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The “Islamic State” and U.S. Policy

Christopher M. Blanchard

Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs

Carla E. Humud

Analyst in Middle Eastern and African Affairs

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Summary

The Islamic State (IS, aka the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, ISIL/ISIS, or the Arabic acronym *Daesh*) is a transnational Sunni Islamist insurgent and terrorist group that controls large areas of Iraq and Syria, has adherents in several other countries, and disrupts regional and international security with violence and terrorism. A series of terrorist attacks attributed to the group outside of Iraq and Syria during 2015 has demonstrated IS supporters' ability to threaten societies in the Middle East, Africa, and Europe, including in countries with sophisticated and capable intelligence and security forces.

The group has stated its intent to attack inside the United States, but debate continues over whether the group has the capability to direct and carry out such attacks. Members of Congress and Obama Administration officials have spoken with increasing concern about the group's ability to threaten U.S. interests and partners abroad, its engagement in terrorist attacks outside of its core areas of operation, and its stated intent to attack the United States at home and overseas. IS claims of responsibility in November 2015 for the apparent bombing of a Russian airliner in Egypt, a suicide bombing attack in Beirut, and a multi-pronged assault in central Paris intensified debate about U.S. strategy, policies, and options. The group's statements suggest it seeks to provoke reactions from targeted populations and spur widespread confrontations between various Muslim sects and between Muslims and non-Muslims.

The interdependent nature of the conflicts and political crises in Iraq, Syria, and other countries where IS fighters operate complicate efforts to address and eliminate the IS threat. President Obama has stated that the goals of U.S. strategy are to "degrade and ultimately defeat" the Islamic State using various means including U.S. direct military action and support for local partner forces. U.S. military operations against the group and its adherents in several countries, as well as U.S. diplomatic efforts to reconcile Syrian and Iraqi factions, are ongoing. Parallel U.S. political and security efforts in North Africa, West Africa, and South Asia also seek to mitigate local IS-related threats. The Administration also is devoting renewed attention to finding a negotiated settlement to the Syria conflict.

This report provides background on the Islamic State organization, discussing its goals, operations, and affiliates, as well as analyzing related U.S. legislative and policy debates.

For more information, see CRS Report RS21968, *Iraq: Politics and Governance*, by Kenneth Katzman and Carla E. Humud; CRS Report RL33487, *Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response*, coordinated by Christopher M. Blanchard.; CRS Report R43980, *Islamic State Financing and U.S. Policy Approaches*, by Carla E. Humud, Robert Pirog, and Liana W. Rosen; CRS Report R44000, *Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations In Brief*, by Jim Zanotti; CRS Report R44135, *Coalition Contributions to Countering the Islamic State*, by Kathleen J. McInnis; CRS Report R43760, *A New Authorization for Use of Military Force Against the Islamic State: Issues and Current Proposals in Brief*, by Matthew C. Weed; CRS Insight IN10209, *European Security, Islamist Terrorism, and Returning Fighters*, by Kristin Archick and Paul Belkin; CRS Report R44003, *European Fighters in Syria and Iraq: Assessments, Responses, and Issues for the United States*, coordinated by Kristin Archick; CRS In Focus IF10259, *Europe's Migration and Refugee Crisis*, by Kristin Archick and Rhoda Margesson; CRS Report R44110, *The Islamic State's Acolytes and the Challenges They Pose to U.S. Law Enforcement: In Brief*, by Jerome P. Bjelopera; and, CRS Report RL31269, *Refugee Admissions and Resettlement Policy*, by Andorra Bruno.

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The Islamic State

The Islamic State organization (IS, aka ISIL/ISIS/*Daesh*)¹ emerged as a threat to the Middle East and the broader international community amid more than a decade of conflict in Iraq and more than four years of conflict in Syria. As of late 2015, the group commands tens of thousands of fighters in Iraq and Syria, and has received pledges of support from affiliate groups in several countries across the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia. The Islamic State's apocalyptic ideology, its revolutionary intent toward the strategically important Middle East, and its embrace of transnational terrorism have alarmed policy makers around the world and spurred global debate over strategies and policy options. IS leaders appear committed to provoking direct military confrontation with hostile powers. They continue to urge Muslims and others to view the Islamic State as a harbinger of what they believe to be a prophesized civilizational conflict. The interdependent nature of the crises in Syria and Iraq and the associated lack of security and governance have both provided a ripe opportunity for the group to grow and complicated efforts to counter them.

In the 114th Congress, Members continue to debate U.S. strategy and policy options, while considering proposals to authorize and appropriate funds for U.S. responses. As of late 2015, key questions in these debates include:

- What threats are posed by the Islamic State organization? Is the group primarily a regional security threat, a transnational terrorist threat, or both? How should different views on the IS threat inform U.S. responses? What anti-IS goals are most achievable? With what means and over what time period?
- How should the United States balance the use of diplomatic, military, and economic tools in responding to the IS threat? How can the United States best undermine the appeal of the Islamic State's ideology?
- How might U.S. or other countries' use of ground combat military forces to recapture territory from the Islamic State affect the threat that the group poses? On what legal basis might such operations be authorized? How much might they cost in material, financial, and human terms? If such operations succeed—what political and military arrangements would best ensure that extremists could not return to recaptured areas or draw new local support?
- Does progress against the Islamic State depend on altering the political dynamics of Iraq and Syria? How should the IS threat shape U.S. policy toward Syria and Iraq, the provision assistance to U.S. partners, and the resettlement of refugees?

¹ In conjunction with its summer 2014 military offensive in Iraq and its declaration of the establishment of an Islamic caliphate in areas under its control, the Islamic State organization (IS) dropped prior references to "Iraq and Al Sham" in its formal communications. On June 29, Islamic State Spokesman Abu Muhammad Al Adnani said, "the 'Iraq and Al Sham' in the name of the Islamic State is henceforth removed from all official deliberations and communications, and the official name is the Islamic State from the date of this declaration." In line with this statement, the group has since referred to itself simply as "the Islamic State," although U.S. government officials, some international media entities, and some members of the public continue to refer to the group by English-language acronyms for its previous name "the Islamic State of Iraq and Al Sham"—ISIS/ISIL. The difference in English-language acronyms stems from distinct interpretations of the geographic scope of the term *Al Sham*. Some observers insist that the term refers to a broad, if imprecisely defined geographic area commonly referred to in English as "the Levant;" others insist that *Al Sham* refers specifically to Syria. Still others, including senior U.S. officials, refer to the group by an Arabic acronym for its 2013-2014 name – *Daesh* (often pronounced 'daash', for *Dawla Islamiyya fi Iraq wal Sham*). The acronym *Daesh* does not correspond to an Arabic word, but may be seen as derogatory by IS supporters because it does not acknowledge the group's chosen name or its ambitions.

Posture and U.S. Threat Assessments

The Islamic State continues to occupy large areas of northern and western Iraq and similarly large areas of northern and eastern Syria and has the support of affiliated organizations in several countries and regions. Islamic State territorial gains in 2015—while limited compared to the group's broad territorial expansion in 2014—have come largely at the expense of Syrian government forces. IS fighters have expanded their control over central Syria and threaten some pro-Asad and anti-Asad forces' positions in western Syria, but the group also has lost some territory in northern Syria to a mixture of Kurdish and allied Arab forces backed by coalition airpower. As of late 2015, the United States and its coalition partners had announced their intention to close off the Islamic State's remaining access to the Turkish border across the area west of the Euphrates River and northeast of Aleppo. According to U.S. officials, Russia's military intervention in Syria on behalf of Syrian President Bashar al Asad is complicating U.S. efforts in Syria, although the Obama Administration seeks U.S.-Russian cooperation against the Islamic State. In Iraq, with the exception of their May 2015 seizure of Ramadi, IS fighters also have suffered losses to various forces in 2015, including in Tikrit, Baiji, Sinjar, and surrounding areas. They continue to hold the city of Mosul and large areas of Anbar Province, from which they carry out attacks on Iraqi security forces and civilians.

Since early 2015, U.S. officials have estimated that the Islamic State can muster tens of thousands of fighters in Iraq and Syria and thousands elsewhere, but officials also have estimated that coalition air strikes and ground operations have killed thousands of IS personnel. Thousands of recruits reportedly have joined the organization since the start of coalition military operations in 2014, but U.S. officials have reported uncertainty about casualty-to-replacement ratios and the overall extent and effects of attrition in IS ranks.² Some reports suggest that the group has been required to use conscription in some areas, and one U.S. official estimated in November 2015 that the coalition has been targeting and killing "one mid-to-upper-level ISIL leader every two days since May [2015]."³

In addition to local recruits and conscripts, IS personnel reportedly have been replenished with flows of foreign terrorist fighters that U.S. officials have described as unprecedented. In May 2015, an unnamed senior State Department official attempted to put recent foreign terrorist fighter travel trends in context by saying:⁴

...we've never seen something like this. We've never seen a terrorist organization with 22,000 foreign fighters from a hundred countries all around the world. To put it in context – again, the numbers are fuzzy – but it's about double of what went into Afghanistan over 10 years in the war against the Soviet Union. Those jihadi fighters were from a handful of countries. These guys are coming from a hundred different countries. You combine that with social media, their efforts to inspire homegrown attacks, not even to have fighters come and train but do attacks at home, this is a formidable, enormous threat.

As of July 2015, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) estimated publicly that as many as 25,000 individuals from more than 100 countries have travelled to Syria to engage in combat with various groups since 2011, including more than 4,500 Europeans and

² Testimony of US CENTCOM Commander General Lloyd Austin before the House Armed Services Committee, March 3, 2015.

³ Department of Defense Press Briefing by Col. Steve Warren, Operation Inherent Resolve spokesman from Baghdad, Iraq, November 13, 2015.

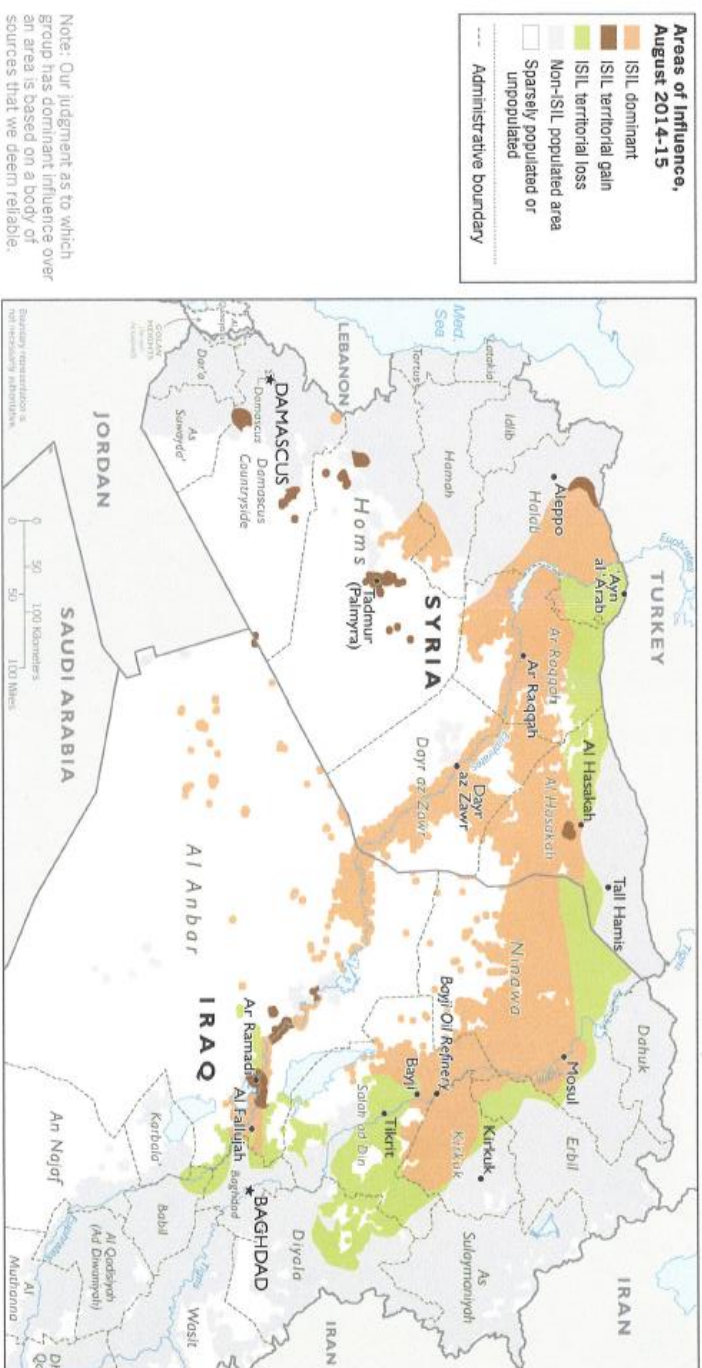
⁴ Background Press Briefing on Iraq by Senior State Department Official, Washington, DC, May 20, 2015.

