Olsen, as many as 12,000 foreign fighters have travelled to Syria, including more than 1,000 Europeans, and more than 100 U.S. citizens.

What has the United States done in Iraq to counter the Islamic State?

At the request of the Iraqi government, **the U.S. has conducted airstrikes and provided military advisors, intelligence support, and weapons sales.** In June, President Obama authorized the deployment of 300 U.S. military personnel to serve as advisors, assess the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), and gather intelligence on the Islamic State. An additional 820 military personnel have been sent to help secure the U.S. Embassy and other U.S. facilities in Baghdad and Irbil (capital of the Kurdish Regional Government [KRG] in northern Iraq), to protect evacuation routes such as the international airport in Baghdad, and to operate surveillance aircraft. On September 10, President Obama announced that he would expand airstrikes in Iraq and send 475 military advisors to Iraq to provide training, intelligence, and equipment to Iraqi and Kurdish forces.

On August 7, 2014, President Obama stated that he had authorized targeted airstrikes against Islamic State positions. Virtually every day since August 8, U.S. combat

aircraft and armed unmanned aerial vehicles have struck Islamic State heavy weaponry, checkpoints, and other positions. In notifying Congress, the President has communicated the following as objectives for the airstrikes: “stopping the advance on Erbil [aka Irbil] by the terrorist group Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), supporting civilians trapped on Mount Sinjar, supporting operations by Iraqi forces to recapture the Mosul Dam, and supporting an operation to deliver humanitarian assistance to civilians in the town of Amirli, Iraq.”

Since the Islamic State-led capture of Mosul in June, the United States has announced sales of over 5,000 additional HELLFIRE air-to-surface missiles to Baghdad. Deliveries of U.S.-made F-16s and Apaches, purchased in 2011 and 2012, are reportedly in their early stages. After the Islamic State move toward Irbil, the Administration reportedly began supplying mostly lighter weaponry and ammunition directly to the *peshmerga* (Kurdish militia) through the Central Intelligence Agency. That channel is a means of adapting to a general policy that requires all U.S. Foreign Military Sales (FMS, run by the Defense Department) to be provided to a country’s central government.

During early August 2014, the U.S. military conducted airdrops of food and water to those trapped on Mount Sinjar. In late August, the U.S. military airdropped humanitarian aid to the town of Amerli (in eastern Salahuddin Province), inhabited by ethnic Turkmen Shiite Muslims. IS fighters had precipitated crises in both areas, but their hold on these areas was largely broken by U.S. airstrikes with ground support from the ISF, *peshmerga*, and—in the case of Amerli—Shiite militiamen.

President Obama has repeatedly ruled out direct U.S. combat deployment, stating that U.S. troops cannot fix the underlying political problems that appear largely to have driven the IS-led Sunni insurrection in Iraq. The Administration reportedly supported efforts among Iraqi national parliamentary leaders to bring about the resignation of longtime Prime Minister Nuri al Maliki, in the hopes that his successor Haydar al Abbadi can help entice Sunni Arabs to reject IS control while encouraging them and Kurds to accept a continuing central government role in the regions they predominantly inhabit.

What are potential U.S. actions against the Islamic State in Syria?

President Obama on September 10 delivered a speech laying out a strategy to defeat Islamic State forces, stating that the U.S. would not introduce combat troops in Syria but would instead work with a coalition of regional and Western states to strengthen local partners fighting IS forces on the ground. The President did not rule out U.S. airstrikes in Syria, saying, “I will not hesitate to take action against ISIL, in Syria as well as Iraq.” The President noted that the United States had “ramped up our military assistance to the Syrian opposition,” which he described as the best counterweight to extremist groups. He called on Congress to provide additional authorities and resources to train and equip Syrian fighters.

What has the Administration requested to date, and what is the status of its requests in Congress?

The Administration’s June 2014 request for FY2015 Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) funds included a request for funds and authorities for a proposed \$1.5 billion Syria Regional Stabilization Initiative (RSI), \$500 million of which would support an overt training and equipment program for select Syrians. On September 10, President Obama reiterated his request to Congress for “additional authorities and resources to equip these [vetted Syrian opposition] fighters.”

As of early September, congressional consideration of this request had merged with congressional consideration of a proposed continuing resolution to fund government operations after September 30, 2014. It remains to be seen whether a version of the Administration’s requested authority and funding will be included in a proposed continuing resolution, whether it may be considered as an amendment to such a continuing resolution, or whether Congress might consider the proposal independently. Some congressional committees already have acted on the President’s June 2014 request for funding and authorization for the train-and-equip mission.

The Senate Armed Services Committee reported version of the FY2015 National Defense Authorization Act (Section 1209 of S. 2410) would authorize the Department of Defense, with the concurrence of the State Department, to train and equip vetted members of select Syrian opposition forces for limited purposes through the year 2018.

Section 9015 of the Senate Appropriation Committee’s version of the FY2015 Defense Appropriations bill (H.R. 4870) would authorize assistance, including the provision of defense articles and defense services, to appropriately vetted elements of the Syrian opposition, for, among other purposes, “protecting the United States, its friends and allies, and the Syrian people from threats posed by terrorists in Syria.” Under this section, the committee specifies that up to \$500 million may be used for a support program. The Senate Appropriations Defense subcommittee considered and rejected a proposed amendment that would have stripped the authority and funding for the Syria program from the bill.

For additional information, see CRS Report R43612 *The “Islamic State” Crisis and U.S. Policy*, coordinated by Kenneth Katzman, and CRS Report RL33487, *Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response*, coordinated by Christopher M. Blanchard.

Carla Humud (Coordinator), chumud@crs.loc.gov, 7-7314
Christopher M. Blanchard, cblanchard@crs.loc.gov, 7-0428

Kenneth Katzman, kkatzman@crs.loc.gov, 7-7612

IF00050