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The Islamic State and Its Affiliates

The Islamic State (IS, also known as ISIS, ISIL, or *Da'esh*) is a transnational Sunni Islamist insurgent and terrorist group. At its 2015 height, the group controlled large areas of Iraq and Syria from which it launched and inspired attacks in the region and beyond. While the group no longer controls territory in Syria and Iraq, U.S. military officials warn that it continues to operate there. Greater threats to U.S. interests appear to come from IS affiliates (in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia), which may have stronger military capabilities and claims to global leadership of the group. The 2025 Annual Threat Assessment (ATA) of the U.S. Intelligence Community noted that while the Islamic State “has suffered major setbacks,” it “remains the world’s largest Islamic terrorist organization, has sought to gain momentum from high-profile attacks, and continues to rely on its most capable branches and globally dispersed leadership to weather degradation.” Congress has authorized, funded, and overseen the use of various U.S. policy tools to counter the Islamic State, including military and economic actions.

Origins and Leadership

The Islamic State grew out of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), made up of former Al Qaeda (AQ) elements. Some ISI members traveled to Syria in 2011 to establish a new AQ affiliate, the Nusra Front. In 2013, then-ISI leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi announced that ISI and the Nusra Front had merged to form the Islamic State of Iraq and Al Sham (ISIS/ISIL). AQ leaders rejected Baghdadi’s move to subsume the Nusra Front under his leadership and severed ties with ISIS in 2014. Baghdadi later declared a “caliphate” and renamed his group the Islamic State.

After years of operations by a U.S.-led military coalition and Iraqi and Syria partner force, the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) captured the last IS-held outpost in Syria in 2019. Baghdadi died in a U.S. raid later that year. He was succeeded by Abu Ibrahim al Hashimi al Qurayshi, who was killed in a 2022 U.S. military operation. Two subsequent IS leaders were killed, respectively, by Turkish-backed Syrian forces in late 2022 and under disputed circumstances in early 2023. A new IS leader, known as Abu Hafs al Qurayshi, was named in August 2023. As of July 2025, UN sanctions monitors reported “growing confidence” that the head of the IS-Somalia branch, Abdul Qadir Mumin, was the new IS global leader, although the group had yet to publicly confirm his name. The head of U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) testified to Congress in early 2025 that “ISIS controls their global network from Somalia.”

IS Status in Syria and Iraq

IS-claimed attacks were at “historically low levels” in Iraq and Syria, per the U.S. military as of mid-2025. UN monitors reported that while those two countries “may remain the [IS] spiritual homeland, its operational focus is

now largely elsewhere.” In July 2025, a U.S. raid in Syria reportedly killed a senior IS leader; defense officials assess IS seeks to destabilize Syria’s transitional government.

Islamic State Detainees. As of June 2025, the SDF held about 9,000 IS fighters in detention facilities, which have been targets for IS attacks. The SDF also retained custody of 30,800 displaced persons linked to IS (92% women and children) at the Al Hol and Roj camps, where U.S. officials have warned of ongoing IS radicalization efforts. U.S.-encouraged repatriation efforts helped reduce the camps’ population by around 25% between January 2025 and July 2025.

Selected Global Affiliates

Armed groups in various countries have affiliated with the Islamic State; they vary in their goals, tactics, leadership structures, and threat profiles. As of September 5, 2025, the U.S. State Department has designated nine IS affiliates as Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs). In June 2023, the Department designated two leaders associated with IS’s General Directorate of Provinces, which has four regional offices that provide “operational guidance and funding around the world,” as Specially Designated Global Terrorists (SDGTs). Other FTOs affiliated with IS in Bangladesh, Libya, Egypt, and the Philippines are reportedly active, albeit reportedly less than the groups described below.

Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP)

Established in 2015, ISKP has accelerated attacks in Afghanistan and beyond since the Taliban’s return to power in 2021. The 2025 ATA described ISKP as the IS “branch most capable of carrying out external terrorist attacks,” citing ISKP-attributed mass-casualty attacks in Iran and Russia in 2024. The Taliban has exerted some pressure on the group, but ISKP continues to have some 2,000 fighters and “operate[s] with relative impunity” in Afghanistan, where it prioritizes “attacks on Shia communities, the de facto [Taliban] authorities and foreigners,” per UN monitors. The CENTCOM commander testified in June 2025 that ISKP “got hit very, very hard over the last several months” by the Taliban and Pakistan; he hailed the latter as a “phenomenal partner in the counterterrorism world.”

Sub-Saharan Africa

After IS’s territorial defeat in Iraq and Syria, U.S. officials warned that IS leadership aimed to expand elsewhere, particularly in Africa. The 2025 ATA noted “the growing importance of the continent to the group” and UN sanctions monitors observed that “the organization’s pivot towards parts of Africa continued” in 2025. Notably in West Africa, regional IS and AQ affiliates have exploited “entrenched corruption, slow economic development, weak democratic institutions, and limited strategic patience” to expand into new areas, per AFRICOM’s 2025 posture statement.