Figure 1. Areas of Islamic State Influence
U.S. Department of Defense Map, September 2015

Iraq and Syria: ISIL's Areas of Influence, August 2014 to August 2015

Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant's (ISIL) frontlines in much of northern and central Iraq and northern Syria have been pushed back since August 2014. ISIL can no longer operate freely in roughly 20 to 25 percent of populated areas in Iraq and Syria where it once could. The map depicts ISIL's territorial losses, which translate into approximately 15,000 to 20,000 square kilometers, or about 30 to 37 percent, in Iraq, and 2,000 to 4,000 square kilometers, or about 5 to 10 percent, in Syria. ISIL probably has a presence and freedom of movement in much of the unpopulated areas

depicted on the map, but we cannot determine if it is the dominant actor. In Iraq, ISIL's largest territorial losses have been in Diyala, Erbil, Ninawa, and Salah ad Din Governorates. In Syria, the group's frontlines have been pushed back in large areas in the north. Despite its net losses in both countries, ISIL has captured territory of strategic value since August 2014, such as Ar Ramadi in Iraq's Al Anbar Governorate and Tadmur (Palmyra) in Syria's Homs Province. Our estimates fluctuate regularly because of the dynamic nature of the conflict.



Source: Map and text produced by U.S. Department of Defense, September 2015.

some U.S. citizens.⁵ According to the ODNI, out of this larger total, hundreds of Western foreign fighters, including dozens of U.S. citizens, have joined the ranks of the Islamic State.⁶

Although the Islamic State organization is now considered a direct threat to U.S. and allied interests overseas, officials and observers continue to debate the extent to which the group has the capability to direct and conduct attacks inside the United States. U.S. officials have suggested that the individuals responsible for deadly 2015 shooting attacks in Texas and Tennessee were inspired by jihadist-Salafist propaganda, but they have not alleged any operational links between the Islamic State organization and the attackers. These U.S. attacks followed a spate of similar so-called lone wolf attacks in Europe and elsewhere, in which the alleged perpetrators appeared to be inspired by the Islamic State and/or Al Qaeda but have not necessarily been operationally linked to them or their affiliates. The Islamic State has praised these and other incidents and continues to urge supporters to conduct such attacks if they are able. Federal Bureau of Investigation Director James Comey described the FBI's view of the effect of IS propaganda on patterns of radicalization and violence among IS supporters in October 2015:⁷

In recent months ISIL released a video, via social media, reiterating the group's encouragement of lone offender attacks in Western countries, specifically advocating for attacks against soldiers and law enforcement, intelligence community members, and government personnel. Several incidents have occurred in the United States and Europe over the last few months that indicate this "call to arms" has resonated among ISIL supporters and sympathizers.

The group has stated its aspiration to attack in Europe and inside the United States on numerous occasions. On November 16, an IS subgroup in Iraq released a video message praising the Paris terrorist attacks and promising similar attacks in Europe and in Washington, DC.⁸ The next day, the Islamic State's flagship English-language publication praised the attacks, promised similar attacks, and encouraged its supporters to carry out attacks as individuals if possible.

In this context, U.S. officials have expressed increasing concern about the IS threat in congressional testimony and other public statements. In November 2014, National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) Director Nicholas Rasmussen said in testimony before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence that "the [ISIL] threat beyond the Middle East is real, although thus far limited in sophistication. However, if left unchecked, over time we can expect ISIL's capabilities to mature, and the threat to the United States homeland ultimately to increase."⁹ In October 2015, Rasmussen expressed concern about "the group's trajectory" given

⁵ ODNI Spokesman Brian Hale quoted in Barbara Starr, 'A few dozen Americans' in ISIS ranks,' CNN, July 15, 2015.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ FBI Director James Comey, Statement for the Record, House Homeland Security Committee, October 21, 2015.

⁸ U.S. Government Open Source Center (OSC) Report TRO2015111646225556, "Alert: ISIL Video Praises Paris Attacks, Vows Similar Attacks in Washington," Twitter, November 16, 2015. The statement said: "To Europe I say this: We are coming. We are coming with car bombs, explosions, explosive vests, and silencers. ... You have taken in only one wave of an ocean. The waves will continue to pound you. God willing, more operations will come to you. ... To the countries participating in the Crusader campaign we say this: We swear to God, you will have days like those of France. If we could attack France on the soil of Paris, we swear to God we will attack America on the soil of Washington, God willing. God willing, we will conquer Rome, for this is the promise of the truthful."

⁹ Mr. Nicholas J. Rasmussen then-Acting Director, National Counterterrorism Center, Statement for the Record, Senate Select Intelligence Committee, November 20, 2014. In September 2014, his predecessor Matthew Olsen had said that "we have no credible information that ISIL is planning to attack the U.S.". Olsen also said U.S. counterterrorism officials "remain mindful of the possibility that an ISIL-sympathizer—perhaps motivated by online propaganda—could conduct a limited, self-directed attack here at home with no warning." However, Olsen noted that, "In our view, any threat to the U.S. homeland from these types of extremists is likely to be limited in scope and scale."

that it has “the ingredients that we traditionally look at as being critical to the development of and external operations capability.”¹⁰

In the wake of the Paris, Beirut, and Sinai attacks of November 2015, and an October 2015 attack in Ankara (Turkey’s capital), CIA Director John Brennan publicly described the Islamic State as having embraced an “external operations agenda.” (See “Transnational Terrorism as a Strategy and Tactic”.) Efforts to prevent future attacks may draw from analysis and forensic study of where, how, and by whom the recent attacks were planned, organized, and directed.

Speaking at a November 16 press conference at the G-20 summit in Turkey, President Obama responded to questions about whether he and his Administration have underestimated the threat posed by the Islamic State by arguing that the U.S. government has taken the IS terrorist threat seriously. He added that, in his view, this seriousness should be evident in multifaceted and ongoing U.S. efforts to degrade IS and other terrorist groups’ capabilities and to prevent attacks. Echoing comments made by other Administration officials in 2015, the President acknowledged the ongoing and serious nature of IS and Al Qaeda terrorist threats and said that continued vigilance would be required because U.S. adversaries had demonstrated their “willingness to die” in operations, making efforts to stop them more challenging.¹¹

Some public criticism of the President, including from some Members of Congress and 2016 presidential candidates, was aimed at the following remarks he made in a November 12 interview, a day prior to the Paris attacks:

From the start, our goal has been first to contain [the Islamic State], and we have contained them. They have not gained ground in Iraq. And in Syria it -- they’ll come in, they’ll leave. But you don’t see this systematic march by ISIL across the terrain.¹²

In his November 16 press conference, the President responded to the criticism by emphasizing that

when I said that we are containing their spread in Iraq and Syria, in fact, they control less territory than they did last year. And the more we shrink that territory, the less they can pretend that they are somehow a functioning state, and the more it becomes apparent that they are simply a network of killers who are brutalizing local populations. That allows us to reduce the flow of foreign fighters, which then, over time, will lessen the numbers of terrorists who can potentially carry out terrible acts like they did in Paris.

Emergence and Organizational Development

Roots in Iraq and Syria

Many observers argue that changes in Iraq’s political structure as a result of the U.S.-led overthrow of Saddam Hussein helped give rise to the Islamic State. The fall of Hussein’s Sunni Arab-dominated government and the ascension to power of the majority Shiite Arab population fueled deep Sunni resentment that continues today. In Syria, the Islamic State has grown in size and strength in part because of the Asad regime’s use of Syria’s armed forces and Iranian support to try to suppress rebellion by Syria’s Sunni Arab majority.

¹⁰ NCTC Director Rasmussen, Statement for the Record, House Homeland Security Committee, October 21, 2015.

¹¹ President Barack Obama, Press Briefing at G-20 Summit in Antalya, Turkey, November 16, 2015.

¹² Alexander Mallin, “Obama Criticized for Claim That ISIS Is ‘Contained,’” ABC News, November 14, 2015.

The Islamic State's direct ideological and organizational roots lie in the forces built and led by the late Abu Musab al Zarqawi in Iraq from 2002 through 2006—*Tawhid wal Jihad* (Monotheism and Jihad) and Al Qaeda in the Land of the Two Rivers (aka Al Qaeda in Iraq, or AQ-I). Zarqawi took advantage of Sunni animosity toward U.S. forces and feelings of disenfranchisement at the hands of Iraq's Shiites and Kurds to advance a uniquely sectarian agenda that differed from Al Qaeda's in important ways. Some experts attribute Sunni resentment to the use by some Shiites' of the democratic political process to monopolize political power in Iraq. Following Zarqawi's death at the hands of U.S. forces in June 2006, AQ-I leaders repackaged the group as a coalition called the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). ISI lost its two top leaders in 2010 and was weakened, but not eliminated, by the time of the U.S. withdrawal in 2011. The precise nature of ISI's relationship to Al Qaeda leaders from 2006 onward is unclear.

Under the leadership of former U.S. detainees Ibrahim Awad Ibrahim al Badri al Samarra'i (aka Abu Bakr al Baghdadi), Taha Subhi Falaha (aka Abu Mohammed al Adnani), and others, the Islamic State of Iraq rebuilt its capabilities from 2010 onward. By early 2013, the group was conducting dozens of deadly attacks a month inside Iraq and had begun operations in neighboring Syria. In April 2013, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi announced his intent to merge his forces in Iraq and Syria with those of the Syria-based, Al Qaeda affiliated group *Jabhat al Nusra* (Support Front), under the name of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/ISIS). Jabhat al Nusra and Al Qaeda leaders rejected the merger, underscoring growing tensions among Sunni extremists in the region. Al Qaeda leader Ayman al Zawahiri sought to remind IS leaders of previous pledges of loyalty to Al Qaeda made by deceased IS figures, but IS leaders rejected his claims. Al Qaeda's general command issued a statement disavowing the Islamic State in early 2014. Islamic State leaders declared that their group "is not and has never been an offshoot of Al Qaeda,"¹³ and said that since they viewed themselves as a sovereign political entity, they had given leaders of the Al Qaeda organization deference over time rather than full pledges of obedience.

Declaration of Caliphate

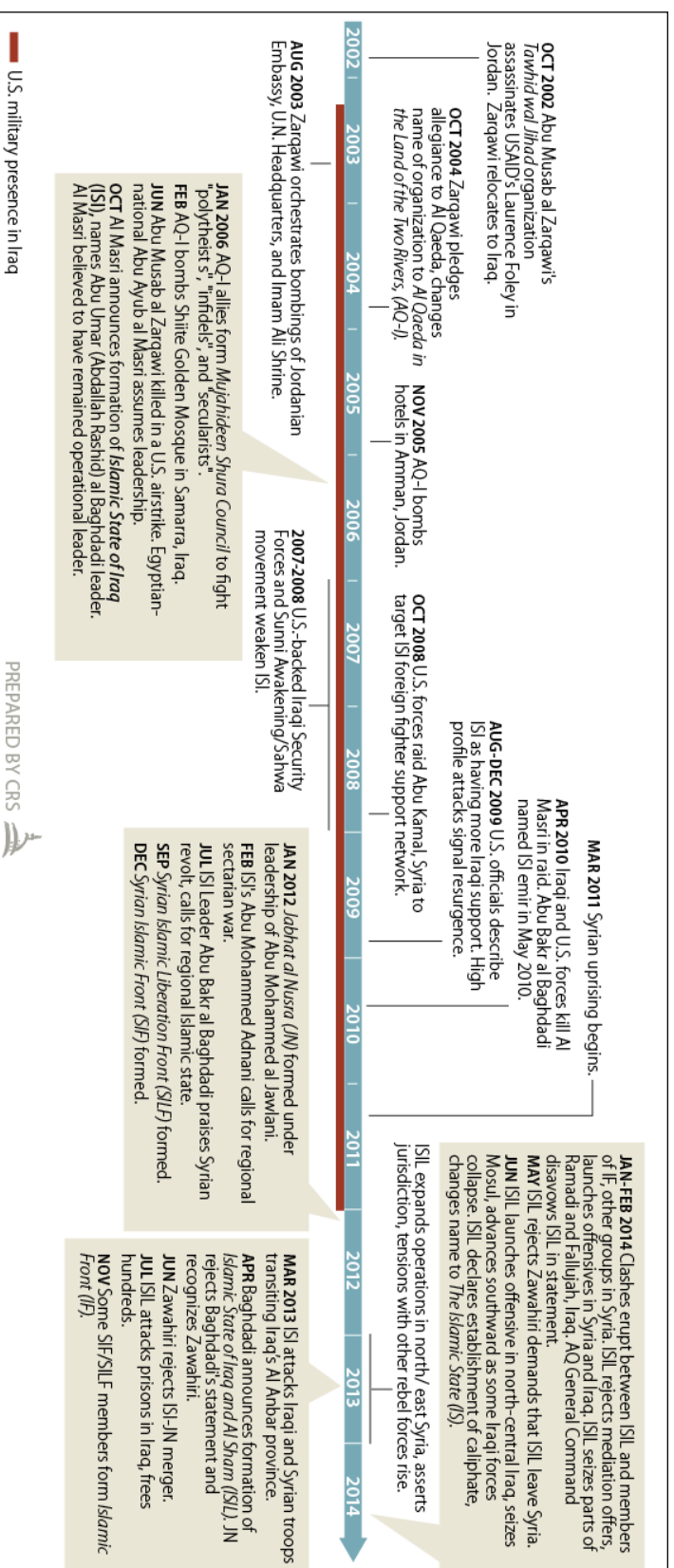
In June 2014, Islamic State leaders declared their reestablishment of the caliphate (*khilafa*, lit. succession to the prophet Mohammed), dropped references to Iraq and the Levant in their name, demanded the support of believing Muslims, and named Abu Bakr al Baghdadi as caliph and imam (leader of the world's Muslims).¹⁴ IS leaders have highlighted Baghdadi's reported descent from the Quraysh tribe—the same tribe as the Prophet Muhammad—as well as his religious training, as qualifications for his position as caliph. Islamic State spokesman Abu Muhammad al Adnani describes Baghdadi as, "the mujahid shaykh, the learned, the active, and the devout, the warrior and the renewer, the descendant of the Prophet's house."¹⁵ The group cites its implementation of several of the historical requirements of the caliphate/imamate as further grounds for the religious legitimacy of its actions.

¹³ OSC Report TRN2014051234500562, "Al-Furqan Releases ISIL Al-Adnani's Message Criticizing Al-Zawahiri, Refusing to Leave Syria," Twitter, May 11-12, 2014.

¹⁴ Scholar of medieval Islam Wilferd Madelung describes historical Sunni doctrines for the declaration of the imamate in "Imāma." *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd Ed., Edited by: P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs, Brill Online, 2015.

¹⁵ OSC Report TRR2014062966139093, Abu Muhammad al Adnani, "This is the Promise of God," June 29, 2014.

Figure 2. Timeline: The Roots of the Islamic State



Source: Prepared by CRS using U.S. Government Open Source Center reporting and other open sources.

Nevertheless, Baghdadi's appointment as caliph has been rejected by many Islamic scholars. In one open letter to Baghdadi, a group of prominent Muslim scholars questioned the legitimacy of his appointment, asking "Who gave you authority over the *ummah* (community of believers)? Was it your group? If this is the case, then a group of no more than several thousand has appointed itself the ruler of over a billion and a half Muslims."¹⁶ Rather than debate Baghdadi's credentials, most Muslim critics simply reject the entire premise of an Islamic State-led caliphate. In particular, they condemn the group's unilateral announcement of a caliphate without consultation or consensus in the broader Muslim community. For example, one group of critics argued:

If you recognize the billion and a half people who consider themselves Muslims, how can you not consult them regarding your so-called caliphate? Thus you face one of two conclusions: either you concur that they are Muslims and they did not appoint you caliph over them—in which case you are not the caliph—or, the other conclusion is that you do not accept them as Muslims, in which case Muslims are a small group not in need of a caliph, so why use the word 'caliph' at all? In truth, the caliphate must emerge from a consensus of Muslim countries, organizations of Islamic scholars and Muslims across the globe.¹⁷

Some jihadist groups, including Al Qaeda, also have rejected Baghdadi's appointment as caliph, arguing that he is simply another military commander and is owed no special loyalty. Al Qaeda leaders Osama Bin Laden and Ayman al Zawahiri viewed the late Taliban leader Mullah Omar as the rightful leader of faithful Muslims and pledged loyalty (*bay'a*) to him, although their views about the wisdom and legitimacy of declaring a caliphate under his leadership or Al Qaeda's differ from those of the Islamic State. In the wake of Mullah Omar's death, Zawahiri pledged loyalty to his successor, Mullah Akhtar Mansoor, and urged other Muslims to do so.¹⁸ The apparently limited appeal of these Al Qaeda and Islamic State demands suggests that their violent agenda remains popular only among a relatively small, if dangerous, minority of the world's Sunni Muslims.

IS Affiliates and Adherents

Since 2014, some armed groups have recognized the Islamic State caliphate and pledged loyalty to 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. The implications of such pledges of loyalty to the Islamic State on groups' objectives, tactics, and leadership structures appear to vary and may evolve. The Obama Administration has stated that groups and individuals that are associated with the Islamic State and that participate in hostilities against the United States or its coalition partners are legitimate military targets pursuant to the 2001 Authorization for the Use of Military Force against Al Qaeda, subject to executive branch discretion (see "Authorization for the Use of Military Force" below).

As of late 2015, experts consider the following IS adherents to be the most significant and capable.

¹⁶ "Open Letter to Dr. Ibrahim Awwad Al-Badri, alias 'Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi,' and to the fighters and followers of the self-declared 'Islamic State,'" September 19, 2014. Available at <http://www.lettertobaghdadi.com/>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ OSC Report TRR2015081353744980, "Al-Qa'ida Amir Ayman al-Zawahiri Swears Allegiance to New Taliban Leader Mullah Akhtar Mansoor," August 13, 2015

The Islamic State in Egypt (Sinai Province, Wilayah Sinai)]¹⁹

The Islamic State's local affiliate in the northern Sinai Peninsula was formerly known as *Ansar Bayt al Maqdis* (Supporters of the Holy House or Partisans of Jerusalem). It emerged after the Egyptian revolution of 2011 and affiliated with the Islamic State in 2014. Estimates of its membership range from 500 to 1,000, and it is comprised of radicalized indigenous Bedouin Arabs, foreign fighters, and Palestinian militants. On social media, the group has displayed various pictures of its weaponry, specifically man-portable air defense systems (MANPADS) such as the 9K338 Igla-S and Kornet anti-tank guided missile (ATGM) systems.²⁰ SP has claimed credit for destroying Metrojet Flight 9268, which exploded in mid-air over the Sinai Peninsula on October 31, killing all 224 passengers aboard. The Egyptian government has been circumspect over the cause of the crash, while several foreign governments, including the United States, have strongly suggested that the detonation of a hidden bomb most likely brought down the plane.

The Islamic State in Saudi Arabia (Wilayah Najd/Haramayn/Hijaz)²¹

IS leaders have threatened the kingdom's rulers directly and called on the group's supporters there to attack Shiites, Saudi security forces, and foreigners.²² IS supporters have claimed responsibility for several attacks in the kingdom since 2014, including suicide bombing attacks on Shia mosques in different parts of the country and attacks targeting Saudi security forces. In June 2015, an IS-affiliated Saudi suicide bomber blew himself up in a Kuwaiti mosque, killing more than two dozen people and wounding hundreds.²³ Saudi officials have arrested more than 1,600 suspected IS supporters (including more than 400 in July 2015) and claim to have foiled several planned attacks.²⁴ U.S. diplomatic facilities closed temporarily in March 2015 in connection with reported threat information, and U.S. officials continue to warn of the potential for attacks on U.S. persons and facilities in the kingdom, along with other Western and Saudi targets.

The Islamic State poses a unique political threat to Saudi Arabia in addition to the tangible security threats demonstrated by a series of deadly attacks inside the kingdom since late 2014. IS leaders claim to have established a caliphate to which all pious Sunni Muslims owe allegiance, directly challenging the legitimacy of Saudi leaders who have long claimed a unique role as Sunni leaders and supporters of particular Salafist interpretations of Sunni Islam. IS critiques of Saudi leaders may have resonance among some Saudis who have volunteered to fight for or contributed on behalf of Muslims in several conflicts involving other Muslims over the last three decades. Saudi leaders argue that it is the Islamic State that lacks legitimacy, and some Saudi

¹⁹ Prepared by Jeremy Sharp, Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs. For more information, see CRS Insight IN10199, *The Islamic State in Egypt: Implications for U.S.-Egyptian Relations*, by Jeremy M. Sharp.

²⁰ "Analysis: Sinai Militants display Igla-S, Kornet Missiles," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, September 16, 2015.

²¹ Prepared by Christopher Blanchard, Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs. For more information, see CRS Report RL33533, *Saudi Arabia: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Christopher M. Blanchard.

²² OSC Report TRR2014111361251279, "ISIL Amir Al-Baghdadi Accepts Pledges of Allegiance, Announces 'Expansion' to Saudi Arabia, Yemen," Twitter in English, Arabic, November 13, 2014.

²³ Ahmed Al Omran, "Saudi Brothers Suspected of Links to Kuwait Mosque Bombing Arrested," *Wall Street Journal*, July 7, 2015.

²⁴ Ahmed Al Omran, "Saudi Arabia Arrests 431 People With Suspected Islamic State Links," *Wall Street Journal*, July 18, 2015; and, Isa al Shamani, "Forty-Six Saudi Women are with DA'ISH in Syria; 1,375 Individuals Accused of being Members of the Organization," *Al Hayah* (London), September 3, 2015.

observers compare the group's ideology to that of other violent, deviant groups from the past and present.²⁵

The Islamic State in Libya (Wilayah Tarabalus/Barqa/Fezzan)²⁶

Supporters of the Islamic State (IS) in Libya have announced three affiliated wilayah (provinces) corresponding to the country's three historic regions—*Wilayah Tarabalus* in the west, *Wilayah Barqa* in the east, and *Wilayah Fezzan* in the southwest. Detailed open source estimates are lacking, but some observers put the group's strength in Libya at several hundred to a few thousand fighters among a much larger community of Salafi-jihadist activists and fighters. Since late 2014, IS supporters have taken control of Muammar al Qadhafi's hometown—the central coastal city of Sirte—and committed a series of atrocities against Christians and Libyan Muslim opponents. They also have launched attacks against forces from Misrata and neighboring towns in an effort to push westward and southward. IS backers sought to impose their control on the eastern city of Darnah, but have faced resistance from other armed Islamist groups that do not share their beliefs or recognize the authority of IS leader and self-styled caliph, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi. In November 2015, the U.S. military conducted an airstrike thought to have killed the Iraqi leader of IS operations in Libya, the first such U.S. strike on IS operatives outside of Syria and Iraq.

The Islamic State in Nigeria [West Africa Province (Wilayah Gharb Afriqiyyah)]²⁷

This northeast Nigeria-based Sunni insurgent terrorist group widely known by the name *Boko Haram* ("western education is forbidden") and formerly known as *Jama'a Ahl as-Sunna Li-da'wa wa-al Jihad* ("People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad") pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in March 2015. More than 14,000 deaths have been attributed to the group in the past five years (more than 5,500 in 2014 alone), and more than 1.5 million people have been displaced by related violence, which increasingly spread into neighboring Cameroon, Chad and Niger (an area collectively known as the Lake Chad Basin) in 2015. The group threatens civilian, state and international targets, including Western citizens, in the region; in 2011 it bombed the United Nations building in Nigeria's capital, Abuja. The State Department designated Boko Haram and a splinter faction, Ansaru, as Foreign Terrorist Organizations in 2013. Counterterrorism cooperation with Nigeria has been constrained by various factors. U.S. counterterrorism assistance to the Lake Chad Basin countries has grown substantially since 2014 (now totaling more than \$300 million in Boko Haram-focused support, in addition to intelligence sharing). The region is a priority area for U.S. Counterterrorism Partnership Fund (CTPF) programs.

²⁵ See Nawaf Obaid and Saud Al-Sarhan, "The Saudis Can Crush ISIS," *New York Times*, September 8, 2014.

²⁶ Prepared by Christopher Blanchard, Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs. For more information, see CRS Report RL33142, *Libya: Transition and U.S. Policy*, by Christopher M. Blanchard.

²⁷ Prepared by Lauren Ploch Blanchard, Specialist in African Affairs. For more information, see CRS Insight IN10242, *Nigeria's Boko Haram and the Islamic State*, by Lauren Ploch Blanchard and Christopher M. Blanchard and CRS Report R43881, *Nigeria's 2015 Elections and the Boko Haram Crisis*, by Lauren Ploch Blanchard.

The Islamic State in Afghanistan and Pakistan (Wilayah Khorasan)²⁸

The June 2015 semi-annual Defense Department report on Afghanistan stability states that the United States and the Afghan government are closely watching the Islamic State's attempt to expand its reach in Afghanistan and Pakistan.²⁹ The Islamic State presence in Afghanistan and Pakistan appears to consist of individuals of more mainstream insurgent groups, particularly the Afghan Taliban, "rebranding" themselves as members of "The Islamic State of Khorasan Province," or *Wilayah Khorasan*. This group differs from the so called Khorasan Group identified by U.S. officials as being an Al Qaeda affiliated cell seeking to conduct transnational terrorist attacks. It does not appear that Islamic State leadership has sent substantial numbers of fighters from Iraq and Syria into Afghanistan or Pakistan. According to the report, "[the Islamic State's] presence and influence in Afghanistan remains in the exploratory stage." There also reportedly is growing competition and conflict between the Taliban and Islamic State fighters. Still, the emerging Islamic State presence in Afghanistan is a growing factor in U.S.-Afghan discussions on the joint response to a deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan overall, according to official readouts from recent high-level U.S.-Afghanistan exchanges.³⁰

The Islamic State in Yemen (Wilayah al Yemen, Wilayah Al Bayda, Wilayah Aden-Abyan, Wilayah Shabwah)³¹

In Yemen, militants who claim allegiance to the Islamic State have taken advantage of ongoing war to repeatedly bomb mosques known for attracting worshippers of Zaydi Islam, an offshoot of Shia Islam (with legal traditions and religious practices which are similar to Sunni Islam). Islamic State terrorists have targeted supporters of the Houthi Movement, a predominately Zaydi armed militia and political group that aims to rule wide swaths of northern Yemen and restore the "Imamate," or Zaydi-led monarchical rule that intermittently governed northern Yemen from 893 AD to 1962. The Houthis are currently at war with a coalition of predominately Sunni Arab states led by Saudi Arabia, and the Islamic State may see this war as an opportunity to increase sectarian hatred in Yemen. Though wracked by war, Yemen has not traditionally had the same kind of sectarian animosity as other Arab states such as Iraq and Lebanon.