Islamic State West Africa Province (IS-WA or ISWAP), formed in 2016 as an offshoot of the Nigerian Islamist armed group Boko Haram, has grown to surpass the latter in size and capacity. IS-WA primarily operates in the Lake Chad Basin areas of Nigeria, Niger, Cameroon, and Chad. IS-WA's ranks have reportedly reached 8,000-12,000 members per UN sanctions monitors; the 2025 ATA assessed that IS-WA "remains the largest [IS] branch and leads in numbers of claimed attacks." UN monitors also observed in 2025 that IS-WA "emerged as the most prolific propaganda producer for ISIL (Da'esh), surpassing other affiliates in content volume."

Islamic State Sahel Province (IS-Sahel, formerly Islamic State in the Greater Sahara) emerged in 2015 as an offshoot of an AQ regional affiliate and was elevated as an IS "province" in 2022. It operates primarily in border regions of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, where military juntas have expelled French, U.S., and UN troops and strengthened security ties with Russia. Both IS-Sahel and the more powerful AQ affiliate in the Sahel known as JNIM have pursued southward incursions into coastal countries.

Islamic State Democratic Republic of the Congo (IS-DRC), established in 2019 as a rebranding of the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), is a long-active Ugandan-origin insurgent group that operates in parts of DRC and Uganda. In eastern DRC, where dozens of armed groups are active, the group was the top perpetrator of violence against civilians in 2024, according to UN reporting. As of mid-2025, the "highly mobile" group reportedly remained resilient despite joint DRC-Ugandan military operations.

Islamic State-Mozambique (IS-M), an IS affiliate as of 2019, originated in 2017 as an insurgency that has since killed thousands in Mozambique and displaced over 1 million in the country. Rwanda-led counterterrorism efforts have constrained the group's size and reach, but it remains resilient and has launched new attacks in 2025.

Islamic State-Somalia split from AQ's largest affiliate, Al Shabaab, in 2015. The 2025 ATA estimated that IS-Somalia "doubled in size during the past year." Foreign fighters make up over half of its 600-800 fighters, with reported tensions between Arab and African fighters. As noted above, IS-Somalia leader Abdul Qadir Mumin may have assumed overall IS leadership in 2023, perhaps because of IS-Somalia's fundraising success and its hosting of the IS Karrar office, a "key [IS] financial hub."

U.S. Policy Responses

Military Operations. The Department of Defense's 2014 creation of Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) formalized U.S.-led coalition operations against IS forces in Iraq and Syria. While the campaign was largely carried out by local Syrian and Iraqi partner forces, the United States provided advice, airstrikes, artillery, and intelligence support. As of September 2025, U.S. forces continue to enable partner forces to strike IS targets in Iraq and Syria, while also conducting direct strikes on IS targets in Syria and Somalia.

Global Partnerships. The United States formed the Defeat (D)-ISIS coalition in 2014. Most of its 89 members did not participate militarily in Iraq and Syria, but U.S. officials sought their cooperation to counter the flow of foreign

fighters, financing, and propaganda. Two D-ISIS subgroups (the Africa Focus Group and the D-ISIS Small Group) remain active.

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 U.S. military operations there. U.S. personnel have been deployed in Iraq and Syria to provide advisory, planning, training, and intelligence assistance since late 2015, and to secure U.S. personnel and facilities. In September 2024, U.S. and Iraqi leaders agreed to end coalition military operations in Iraq by September 2025 and coalition operations from Iraq into Syria by September 2026. U.S. military forces in both countries are consolidating and repositioning in connection with these plans.

Congress has authorized U.S. train and equip programs for Iraq and Syria through December 2025. The Administration's FY2026 funding request seeks \$357 million in defense funds for the Counter-ISIS Train and Equip Fund (CTEF), a decrease from \$529 million enacted in FY2025. The request proposes ending stipends for Iraqi Kurdish forces as mutually agreed, and proposes providing new support to Lebanon's armed forces.

In Africa, U.S. airstrikes, as well as operations by U.S.-backed forces, have increased against IS-Somalia. In 2024, U.S. troops withdrew from Niger, leaving the United States "without a persistent presence in the Sahel" and with limited ability to "monitor the expanding influence of terrorist organizations in the region." The Trump Administration has sought to restore security cooperation with Niger. Tensions between military- and civilian-led governments in West Africa have disrupted regional security initiatives that the United States once supported.

Foreign Assistance. The United States has used foreign aid, including stabilization assistance, to counter IS and prevent the group's re-emergence in Syria and Iraq. U.S. foreign assistance changes under the Trump Administration have implications for IS-related activities. U.S. Agency for International Development stabilization and counter-extremism programs in IS-affected countries (including Iraq, Syria, Somalia, Mozambique, and countries in West Africa) appear to have been terminated, with some State Department programs continuing. Humanitarian funding for IS-affected areas in each country also has been reduced.

Sanctions. The United States seeks to limit the Islamic State's ability to finance its operations. To that end, the State Department has designated the above-named affiliates as SDGTs and FTOs, and has also sanctioned individual leaders and financiers. U.S. sanctions block SDGT and FTO property and interests in property within U.S. jurisdiction. Foreign financial institutions that facilitate significant transactions on behalf of SDGTs may also be subject to U.S. sanctions. 18 U.S.C. 2339B also prohibits persons from providing material support to FTOs. Several IS affiliates also are subject to UN sanctions under UN Security Council Resolution 2368 (2017), which requires member states to apply an asset freeze, travel ban, and arms embargo to designated individuals or entities.

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