Ideology and Operations

The ideology of the Islamic State organization can be described as a uniquely hardline version of violent jihadist-Salafism—the group and its supporters are willing to use violence in an armed struggle to establish what they view as an ideal Islamic society. Their vision is based on a specific understanding of the life of the prophet Mohammed, the example of his earliest followers, and select events in Islamic history.³² In this regard, the group's beliefs are a particularly activist,

²⁸ Prepared by Kenneth Katzman, Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs. For more information, see CRS Report RL30588, *Afghanistan: Post-Taliban Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy*, by Kenneth Katzman.

²⁹ U.S. Department of Defense, Report on Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan, June 2015.

³⁰ Josh Lederman, "Obama finalizes slowdown of U.S. troop withdrawal with Afghan leader," AP, March 24, 2015.

³¹ Prepared by Jeremy Sharp, Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs. For more information, see CRS Report R43960, *Yemen: Civil War and Regional Intervention*, by Jeremy M. Sharp.

³² For background on Salafism, see Roel Meijer (ed.), *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement*, Oxford University Press, 2009; and Quintan Wiktorowicz, "Anatomy of the Salafi Movement," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 29, pp. 207–239, 2006. According to Meijer's volume, Salafism "refers to the movement that believes that Muslims should emulate the first three generations of Islam referred to as the pious forefathers (*al salaf al salih*) as much as possible in all areas of life."

violent, and uncompromising expression of broader ideological trends that have developed over a period of centuries and have fueled extremism and conflict across the Sunni Muslim world for much of the last 40 years.³³ While IS supporters may share some of the views of nonviolent Salafist Sunnis, Islamic State adherents differ from them, from most non-Salafist Sunnis, and even from other violent jihadist-Salafists in two key respects. One is their chosen creed (*aqidah*)—their perspectives on the requirements of true Islamic faith—and the other is their chosen approach (*manhaj*, lit. path)—their method for interpreting and applying their view of Islamic religious tenets. Islamic State figures describe their organization as the successor to and defender of the prophet Mohammed's approach, a view that many other Sunni Muslims reject. The Islamic State's supporters further hold an apocalyptic vision of their organization and its role in instigating a broad clash between true Muslims and all those they consider non-believers.

Creed and Approach

Like other Salafists, the Islamic State organization seeks the elimination from Islam of what it views as idolatry, the promotion of strict monotheism, and the protection of those it views as true Muslim believers from threats posed by idolaters, apostates, and other non-believers.³⁴ IS leaders argue that many individuals who would describe themselves as Sunni Muslims have strayed from the creed and path defined by the prophet Mohammed and his companions. The Islamic State rejects criticism from other Sunnis who argue that the group too easily or broadly declares the infidelity of other Muslims (an act referred to as *takfir*), arguing instead that the Islamic State only attacks those whose infidelity can be demonstrated.³⁵ Nevertheless, IS ideologues dictate strict conditions for determining whether other Muslims have nullified their faith through certain acts, and they describe a wide range of groups and individuals as idolaters (i.e., those who worship other gods or associate others with god) or apostates (believers who reject or stray from Islam).

For example, the group considers individuals that support democratic governance and participate in elections, including Sunni Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood, to be idolaters for elevating man-made law and political order alongside or above religious law prescribed by God. The group is especially uncompromising in its condemnation of and violence toward Shiites and Alawites, whom it considers irredeemable apostates subject to punishment by death for their veneration of the prophet Mohammed's family and for other beliefs and practices.³⁶

³³ In the words of one observer, the Islamic State's ideology can be seen as an "acutely severe" and "unforgiving" example of violent jihadist-Salafism, a broader movement which itself "is predicated on an extremist and minoritarian reading of Islamic scripture that is also textually rigorous, deeply rooted in a premodern theological tradition, and extensively elaborated by a recognized cadre of religious authorities." See Cole Bunzel, From Paper State to Caliphate: The Ideology of the Islamic State, The Brookings Institution Center for Middle East Policy Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World, Analysis Paper No. 19, March 2015.

³⁴ Terms frequently used in IS members' explanations of their ideology include Arabic words for idolatry (*shirk*); monotheism (*tawhid*); believers (*muaminin*); non-believers (*kuffar*); idolaters (*mushrikin*); apostates (*murtadd*); faith (*iman*); and disbelief (*kufr*).

³⁵ For example, in the midst of jihadist infighting in northern Syria in early 2014, Islamic State religious official Mohammed Sammuh al Rashid (aka Abu Ubadah al Maghribi) released a statement saying "nobody should issue *takfiri* [declaring the non-belief of Muslims] rulings" against other Muslim groups, because "declaring their non-belief for the sake of fighting them is closer to the opinion of the Kharijites whom we hate." OSC Report TRR2014012180009989, "Syria: Islamic State of Iraq, Levant Sharia Official Calls Factions to Stop Infighting," January 21, 2014. Abu Mohammed Al Adnani rejected similar criticism from a Jabhat al Nusra official in a March 2014 audio statement entitled "Then Let Us Earnestly Pray, and Invoke the Curse of Allah on Those Who Lie."

³⁶ Islamic State propaganda regularly refers to Shiites derogatorily as rejectionists (*rawafid*) and *Safavids*, a reference to the 16th-18th century Persian dynasty that ruled large parts of modern day Iraq. Alawites are referred to derogatorily (continued...)

IS materials welcome the so called "extinction of the gray zone" (see **Figure 3**) in a black and white struggle between faith and disbelief; they often use these and other stark terms to describe what they see as binary tests of Muslim faith created by conflicts in Syria and Iraq and other world events, including IS terrorist attacks and actions taken by others to counter the group.

The Islamic State's methods for deriving these views and applying them through action place the group at odds with other self-identified Sunni Muslims, including some other violent jihadist-Salafists such as various prominent ideologues and members of Al Qaeda. In contrast to most traditional schools of Sunni religious opinion and consensus, the group defines itself and justifies its actions through selective reference to certain Sunni Islamic religious texts, including passages from the Qur'an, the attributed sayings and practices (*hadith/Sunna*) of the prophet Mohammed and his companions, and some subsequent religious scholarship. The group's dogma disregards some historical events and elides some authoritative Islamic sources that contradict its extreme views.³⁷

Bernard Haykel, an expert on Salafism at Princeton University, argues that the Islamic State's approach amounts to "denying the legal complexity of the [Islamic] legal tradition over a thousand years."³⁸ Haykel describes the group's view of Islam as "ahistorical" and links its extreme views to the group's "very particular reading of that tradition and those texts."

Nevertheless, statements and public outreach materials suggest that Islamic State leaders seek to convince other Muslims that the group's actions and views are consistent with historic Islamic

Figure 3. "The Extinction of the Gray Zone"

Cover of IS English Language Magazine, February 2015



Source: U.S. Government Open Source Center (OSC).

(...continued)

as *Nusayris*, or followers of a key 9th century figure in the sect's history, Mohammed ibn Nusayr.

³⁷ For example, the group's materials selectively cite parts of *Surah al Tawbah* from the Quran, emphasizing verse 5's call to fight and kill polytheists wherever they are found and ignoring calls in immediately adjacent verses 6 and 7 to grant asylum and conversion to those who seek it and to respect treaties with non-Muslims as long as non-Muslims respect treaties with the faithful (*Al Tawbah*, 9:5-7). Similarly, the group ignores the injunction in *Surah Al Anfal* to prepare for war but to favor peace with those who favor peace (*Al Anfal*, 8:61). More broadly the group rejects traditional Islamic legal approaches that have sought to explain these and other apparently contradictory impulses in the Qur'an and the hadith through analysis of their chronological development, chains of transmission, and applicability outside their original historical context.

³⁸ Haykel quoted in Jack Jenkins, "What The Atlantic Left Out About ISIS According To Their Own Expert," ThinkProgress Online, February 20, 2015.

practices and are supported by Islamic religious texts and jurisprudence. In this regard, IS figures make frequent reference to other minority, hardline Sunni perspectives on the complex history of Islamic faith and practice, especially the works of the 14th century scholar and polemicist Taqi Ad-din Ahmed Ibn Taymiyyah, the 18th century leader of the Arabian Salafist revival movement Mohammed ibn Abd al Wahhab, and their supporters. Some of their rivals label IS members as Kharijites, a reference to a violent movement from Islam's first century that rejected Mohammed successors and declared other Muslims to be apostates.

The extent to which commitment to the group's professed ideology consistently permeates the group's membership is debatable. Senior leaders and ideologues appear highly committed, but their public statements may mask opportunism or insecurities. Similarly, many lower ranking operatives in the group profess deep commitment to the group's ideology, but it is unlikely that such commitment is universal among the complex combination of foreign and local forces in the Islamic State's ranks. Some local supporters appear to have made pragmatic calculations of survival in pledging fealty to the group or have sought to settle local scores with rivals opposed to the Islamic State's rise.

To date, controversy surrounding the strategy and tactics of the Islamic State have divided jihadist-Salafists and prevented the group from drawing support from what might be a much larger population of prospective adherents. In late 2006 and early 2007, the establishment of the Islamic State of Iraq and the outlining of its ideology by then-leader Abu Umar al Baghdadi provoked serious controversy in jihadist-Salafist circles, with some groups and figures rejecting the group's calls for attacks on Sunni security force personnel and describing the establishment of the state premature.³⁹ Similar controversy has raged since 2013, when the group rejected Al Qaeda's demands that it withdraw from Syria and declared the establishment of its caliphate. As circumstances evolve, future IS actions may lead to additional controversy and internal divisions that might weaken the group or contribute to its defeat. The group's embrace of transnational terrorism against civilians is one such development. Alternatively, the group's staying power might be bolstered by the firm convictions of its core members that they constitute an elite vanguard of believers tasked with a unique religious and historical mission. Islamic State leaders show disregard for popular opinion and do not shy away from controversy with their critics, including disputes with fellow Sunni Muslims and other leading jihadists, like Al Qaeda.⁴⁰

³⁹ At the time, the Islamic Army of Iraq and other Sunni Islamist insurgents criticized ISI's views, and Saudi scholars intervened to urge unity over insistence on divisive doctrines. Kuwaiti Salafist cleric Hamid al Ali called for ISI to rescind its declaration of an Islamic state.

⁴⁰ For example, in April 2014, Abu Mohammed al Adnani said

Al-Qa'ida has become a follower of the majority, whom it calls the *ummah* [community of believers], flattering them at the expense of religion. The tyrants of the [Muslim] Brotherhood [MB], who fight the *mujahideen* and do not rule by the sharia of the Merciful, have become an entity being promoted for and being worthy of leniency. They [the MB] are described as the hope of the *ummah* and one of its heroes. We have no idea about which *ummah* they are talking about, or what bitter harvest they are seeking. [They say] 'The Christians, who are fighting the *ummah*, and the people of the idols such as the Hindus, Sikh, and others, have become partners in the homeland, in which it has become mandatory to coexist with them in peace and stability.' No, by God this had never been the belief of the ISIL for one day and it will never be.

The ISIL cannot go along with the people: If they do right, it does the same, and conversely if they do wrong, it does the same. The methodology of the ISIL will continue to be the disbelief in tyranny, disavowal from it and its people, and waging jihad against them with the sword, arrowheads, argument, and evidence.

Subsequently, The ISIL will welcome those who agree with it and shall ignore those who disagree with it, even if they called themselves 'the *ummah*.' This will certainly be the case, even if that

(continued...)

Is the "Islamic State" Islamic?

Interest in the roots and ideas of the Islamic State organization has prompted debates over the group's relationship to the Islamic faith and over the merits of different ways of describing the group, its beliefs, and its goals in public policy discourse. Participants in these debates may approach the question – "Is the 'Islamic State' Islamic?" – from different perspectives and draw different conclusions.

Those who understand the question "Is the Islamic State Islamic?" to focus on whether or not the group's members view themselves as Muslims or whether they make reference to Islam as a religion and Islamic history in describing their goals might answer the question affirmatively – e.g. – *"Yes, the 'Islamic State' is 'Islamic' because it defines itself through references to Islam and because it seeks a series of goals linked directly to its views of the requirements of Islam as a religion."*

Those who understand the question "Is the Islamic State Islamic?" to focus on whether or not the group's members and actions are authentically Islamic in the sense of reflecting the religion's core tenets or representing how most other Muslims would define their faith might answer the question negatively – e.g. – *"No, the 'Islamic State' is not 'Islamic' because it selectively draws from Islamic texts and traditions, because its actions are predicated on its rejection of what it sees as the wayward beliefs of other Muslims, and because its views on faith, theology, and violence are at odds with those that many other Muslims would describe as 'Islamic.'"*

Those who are critical of statements such as "The Islamic State is not Islamic" or "The Islamic State has nothing to do with Islam" may reject what they view as a failure to acknowledge religious aspects of the group's identity, ideology, and goals. These critics may fear that deemphasizing or misunderstanding the group's religious beliefs could lead to mistakes in policy.

At the same time, those who argue that "The Islamic State is not Islamic" or "The Islamic State has nothing to do with Islam" may be seeking to signal to Muslim and non-Muslim audiences that they do not view the beliefs and actions of the Islamic State as authoritatively or authentically Islamic or that opponents of the Islamic State are not at war with Muslims writ large. They may further be seeking to signal that they do not see the Islamic State organization as representative of most Muslims.

William McCants, director of the Brookings Institution Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World and author of an in-depth profile of the Islamic State and its ideology, argues that "Ultimately, it's for Muslims to decide whether the Islamic State is being faithful to scripture. For the nonbelievers, it's enough to recognize that Islamic scripture is contradictory when it comes to violence and to rejoice that most Muslims makes sense of these contradictions in a very different way than ISIS."⁴¹

Treatment of Religious Minorities, Jews, Christians, and Shiites

Religious minority communities living in Islamic State territory have faced expulsion, the destruction or seizure of their property, forced conversion, kidnapping, assault, sexual slavery, and death. The United Nations has stated that "the targeting of ethnic and religious communities by the Islamic State appears to be part of a deliberate and systematic policy that aims to suppress, permanently cleanse or expel, or in some instances destroy those communities within areas of its control."⁴² This approach has been justified by IS leaders based on the designations of groups and individuals as polytheists or apostates as outlined above ("Creed and Approach").

(...continued)

means that the ISIL is alone on one side and the entire world is on the other. O Muslims, this is our methodology that, God willing, we will never depart from, even if Al-Qa'ida is going to fight us over it, and even if we were annihilated, but for one person who will follow it."

Abu Mohammed al Adnani – This is Not and Will Never Be Our Path, OSC Report TRN2014041833830660, "Iraq: ISIL Spokesman's Audio Attacks Al-Qa'ida's Ideology, Calls For Establishing Islamic Caliphate," April 17, 2014.

⁴¹ Will McCants, "After the Paris attacks, here's how to think about the relationship between ISIS and Islam," *Washington Post*, November 14, 2015.

⁴² Report on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict in Iraq: 6 July – 10 September 2014, published jointly by the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).

In general terms, the group views Jews and Christians as having violated unspecified terms of agreement with Muslims that would require the protection called for in authoritative Islamic texts, including the Qur'an.⁴³ Like Al Qaeda leaders and other jihadist-Salafist ideologues, IS leaders often refer to their enemies as part of a Jewish and Crusader-led conspiracy against Islam. In classifying Jews and Christians as hostile parties, the Islamic State justifies violence against them. In basic terms, the Islamic State offers Jewish and Christian enemies three choices – conversion, the payment of a protection tax known as *jizyah*, or death.⁴⁴

After taking control of the Iraqi city of Mosul in 2014, the Islamic State demanded that Christians and other minorities there convert to Islam or leave the city but did not offer them the opportunity to remain after paying *jizyah*. Most members of minority communities fled, but some who did not were detained. The Islamic State reportedly bulldozed or otherwise destroyed remaining Christian churches and shrines in Mosul.⁴⁵ Similar actions have been reported in Syrian Christian communities seized by IS fighters. These actions have been criticized by some Islamic scholars, who argue that, "these Christians are not combatants against Islam or transgressors against it, indeed they are friends, neighbors and co-citizens. From the legal perspective of *shari'ah* they all fall under ancient agreements that are around 1400 years old, and the rulings of *jihad* do not apply to them."⁴⁶

Baghdadi's and Adnani's statements regarding the elimination of groups considered apostates also focuses on fighting Shiite Muslims. As part of its campaign to depose the Shiite-led government in Baghdad, the Islamic State has supplemented its conventional military offensive with repeated bombings of Shiite gathering places in Baghdad and some other majority Shiite cities, killing numerous Shiite civilians. While the Islamic State justifies the targeting of Shiites through a selective and extremist reading of religious texts, its actions are likely also influenced by the sectarian political context out of which the group emerged. The group and its supporters describe years of repression and injustice against Sunnis perpetrated by Iraq's U.S.-backed, Shiite-led government. In his announcement of the creation of the Islamic State caliphate in June 2014, IS spokesman Abu Muhammad al Adnani declared, "the time has come for those generations that were drowning in oceans of disgrace, being nursed on the milk of humiliation, and being ruled by the vilest of all people, after their long slumber in the darkness of neglect—the time has come for them to rise."⁴⁷ In a November 2014 speech, Baghdadi declared that the soldiers of the Islamic

⁴³ In 2007, then Islamic State of Iraq leader Abu Umar al Baghdadi said, "We consider that the people of the book [Christians and Jews] and others among the non-believers within the Islamic State today are enemies with no rights as *dhimmis* [rights guaranteed to non-Muslims according to Islamic law under Muslim government]. They have violated the pact with them on countless occasions and if they wish to have safety and security they must renew the pact with the Islamic State according to the Umari conditions they violated [conditions attributed to the second caliph Umar]." OSC Report FEA20070314102073, "New Al-Baghdadi Statement Warns U.S. Against Agreements With Other Jihad Groups, March 13, 2007.

⁴⁴ In March 2015, IS spokesman Abu Muhammad al Adnani said, "O Jews and Crusaders, if you want to protect yourselves, save your money, and live a secure life away from our swords, you have only two options: either you join Islam and declare God as the only god and no other, and thus live a good life in this world, gain the next one, and be doubly rewarded, [and] this is what we are calling on you to do and advising you to accept...The other option would be for you to contently pay us the *jizyah* [capitation tax collected from non-Muslims in states ruled by Islamic law], after you depart from the Arabian Peninsula of Muhammad, blessings and peace be upon him, as well as Jerusalem and all the nations of Muslims. The *jizyah* you will be paying us is one tenth of the tenth of what you are currently paying to fund your failing war. So save your money, and lift our swords from your [own] throats. If you choose the third option, and insist on your arrogance, pride, and stubbornness, you will deeply regret it soon, God willing."

⁴⁵ "ISIS forces last Iraqi Christians to flee Mosul," *New York Times*, July 18, 2014.

⁴⁶ "Open Letter to Dr. Ibrahim Awwad Al-Badri, alias 'Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi,' and to the fighters and followers of the self-declared 'Islamic State,'" September 19, 2014. Available at <http://www.lettertobaghdadi.com/>.

⁴⁷ OSC Report TRR2014062966139093, June 29, 2014.

State "will never abandon fighting, because they defy humiliation and injustice. They will never abandon fighting, because they did not taste honor and dignity except by fighting."⁴⁸ In March 2015, Adnani called on Sunnis to rise up in similar terms, citing a long list of grievances.⁴⁹

As they seek to motivate their followers, Islamic State leaders intone both religious references and allusions to historical incidents of perceived Sunni disenfranchisement. Assessing which parts of the group's message resonate most with individual IS followers is extremely challenging. In addition to religious convictions and individuals' sense of identity, the appeal of taking decisive action, a desire for adventure or glory, financial expediency, or violent personality disorders also may come into play in some cases.

Threatening U.S. Partners and Allies

Like Al Qaeda, the Islamic State identifies a range of U.S. partners in the Middle East and Europe as hostile targets and considers them agents in a broad U.S.-led conspiracy against Sunni Muslims. As a matter of priority, Al Qaeda leaders have largely focused their efforts on targeting the United States, its interests, and its allies in Europe, viewing insurgent campaigns against U.S. partners in the Middle East such as the governments of Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Egypt as potentially harmful or counterproductive distractions that could alienate potential Muslim supporters. In contrast, the Islamic State organization has primarily sought to eliminate local and regional opposition to its existence, including among fellow Muslims, in the service of its broader hostility toward the United States, Europe, and others. By seeking to consolidate control over territory in Iraq and Syria and declaring itself a sovereign political-religious authority to which Sunni Muslims owe allegiance, the Islamic State has defined itself to date as a more direct and fundamental challenge to regional governments than Al Qaeda has historically done. Its attacks outside its strongholds reflect its long-held hostility to the West, but are a new development in its approach.

At present, IS leaders continue to urge their supporters to attack and undermine governments supporting U.S. and coalition operations. European partners receive particular attention, as does the government of Saudi Arabia among Middle Eastern states. As noted above, IS supporters have carried out several terrorist attacks inside Saudi Arabia since 2014, and Saudi authorities have arrested hundreds of suspected supporters of the Islamic State and other terrorist groups over the last year. The capture and graphic murder of Jordanian Air Force pilot Muath al Kassasbeh in early 2015 and ongoing IS affiliate operations against the Egyptian government in Sinai demonstrate the group's broader hostility to Arab governments it rejects.

The Islamic State's anti-Israel rhetoric is also noteworthy. In late 2015, IS subgroups across the globe issued missives encouraging Palestinians and others to attack Jews generally and Israelis specifically in conjunction with a wave of violence driven by non-IS related disputes in Israel and the West Bank—largely concentrated on Jewish-Muslim tensions over Jerusalem's holy sites. Although the Islamic State has not directly attacked targets in Israel or territories it controls,

⁴⁸ OSC Report TRR2014111361251279, November 13, 2014.

⁴⁹ "O Sunni people, the rejectionists have come to take your homes, your money, and your land. They have come to kill your men and imprison your women. The Iranians have come demanding revenge from the Iraqis for the 1980s. The rejectionists have come to exact revenge from the Sunni people for Hussayn, may God the Glorified be satisfied with him, whom they killed and then mourned and for whom they have flagellated themselves for hundreds of years. So wake up, O Muslims. ... O *ummah* of Muhammad, blessings and peace be upon him, we warned you before and we warn you again that this war is a Crusader-Safavid war against Islam, monotheism, and the Sunni people." OSC Report TRR2015031285993616, "ISIL Spokesman Celebrates Boko Haram Allegiance, Issues Ultimatum, Threatens Attacks on West," Twitter, March 12, 2015.

possible IS-inspired attacks in Europe over the past two years against Jewish targets have killed some Israeli citizens. Israeli officials have routinely expressed concern about potential IS-inspired or –directed threats.

Transnational Terrorism as a Strategy and Tactic

IS has claimed responsibility for numerous terrorist attacks outside of Iraq and Syria, with civilians deaths rising to nearly 1,000 since January 2015.⁵⁰ Al Baghdadi and other IS leaders have threatened to attack the United States since 2012. They routinely describe the United States and its non-Muslim allies as “crusaders,” and encourage Islamic State supporters to attack U.S. and allied persons, facilities, and interests by any means possible overseas and at home.⁵¹ The group’s propaganda suggests that it welcomes the prospect of direct military confrontation with the United States and U.S. partners, viewing such conflict as a harbinger of apocalyptic battles described in some Islamic religious materials. For example, in November 2014, Al Baghdadi argued that the Islamic State would continue to expand and welcomed the potential introduction of Western ground forces, saying: “soon, the Jews and Crusaders will be forced to come down to the ground and send their ground forces to their deaths and destruction, by Allah’s permission.”⁵² IS leaders frequently challenge the United States and others to “come down and meet us on the ground,” and they view such developments as imminent and likely to end in the destruction of their enemies. A statement released in the wake of the November 2015 Paris attacks contained similarly goading sentiments.⁵³ In this regard, transnational IS terrorist attacks may be an instrumental tactic in a broader strategic effort to draw adversaries, including the United States, into larger-scale and more direct conflict.

On November 16, Central Intelligence Agency Director John Brennan said that the Islamic State organization “has developed an external operations agenda that it is now implementing with lethal effect.”⁵⁴ He argued that the United States and its allies will have to deal with IS threats “for quite some time” and suggested that one potential motivation for the group’s embrace of transnational terrorism as a tactic and strategic tool is its desire to signal continuing momentum in the face of limited progress and battlefield setbacks in Iraq and Syria since late 2014. Brennan stated his view that it is “inevitable that ISIL and other terrorist groups are going to continue to

⁵⁰ Aren Yourish, Derek Watkins, and Tom Giratikanon, “The Islamic State’s Rising Attacks on Civilians Around the World,” *New York Times*, November 17, 2015.

⁵¹ In July 2012, Baghdadi warned U.S. leaders that “the mujahidin have set out to chase the affiliates of your armies that have fled.... You will see them in your own country, God willing. The war with you has just begun.” U.S. Government Open Source Center (OSC) Report GMP20120721586002, “Islamic State of Iraq Amir Calls on Sunni Tribes to ‘Repent,’” July 21, 2012. In 2015, IS Spokesman Adnani urged the group’s supporters “in Europe and the disbelieving West and everywhere else, to target the crusaders in their own lands and wherever they are found.” OSC Report TRR2015012657315008, January 26, 2015.

⁵² OSC Report TRR2014111361251279, “ISIL Amir Al-Baghdadi Accepts Pledges of Allegiance, Announces ‘Expansion’ to Saudi Arabia, Yemen,” Twitter, November 13, 2014.

⁵³ For example: “Rally the troops, assemble the convoys, deliver the planes, raise the Cross, mount on the apostates, crawl to us under your banners, and fulfill the prediction of our prophet, blessings and peace be upon him, whom you insulted, and so we retaliated for him against you. We are here awaiting you and your destruction. Welcome to the field we want. Welcome to the place God chose for us. Welcome to Dabiq [a town in northern Syria, the site of Armageddon in some Islamic eschatological material and the name of the Islamic State’s English language magazine].” OSC Report TRO2015111451259817, “Pro-ISIL Media Establishment Praises Paris Attacks, Invites Military Escalation in Syria,” Twitter, November 14, 2015.

⁵⁴ Remarks of Central Intelligence Agency Director John Brennan before the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, DC, November 16, 2015.

try and to attempt to carry out these attacks. That is an inevitability for at least as far as the eye can see. But to me, it's not inevitable that they're going to succeed."

U.S. Strategy, Policy Options, and Related Issues

The U.S. government continues to lead a multilateral coalition that seeks to "degrade and ultimately destroy" the Islamic State organization by progressively reducing the geographic and political space, manpower, and financial resources available to it.⁵⁵ Stated U.S. strategy to achieve this objective consists of a number of "lines of effort," including, in partnership with several European and Arab states: direct military action, support for Iraqi and Syrian partner ground forces, intelligence gathering and sharing, and efforts to restrict flows of foreign fighters and disrupt the Islamic State's finances.⁵⁶ Administration officials have identified areas where they believe progress has been made in implementing U.S. and allied strategy to date, but they continue to state that it may take a considerable amount of time to achieve the full range of U.S. objectives. They also note the potential for delays or setbacks.

Combatting the Islamic State in Complex Contexts

To date, the Islamic State organization and its regional adherents have thrived in ungoverned or under-governed areas of countries affected by conflict or political instability. These permissive environments provide resources and safe-haven for IS operations and in some cases offer recruits from among disaffected local groups. In places such as Iraq, Syria, the Sinai Peninsula, Libya, Afghanistan, Yemen, and Nigeria, the potential to undermine the Islamic State's presence may be a function of broader efforts to restore security, address political grievances, boost economic growth, and promote effective governance over the long term.

In Iraq, the Administration emphasizes the importance of providing support to multi-sectarian security forces under central government command and the preservation of Iraq's political and territorial unity pursuant to its constitution. Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter said in testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee in October 2015 that

the Iraqi government and security forces will have to take certain steps militarily to make sure our progress sticks. We need to see more in the direction of multi-sectarian governance and defense leadership. For example, we've given the Iraqi government two battalions' worth of equipment for mobilizing Sunni tribal forces; as we continue to provide this support, the Iraqi government must ensure it is distributed effectively. If local Sunni forces aren't sufficiently equipped, regularly paid, and empowered as co-equal members of the Iraqi Security Forces, ISIL's defeats in Anbar will only be temporary.

In Syria, U.S. officials seek a negotiated settlement to the conflict that will see President Asad and some of his supporters leave office while preserving the institutions and security structures of the Syrian state. President Obama linked the success of U.S. efforts against the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq to diplomatic efforts in his November 16 comments at the G-20 summit in Turkey, arguing that,

⁵⁵ White House Office of the Press Secretary, "Statement by the President on ISIL," September 10, 2014.

⁵⁶ The website of the Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL identifies five "lines of effort" guiding the coalition's efforts: (1) Providing military support to our partners; (2) Impeding the flow of foreign fighters; (3) Stopping ISIL's financing and funding; (4) Addressing humanitarian crises in the region; and (5) Exposing ISIL's true nature.

Ultimately, to reclaim territory from them [ISIL] is going to require, however, an ending of the Syrian civil war, which is why the diplomatic efforts are so important. And it's going to require an effective Iraqi effort that bridges Shia and Sunni differences, which is why our diplomatic efforts inside Iraq are so important as well.

To the extent that U.S. and coalition strategy remains predicated on the cooperation of partner forces on the ground and the coordination of multinational efforts in the region and beyond, U.S. officials may be challenged to accommodate the complimentary and competing interests of other regional or global actors in the pursuit of shared goals. In this regard, U.S. engagement with Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and others in diplomatic negotiations aimed at a settlement in Syria implicate a particularly complex set of calculations about potential partnership with U.S. adversaries and the use of leverage to obtain concessions.

Some U.S. partners on the ground in Iraq and Syria lack capabilities that would make them fully effective. Working with others, such as certain Syrian opposition groups, Iraqi Sunni Arab militia, or the Syrian Kurdish YPG militia, may pose diplomatic or security challenges. In some settings, such as Egypt and Nigeria, U.S. counterterrorism partnership with national governments and military forces may test U.S. commitments on political reform and human rights. In other settings that largely lack credible governance, such as Libya or Yemen, dependable partners may remain elusive, which may lead the United States and regional/international coalition partners to consider initiatives with minimal participation by in-country groups

Military Operations against the Islamic State

As of November 12, 2015, U.S. and coalition forces had used combat aircraft, armed unmanned aerial vehicles, and sea-launched cruise missiles to conduct more than 8,125 strikes against Islamic State targets in Iraq and Syria since August 8, 2014, and September 22, 2014, respectively.⁵⁷ The stated objectives of U.S. strikes have evolved as circumstances have changed and some goals have been achieved: The initial focus when strikes began in August 2014 was on stopping the advance of Islamic State forces and reducing threats to American personnel and religious minorities in northern Iraq. As of late 2015, strikes support defensive and offensive military operations by Iraqi military and Kurdish forces in Iraq and seek to weaken the Islamic State organization's ability to support its operations from strongholds inside Syria. In November 2015, the United States launched its first strike against IS personnel outside of Syria and Iraq with a strike against the Iraqi leader of the Islamic State's affiliate in Libya. Other U.S. strikes since 2014 have targeted individuals and locations associated with what U.S. officials describe as "the Khorasan Group," a group of Al Qaeda-affiliated figures that reportedly has engaged in preparations for transnational terrorist attacks, and the Nusra Front, Al Qaeda's larger affiliate in Syria.⁵⁸

At present, U.S. and allied military operations appear to be focused on maintaining and expanding lines of territorial control in Iraq and Syria that reflect the containment and partial reversal of the Islamic State's advances in some areas since 2014. Statements by U.S. officials suggest that future military operations may focus more on severing internal lines of

⁵⁷ U.S. Department of Defense, Special Report: Inherent Resolve, November 12, 2015.

⁵⁸ According to the Defense Intelligence Agency, "The Khorasan Group is a cadre of experienced al-Qa'ida operatives that works closely with and relies upon al-Nusrah Front to provide personnel and space for training facilities in northwestern Syria. The group is primarily focused on transnational terrorist attack plotting. Coalition airstrikes in Syria probably killed a number of senior al-Nusrah Front and Khorasan Group operatives, but the group almost certainly has maintained some capability to continue plotting against Western interests." Joint Statement, House Armed Services Committee, February 3, 2015.

communication in IS-controlled territory, denying the Islamic State access to the Turkish-Syrian border, and preparing for anticipated advances on IS strongholds in Syria and Iraq. On October 30, 2015, an unnamed senior U.S. defense official described five related goals for U.S. military efforts over the coming weeks and months:⁵⁹

Number one, in Iraq, assisting the government of Iraq to take back Ramadi and Baiji, and setting the conditions for Mosul.

Number two, in Syria, enabling new and additional local forces to pressure, take and ultimately hold ISIL's declared stronghold/capital of Raqqa.

Number three, secure the border between Syria and Turkey to drastically reduce the foreign fighter flow, the flow of materiel and money making its way to ISIL.

Number four, across both Iraq and Syria, degrading ISIL's internal lines of communication, (LOCs) and supply.

And number five, finally, reinforcing Jordan and Lebanese defenses as ISIL is pushed south and west under greater pressure.

U.S. defense officials have described a campaign of "thickening" air strikes in support of these goals since the Turkish government granted the United States access to Incirlik Air Base (near the southern Turkish city of Adana) and other bases in Turkey's southeast to support kinetic anti-IS operations. A U.S.-backed Iraqi Kurdish operation to retake the city of Sinjar in November 2015, a campaign by U.S.-supported Syrian groups to capture the nearby town of Al Hawl, and a parallel U.S.-led campaign of airstrikes against IS-held oil facilities and infrastructure in eastern Syria also appear designed to advance some of these goals.⁶⁰

Partnership Programs

Training, Equipping, and Advising U.S. Partners in Iraq

As of November 2015, approximately 3,500 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. About two-thirds are advisers and trainers for the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and the Kurdish peshmerga, and the rest support these forces and provide protection for U.S. civilian and military personnel in country. Coalition partners also have pledged and deployed about 1,500 advisers and trainers for the ISF. U.S. and coalition personnel are implementing joint Iraqi-coalition plans for the training of 12 Iraqi brigades (nine Iraqi Security Force [ISF] brigades and three Kurdish *peshmerga* brigades—a total of about 25,000 personnel). As of November 2015, nearly 16,500 Iraqi Security Force and peshmerga personnel had been trained, with another 3,000 currently in training.⁶¹

U.S. military personnel in Iraq are not currently tasked with providing advisory or training support to Iraqi personnel in combat settings or with engaging directly in combat against hostile entities other than for force protection purposes. During 2015, U.S. military personnel have accompanied some Kurdish peshmerga forces on operations in defined and relatively secure

⁵⁹ U.S. Department of Defense, Background Press Briefing on Enhancing Counter-ISIL Operations, October 30, 2015.

⁶⁰ Cheryl Pellerin, "Coalition-Supported Iraqi Kurds Work to Cut Main ISIL Line of Communication," DoD News Defense Media Activity, November 12, 2015.

⁶¹ Drew Brooks, "82nd commander sees hope in Iraq, confident in forces' fight against ISIL," *Fayetteville Observer*, November 12, 2015.

settings, including to provide assistance in identifying targets for U.S. airstrikes in the November 2015 Sinjar campaign. The death of one U.S. serviceman and the injury of others during an October 2015 raid by peshmerga forces on an IS prison facility has raised some questions about the scope and limits of U.S. accompaniment in Iraqi partner operations.

Congress authorized and provided \$1.6 billion in funding for the U.S. training efforts in Iraq in the FY2015 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA, H.R. 3979, P.L. 113-291) and FY2015 appropriations act (H.R. 83, P.L. 113-235).⁶² \$715 million in U.S. funding is authorized for the Iraq training program in the FY2016 NDAA (S. 1356).

The FY2016 NDAA also requires Administration reporting on Iraqi government efforts to engage with and support all national groups in the campaign against the Islamic State, and grants the President new authorities to facilitate the potential transfer of U.S. assistance to the Kurdish *peshmerga* and Sunni tribal security forces and other local security forces with a national security mission in the event that Iraqi government officials fail "to take substantial action to increase political inclusiveness, address the grievances of ethnic and sectarian minorities, and enhance minority integration in the political and military structures in Iraq."

In this regard, Section 1223 of S. 1356 allows the President to waive provisions of law that require that certain types of U.S. security assistance be provided to central government authorities rather than to subnational entities. In the event of a negative finding in the Administration's reporting on Iraqi government performance, the bill allows for a waiver of those provisions and directs the Secretaries of Defense and State to provide U.S. assistance to entities in Iraq "in coordination to the extent practicable with the Government of Iraq." Iraqi Prime Minister Hayder al Abadi, some other leading Iraqis, and some armed Shiite groups criticized previous proposals in the 114th Congress that would have more broadly authorized the provision of U.S. assistance directly to security forces other than the ISF.

Efforts to Train, Equip, and Advise Syrians⁶³

In October 2015, the Obama Administration announced changes to the Department of Defense program to overtly train and lethally equip vetted members of the Syrian opposition and other vetted Syrians. Congress authorized and funded the program in 2014 for select purposes, including supporting U.S. efforts to combat the Islamic State and other terrorist organizations in Syria and promoting the conditions for a negotiated settlement to Syria's civil war. The program's limited results as of September 2015, Russian military intervention in Syria, and support by some Members of Congress for broader civilian protection missions continue to drive congressional debate over the direction and scope of U.S. military involvement and the program.

In October 2015, President Obama announced his intent to deploy approximately 50 U.S. special forces personnel to northern Syria to advise forces fighting the Islamic State. When asked about the possibility of increasing the number of special forces personnel in Syria to support this

⁶² Under the FY2015 NDAA, the Secretary of Defense, in coordination with the Secretary of State, is authorized to provide assistance, including training, equipment, logistics support, supplies, and services, stipends, facility and infrastructure repair and renovation, and sustainment, to military and other security forces of or associated with the Government of Iraq, including Kurdish and tribal security forces or other local security forces, with a national security mission, through December 31, 2016, for the following purposes: (1) Defending Iraq, its people, allies, and partner nations from the threat posed by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and groups supporting ISIL; and, (2) Securing the territory of Iraq.

⁶³ For more on this program and related legislation, see CRS Report R43727, *Train and Equip Program for Syria: Authorities, Funding, and Issues for Congress*, by Christopher M. Blanchard and Amy Belasco.

mission, White House spokesman Josh Earnest responded, "I certainly wouldn't rule out that something like that could be a possibility if it continues to be an element of our strategy that shows some promise."⁶⁴

According to Administration officials, the revamped train and equip program will shift away from training and equipping "New Syrian Force" units of vetted recruits and toward "equipping and enabling ...a select group of vetted leaders and their units" inside Syria who are fighting the Islamic State organization. Equipment, including some weaponry and ammunition, purchased for the train and equip program using FY2015 funds may be used to resupply forces trained as of October 2015 and to equip and enable other vetted individuals and Syrian units with vetted leaders. According to the U.S. military, examples of these activities include airstrikes on Islamic State targets that have been facilitated by U.S. trainees in northwestern Syria and an October 2015 airlift of ammunition to an Arab-Kurdish coalition force in northeastern Syria known as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) that subsequently advanced on the IS-held town of Al Hawl near the Iraqi border.⁶⁵

While U.S. training of entire new units has been suspended, U.S. training for vetted Syrian "enablers" to perform specialist functions in larger units—including calling in U.S. airstrikes—appears set to remain a component of the program. Administration officials have described their intended overall approach to the redesigned program as "transactional" and performance-based, with Syrian beneficiaries receiving U.S. support as opportunities present themselves and relative to their effectiveness on the battlefield and the alignment of their actions with U.S. interests.

With regard to U.S. efforts to support Syrian fighters, Members of Congress continue to ask Administration officials about the scope and implications of U.S. commitments to defend U.S.-backed groups and individuals inside Syria, as well potential commitments to defend other anti-IS or anti-Asad forces. In an October 27 hearing, Secretary of Defense Carter told the Senate Armed Services Committee that the United States government has an obligation to defend those individuals and forces that it overtly assists in Syria and that the United States military is authorized to do so. The precise application of this policy to the complex array of combatants in Syria, different U.S. assistance recipients, and the range of potential contingencies involving those recipients remains to be seen.

Of the \$500 million dollars in Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund monies approved by congressional defense committees for the program in FY2015, \$384 million was obligated as of September 30, with \$116 million transferred back to the Fund at the end of the fiscal year to preserve its availability in FY2016. The overarching authority for the program provided in the FY2015 NDAA (NDAA, P.L. 113-291) expires after December 31, 2016, although some activities envisioned under the redesigned program could arguably proceed pursuant to other authorities. The FY2016 NDAA (S. 1356) would authorize \$406.45 million in funding for the program, less than the Obama Administration's request for \$600 million. Defense appropriations legislation pending as of November 2015 (H.R. 2685, S. 1558) would provide \$600 million for the program on different terms.

⁶⁴ White House Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest, October 30, 2015.

⁶⁵ Press Briefing by Colonel Steve Warren, Operation Inherent Resolve Spokesman and Captain Jeff Davis, Director, Defense Press Office, November 4, 2015.

Efforts to Combat IS Financing and Restrict Foreign Fighter Travel⁶⁶

The U.S. government has supported the adoption of several U.N. Security Council Resolutions to strengthen IS-related international sanctions and halt flows of foreign fighters and financing to the Islamic State, Jabhat al Nusra, and Al Qaeda-affiliated entities. Resolution 2170 (August 2014) calls upon all Member States “to take national measures to suppress the flow of foreign terrorist fighters to, and bring to justice, in accordance with applicable international law, foreign terrorist fighters of, ISIL, ANF and all other individuals, groups, undertakings and entities associated with Al Qaida,” and reiterates Member States’ obligation to prevent terrorist travel, limit supplies of weapons and financing, and exchange information on the groups. Resolution 2178 (September 2014) requires Member States, consistent with international law, to prevent the “recruiting, organizing, transporting or equipping of individuals who travel to a State other than their States of residence or nationality for the purpose of the perpetration, planning of, or participation in terrorist acts.” On February 12, 2015, the Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 2199, which reaffirmed and clarified the applicability of U.N. sanctions on IS-related individuals and entities that provide active and passive financial support to the Islamic State, ANF, and others associated with Al Qaeda.

Combatting IS Financing⁶⁷

Senior U.S. officials have described the Islamic State as one of the best-funded terrorist organizations, in spite of its relative reliance on resources in areas under its physical control. Its wealth has contributed to the group’s ability to finance sophisticated military operations across parts of Iraq and Syria and may support operations by IS affiliates and terrorist operatives in other regions. The group also seeks to use locally-derived revenue to administratively control and govern the territory it has seized. In several respects, the Islamic State presents a unique policy challenge to combating terrorist financing. Its financial strength lies in its ability to secure large amounts of funding from primarily internal sources, its correspondingly diminished vulnerability to efforts to target international sources of funds, and its exploitation of ungoverned spaces and porous borders to move funds with impunity. These characteristics often place the organization’s finances beyond the reach of some of the most common counterterrorist financing policy tools.

The Islamic State controls a variety of public resources and infrastructure in parts of Iraq and Syria, enabling it to assemble multiple sources of revenue. Some of these resources, such as oil and antiquities, can be smuggled and sold for considerable profit. Others—agriculture and energy and water utilities—generate limited revenue and require a significant investment in inputs or technical expertise, but help the group portray itself as exercising the functions of a legitimate government. Activities such as kidnapping for ransom or the looting of banks and personal property may be profitable in the near-term but are not necessarily sustainable. In other cases, Islamic State control over a set of resources is notable not solely for the revenue the group derives from it, but also for the extent to which it limits the ability of the Iraqi and Syrian governments to conduct trade, provide utility services, or feed their citizens.

⁶⁶ For more information, see CRS Report R43980, *Islamic State Financing and U.S. Policy Approaches*, by Carla E. Humud, Robert Pirog, and Liana W. Rosen; and, CRS Report R44003, *European Fighters in Syria and Iraq: Assessments, Responses, and Issues for the United States*, coordinated by Kristin Archick.

⁶⁷ Prepared by Liana Rosen, Specialist in International Crime and Narcotics and Carla Humud, Analyst in Middle Eastern and African Affairs.

Targeting the Islamic State's finances is one of five core lines of effort to degrade and defeat the terrorist organization. General John Allen, the recently retired U.S. Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL, stated in early 2015 that the United States cannot defeat the Islamic State through military efforts alone, and highlighted the need to deprive the group of access to financial resources.⁶⁸ At present, U.S. policy focuses on disrupting IS revenue streams, limiting the group's access to formal financial systems, and imposing sanctions on the group's senior leadership and financial facilitators.⁶⁹ The United States also has sought to collaborate with international partners, including through cooperation on financial intelligence collection and analysis.

Although military airstrikes on Islamic State-linked oil infrastructure and supply networks have already altered the organization's financial profile, counterterrorist financing policy responses remain nascent. Policymakers continue to grapple with how to develop quick and effective responses to combat Islamic State financing. Some caution that counter-finance tactics may need to be balanced with consideration of the economic harm such actions may inflict on civilian populations in Islamic State-controlled territory. In the absence of alternatives, particularly for key resources such as oil, utilities, and agriculture, efforts to counter Islamic State financing could damage local economies and services and contribute to expanding humanitarian crises.

As the 114th Congress continues to consider and evaluate U.S. policy responses to address the Islamic State, a focus of concern may center on whether U.S. counterterrorist financing tools are capable of diminishing IS sources of funds. Key questions may include whether current U.S. efforts are effective and sufficiently resourced, or require new legislative authorities, to respond to the Islamic State's ability to accumulate and distribute funds. Although Congress has been active in evaluating U.S. policy responses and options to address the Islamic State, particularly the military response and prospects for congressional authorization for the use of military force, legislative proposals to stem the Islamic State's access to and use of funds have been limited. The Administration has not stated that it requires additional Congressional authorities in order to target IS finances. Many observers recognize that a strategy focused on counter-finance may weaken, but not destroy, the Islamic State. For its part, the Department of the Treasury has cautioned against expectations that efforts to combat the Islamic State's finances will bear fruit quickly.

Restricting Terrorist Travel

U.S. officials from the intelligence community, State Department, Department of Homeland Security, and other agencies concerned with domestic security continue to assess, monitor, and respond to threats posed by foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria.⁷⁰ Diplomatic and intelligence efforts focus on coordinating with source, transit, and returnee destination countries to strengthen shared responses and preventive measures. In September 2015, former U.S. Ambassador to Bahrain Thomas Krajewski completed his tour as "senior adviser for partner engagement on Syria foreign fighters," a position that U.S. officials describe as having evolved since 2014 from being

⁶⁸ Gen. John Allen, Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL, statement submitted for the conference "Taking the Fight to ISIL: Operationalizing CT Lines of Effort Against the Islamic State Group," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 2, 2015.

⁶⁹ Under Secretary of the Treasury for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence David Cohen, Remarks at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 23, 2014.

⁷⁰ For an overview of the threat and related U.S. and international responses, see U.S. House of Representatives Homeland Security Committee, Final Report of the Task Force on Combating Terrorist and Foreign Fighter Travel, September 2015.

primarily concerned with raising global awareness of the problem to engaging in joint responses and overseeing the provision of related assistance to U.S. partners. In October 2015, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Joseph Dunford identified efforts to combat foreign fighter flows alongside improving intelligence as his top two priorities for strengthening U.S. efforts against the Islamic State. In testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee on October 27, he said,⁷¹

...we really don't have amongst all the coalition kind of a common view of where the foreign fighters come from, how they move back and forth into the area, but more importantly, not much of a track on where they go once they leave, back to their home country. So from my perspective ...we need to do much more, one, to get a view of foreign fighters as a whole and to make sure we maximize the legal, the military and the political tools that are available to us to cut off the flow of foreign fighters.

Legislation and Select Issues in the 114th Congress

Members of Congress continue to debate the proper means and ends for U.S. efforts to combat the Islamic State organization while exercising oversight over U.S. military operations and a wide array of other counter-IS programs. Since 2014, Congress has appropriated billions of dollars in new funding and authorized the Administration to provide new types of nonlethal and lethal assistance to select groups and forces in Iraq and Syria, but has not passed a new authorization for the use of military force against the Islamic State in either country. In support of his Administration's counter-IS strategy, President Obama requested additional funds from Congress for military operations and security assistance for U.S. partners in Iraq and Syria in FY2016, as well as for a range of other related counterterrorism initiatives. As of November 2015, Congress is considering these requests, related legislative proposals, and new developments involving the Islamic State, Iraq, and Syria as it prepares to consider FY2016 appropriations legislation to replace the continuing resolution that expires December 11, 2015 (P.L. 114-53).

Debating Overall U.S. Strategy

Some critics of current U.S. strategy highlight the Islamic State's apparent success in planning and executing complex terrorist attacks outside of Syria and Iraq and argue that the United States should more aggressively use military force to degrade the Islamic State's capabilities and weaken its control over territory.⁷² These critics argue that the Administration has failed to contain the Islamic State, let alone set it on the road to defeat. The critics argue that, given the evident shortcomings of local U.S. partners, accomplishing the stated U.S. goal of defeating the Islamic State requires greater direct military commitment than the Administration and its coalition partners have expressed willingness to provide.⁷³ Proposals made by these critics differ over the scope of operations proposed, the extent to which they prescribe post-conflict arrangements, and their views on potential U.S. partners and adversaries.

⁷¹ Testimony of Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Joseph Dunford before the Senate Armed Services Committee, October 27, 2015.

⁷² See for example, James F. Jeffrey, "The U.S. Must Send Ground Forces to Eliminate the Islamic State," *Washington Post*, November 16, 2015; and, Matthew Levitt, "How to Beat ISIL without 50,000 Troops," *Politico*, November 18, 2015.

⁷³ See for example, "Fight against ISIS needs troops to be effective, Michael Morell says," *CBS News*, February 4, 2015.

Other critics of the Administration's policy have argued that the United States should state as its policy goal the "containment" of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, rather than its outright defeat.⁷⁴ Those who take this view have maintained that accomplishing the stated goal of defeating the Islamic State is likely beyond U.S. and partner capabilities given the resources and risks that the United States and partner countries have appeared to be willing to bear. Prior to the string of 2015 terror attacks attributed to IS supporters, advocates for a containment strategy tended to assess the linkage between Islamic State's success or staying power in the Middle East and terrorist threats beyond the region as tenuous. It is unclear whether or how recent IS directed and inspired attacks might be affecting these critics' views and recommendations. Other critics of a military or security driven approach argue that operations to degrade or destroy the Islamic State as an organization may do little to undermine the appeal of its ideology and could in some cases strengthen that appeal.⁷⁵

President Obama and other Administration officials argue that either drastically increasing or drastically reducing U.S. and allied military pressure on the Islamic State may serve the group's interests and may do little to alter underlying political and security conditions that have helped give rise to the group. In the wake of IS-claimed terrorist attacks in several countries, President Obama has restated that he does not believe the introduction of large-scale U.S. ground forces for combat operations is necessary in order to achieve U.S. objectives. Rather, he has stated that U.S. efforts to reverse Islamic State gains on the ground should pair continued airstrikes with expanded efforts to advise and strengthen local Iraqi and Syrian partner forces. In sum, Administration officials remain committed to what they view as "sustainable" efforts against the Islamic State—namely those that build the capacity of partners, seek to solve heretofore intractable political problems, and avoid potentially costly or counterproductive U.S. interventions in light of wider U.S. global commitments.

Beyond U.S. efforts to restrict the Islamic State's room for maneuver in the Middle East, governments around the world are struggling to determine whether and how to participate in anti-IS efforts and how they can best counter the radicalization of members of their own populations and protect "soft targets" from terrorist attacks. Several of the perpetrators of the November 2015 Paris attacks reportedly were European nationals who had been indoctrinated by the Islamic State. They operated clandestinely in multiple countries and attacked civilians in public places with suicide vests and automatic weapons. As such, in France and beyond, debates over counter-IS strategies are quickly turning to broader questions over means for countering the appeal of violent extremism (CVE) and balancing civil liberties with domestic security requirements.

Authorization for the Use of Military Force⁷⁶

The President has stated that the Authorization for Use of Military Force ("2001 AUMF"; P.L. 107-40) and the Authorization for Use of Military Force against Iraq Resolution of 2002 ("2002 AUMF"; P.L. 107-243) provide authorization for the current U.S. military campaign against the Islamic State in Iraq, Syria, and beyond. This includes most recently the deployment of approximately 50 U.S. special forces personnel into Syria. On February 11, 2015, however, the

⁷⁴ See for example, Dov Zakheim, "The Only ISIS Strategy Left for America: Containment," *The National Interest*, May 23, 2015.

⁷⁵ Scott Atran and Nafees Hamid, "Paris: The War ISIS Wants," *New York Review of Books*, November 16, 2015.

⁷⁶ Prepared by Matthew Weed, Specialist in Foreign Policy Legislation. For more information, see CRS Report R43760, *A New Authorization for Use of Military Force Against the Islamic State: Issues and Current Proposals in Brief*

President did provide Congress with a draft proposal for a new AUMF targeting the Islamic State (IS AUMF),⁷⁷ stating in an accompanying letter that he could “think of no better way for the Congress to join [the President] in supporting our Nation’s security than by enacting this legislation, which would show the world we are united in our resolve to counter the threat posed by ISIL.”⁷⁸

The President’s proposal would authorize the use of U.S. Armed Forces that he deems “necessary and appropriate” against the Islamic State and associated persons or forces. In the proposed authorization, “the term ‘associated persons or forces’ means individuals and organizations fighting for, on behalf of, or alongside ISIL or any closely related successor entity in hostilities against the United States or its coalition partners.” The authorization does not include authority for the use of U.S. Armed Forces for “enduring offensive ground combat operations.” The proposal’s authorization would terminate three years after enactment, and contains a provision repealing the 2002 AUMF upon enactment. The President would be required to report to Congress at least every six months on actions taken under the proposed IS AUMF.

In June 2015, Senator Tim Kaine introduced a proposed authorization (S. 1587) targeting the Islamic State that is similar in some respects to the President’s IS AUMF, including its authorization language, its three-year termination, its repeal of the 2002 AUMF, and its presidential reporting requirement. In place of the “enduring offensive ground combat operations” language in the President’s IS AUMF, however, S. 1587 states that “use of significant United States ground troops in combat against ISIL” would not be consistent with the purpose of the authorization. The bill contains the same “associated persons or forces” language in the President’s IS AUMF, but adds to the definition “any individual or organization that presents a direct threat to members of the United States Armed Forces, coalition partner forces, or forces trained by the coalition, in their fight against ISIL.” S. 1587 also states that the authorization serves as the sole authority for the use of military force against the Islamic State, superseding any previous authorization.

Several Members of Congress have expressed various concerns over provisions in these proposals, with a number of issues being raised, including the following:

- With regard to the prohibition in the President’s IS AUMF on “enduring offensive ground combat operations,” there have been questions about what this phrase effectively prohibits. Administration officials have stated that the phrase is not based in military terminology, but instead reflects presidential intent. The President’s letter states that it is designed to allow limited ground operations, such as rescuing U.S. personnel, enabling kinetic strikes, gathering and sharing intelligence, and providing advice and assistance to partner forces. Other Administration officials have stated that the prohibition is intended to prohibit lengthy, large-scale ground combat operations such as those undertaken in Iraq from 2003 to 2011, or in Afghanistan since 2001, but that it would not prohibit the current use of ground forces and would be flexible enough to allow other, possibly expanded uses of ground forces in the future. Some Members of Congress have stated that this interpretation of the prohibition might be too broad, as it could lead to sizable and lengthy ground combat operations against the Islamic State and other groups.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Available at: [https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/aumf_02112015.pdf].

⁷⁸ President Barack Obama, Letter from the President—Authorization for the Use of United States Armed Forces in connection with the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, February 11, 2015, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/02/11/letter-president-authorization-use-united-states-armed-forces-connection>.

⁷⁹ See remarks made during the Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearings entitled “The President’s Request for (continued...) ”

- Neither the President's IS AUMF nor S. 1587 includes any geographical limitation, and each specifically authorizes military force against "associated persons or forces," possibly enabling the use of military force in countries other than Iraq and Syria. Since 2014, elements of the Islamic State have carried out attacks in countries other than Iraq and Syria, and new groups in still more countries have pledged allegiance and cooperation with the Islamic State, potentially greatly expanding the geographic reach of the proposed IS AUMF. Some argue that any AUMF should have a geographic restriction, because although the target may be a non-state actor, Congress should enact a specific authorization to allow U.S. Armed Forces to use military force in each country where that non-state actor operates. Specific concern has been expressed over the association of the Boko Haram group in Nigeria with the Islamic State, as it highlights the possibly global nature of the proposed IS AUMF's authority. Obama Administration officials do not seem to agree with this approach, stating that the United States must be able to strike IS and associated forces wherever they operate, and to deny "safe haven" to such forces.
- Although the President stated in his letter that he still intends to engage Congress in reforming the 2001 AUMF, his proposal did not contain a provision that repeals or sunsets that measure, unlike most of the IS AUMF proposals previously introduced. Administration officials have accepted the concept of a three-year sunset for the authority contained in the proposed IS AUMF, as it would ensure that Congress and a new President would have the opportunity to revisit the authorization. Some Members have asked why the same principle does not apply to revisiting the 2001 AUMF, which the executive still relies on to combat Al Qaeda, the Taliban, and various other terror groups in several countries. In addition, because the President and several Administration officials have repeatedly asserted that the 2001 AUMF already provides sufficient authority to conduct the military campaign against the Islamic State, some Members question whether any restrictions on the duration of a new IS AUMF will have real effect if the President can simply rely on 2001 AUMF authority after the IS AUMF expires.

There have been questions as to whether the President's proposed IS AUMF would provide authority to use military force against forces of the Syrian government either offensively or defensively to protect forces in Syria being trained and equipped by the United States. In early 2015, Administration officials stated that the IS AUMF proposal related only to combatting the Islamic State and associated forces, and would not authorize the President to order the use of force against Syrian government forces, including to defend vetted Syrian rebel groups. Recently, however, Administration officials have stated that the President possesses authority to use force to protect U.S. partners in Syria, including against Syrian government forces, pursuant to the President's powers under Article II of the Constitution.⁸⁰ In this assertion, it is not clear whether the Administration is relying on the President's Article II authority to act in the national interest in the promotion and execution of U.S. foreign policy, which the President cited in previous military

(...continued)

Authorization to Use Force Against ISIS: Military and Diplomatic Efforts" on March 11, 2015, and, "Authorization For The Use of Military Force Against ISIL" on December 9, 2014; and the committee's business meeting on December 11, 2014.

⁸⁰ Testimony of Undersecretary of Defense of Policy Christine E. Wormuth, U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Armed Services, hearing on United States strategy of military operations to counter the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, 114th Cong., 1st sess., September 16, 2015.

actions in Iraq for humanitarian purposes, for example, or whether the Administration believes the Article II commander-in-chief power authorizes him to defend "allied" Syrian forces.

FY2016 Budget Requests for Foreign Operations and Defense

In February 2015, the Obama Administration released its preliminary FY2016 budget requests for foreign operations and defense (see **Table 1**). The requests sought funding to continue planned lines of effort in response to the Islamic State threat as well as responses to challenges posed by the broader conflicts and regional displacements related to Syria and Iraq.

Select specific requests include:

- **Iraq and Syria Train and Equip Programs**—DOD requested \$715 million and \$600 million for train and equip programs for Iraqis and Syrians respectively. These requests would fund continuation of programs initiated under authorities and funds first provided in FY2015. As noted above, the FY2016 NDAA (S. 1356) would authorize the requested funds for Iraq under certain conditions and would reduce the authorized amount for the Syria program to \$406.45 million. The Administration also sought \$250 million in State Department-administered Foreign Military Financing for Iraq. House and Senate versions of the FY2016 State and Foreign Operations Appropriations bills support the provision of security assistance to Iraq and state that some such assistance should benefit the Kurdish *peshmerga* (Section 7041 (c) of H.R. 2772 and S. 1725).
- **Continued Support to Syrian Opposition Groups**—The State Department requested \$65 million in Peacekeeping Operations-OCO (PKO-OCO) funding to provide nonlethal support to vetted, moderate armed opposition groups in Syria "to bolster their capacity, cohesion, and credibility" and "to strengthen linkages between armed and civilian actors." The Administration also requested \$160 million in Economic Support Fund-OCO (ESF-OCO) funding to provide nonlethal assistance to other opposition groups and \$10 million in International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement (INCLE-OCO) funding for justice sector support in opposition-held areas. House and Senate versions of the FY2016 State and Foreign Operations Appropriations bills would support the provision of transition assistance to Syrians, and the Senate version would direct that not less than \$175 million in U.S. assistance should be made available for "for non-lethal assistance for programs to address the needs of civilians affected by conflict in Syria, and for programs" in a variety of issue areas (Section 7041(h) of H.R. 2772 and S. 1725).
- **Iraq and Syria-Related Humanitarian Funding**—The Administration requested \$1.629 billion in Migration and Refugee Assistance-OCO (MRA-OCO) and International Disaster Assistance-OCO (IDA-OCO) funding to support continuing U.S. contributions to humanitarian relief and host-country support programs related to Syrian and Iraqi refugees and internally displaced persons. The House version of the FY2016 State and Foreign Operations Appropriations bill (H.R. 2772) would make more than \$966 million available for MRA-OCO and \$1.085 billion available for IDA-OCO. The Senate version (S. 1725), would make \$1.037 billion available for MRA-OCO and \$1.251 billion available for IDA-OCO.
- **Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund (CTPF)**—The Administration requested \$2.49 billion in FY2016 CTPF funds to address terrorist safe havens, including in

Iraq and Syria; to mitigate foreign fighter flows; and to counter Iranian support for terrorism, including its support for militia forces in Lebanon and Iraq. The FY2016 NDAA (S. 1356) authorizes the appropriation of \$750 million in OCO funding for Defense CTPF programs.

Table 1. Select Iraq/Syria Related FY2016 Budget Requests for Foreign Operations and Defense

(\$ in millions)

Program/Account	Iraq	Syria	Jordan	Regional	Totals
Train and Equip Programs (DOD)	715	600			1315
INCLE-OCO	11	10			21
PKO-OCO		65			65
FMF-OCO	250		50		300
ESF-OCO	50	160	277.4		487.4
MRA-OCO				819	819
IDA-OCO				810	810
Totals	1026	835	327.4	1629	3817.4
Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund (CTPF)					
CTPF-State				390	
CTPF-DOD				2100	2490

Sources: FY2016 Congressional Budget Justifications for Defense Operations and Maintenance Funds and State Department Foreign Operations, February 2015.

Note: Accounts referenced are Peacekeeping Operations-Overseas Contingency Operations (PKO-OCO), Economic Support Fund-OCO (ESF-OCO), International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement (INCLE-OCO), Foreign Military Financing-OCO (FMF-OCO), Migration and Refugee Assistance-OCO (MRA-OCO), International Disaster Assistance-OCO (IDA-OCO), and Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund (CTPF) for the State Department and the Department of Defense (DOD).

Outlook

As of late 2015, statements from leading U.S. military, intelligence, and diplomatic officials suggest that the confrontation between the Islamic State organization and its adherents on the one hand and the United States and its partners on the other may be protracted, costly, violent, and challenging. The group's transnational appeal and its supporters' violent fanaticism pose considerable risks to international security and appear likely to continue to force policymakers in the United States and other countries to address complex questions regarding the use of military force, privacy and civil liberties, intelligence sharing, immigration, identity, religious liberty, diplomatic negotiation, and national strategic priorities.

The complex crises that have fueled the Islamic State's rise and facilitated its spread show little sign of abating, although changing patterns of Russian, Iranian, Turkish, European, and Arab state involvement in efforts to combat the Islamic State may significantly alter the context in which U.S. leaders consider strategy and policy options. As U.S. diplomats seek a negotiated settlement to the Syrian civil war they remain cognizant that changes in the balance of forces in Syria may provide opportunity for the Islamic State to expand. Similarly, divisions among or setbacks experienced by various anti-IS Iraqi forces could create opportunities for the Islamic State to exploit, in spite of continuing U.S. advocacy for a pan-sectarian, democratic and united Iraq.

Some observers note that IS losses to date in both countries have largely come in areas that are not mainly populated by Sunni Arabs, and that the anti-IS coalition's most effective partners on the ground—Kurdish and Arab Shiite fighters—may be reaching the political/territorial limits of their potential advance.

The long term prospects for the Islamic State are uncertain at best. Its uncompromisingly stringent views, universal hostility to critics and outsiders, and promises of perpetual survival and expansion to its followers suggest that only a narrow path to strategic success may exist for the group. In the short to medium term, if the Islamic State fails to restore its momentum in core areas of operation or suffers significant military setbacks at the hands of coalition and allied local forces, it may have difficulty in fulfilling its promises to supporters and attracting new recruits. Many observers are now debating how the organization may react if its momentum in the Iraq-Syria theatre of operations remains relatively blunted or if its territorial holdings are further reversed under expanded coalition pressure. Some observers, including CIA Director Brennan, suggest the group could continue to seek to conduct high-profile attacks in neighboring countries and beyond as a means of demonstrating viability and success to its followers/recruits and drawing outside forces deeper into battle. Judging by the course of the international community's struggle against the Al Qaeda organization, IS terrorist attacks may restore a sense of pride and accomplishment among its members but also may galvanize new patterns of multilateral cooperation against the group that could ultimately threaten its survival, if not that of its ideology and apocalyptic vision.

Author Contact Information

Christopher M. Blanchard
Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs
cblanchard@crs.loc.gov, 7-0428

Carla E. Humud
Analyst in Middle Eastern and African Affairs
chumud@crs.loc.gov, 7-7314

Acknowledgments

Contributors to this report include Matthew Weed, Specialist in Foreign Policy Legislation; Liana Rosen, Specialist in International Crime and Narcotics; John Rollins, Specialist in Terrorism and National Security; Kenneth Katzman, Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs; Jeremy Sharp, Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs; and Lauren Ploch Blanchard, Specialist in African Affairs.