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USDOS – US Department of State

Country Report on Terrorism 2020 - Chapter 5 - Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)

Islamic State of Iraq and Syria

Aka al-Qa'ida in Iraq; al-Qa'ida Group of Jihad in Iraq; al-Qa'ida Group of Jihad in the Land of the Two Rivers; al-Qa'ida in Mesopotamia; al-Qa'ida in the Land of the Two Rivers; al-Qa'ida of Jihad in Iraq; al-Qa'ida of Jihad Organization in the Land of the Two Rivers; al-Qa'ida of the Jihad in the Land of the Two Rivers; al-Tawhid; Jam'at al-Tawhid Wa'al-Jihad; Tanzeem Qa'idat al Jihad/Bilad al Raafidaini; Tanzim Qa'idat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidayn; The Monotheism and Jihad Group; The Organization Base of Jihad/Country of the Two Rivers; The Organization Base of Jihad/Mesopotamia; The Organization of al-Jihad's Base in Iraq; The Organization of al-Jihad's Base in the Land of the Two Rivers; The Organization of al-Jihad's Base of Operations in Iraq; The Organization of al-Jihad's Base of Operations in the Land of the Two Rivers; The Organization of Jihad's Base in the Country of the Two Rivers; al-Zarqawi Network; Islamic State of Iraq; Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham; Islamic State of Iraq and Syria; ad-Dawla al-Islamiyya fi al-Iraq wa-sh-Sham; Daesh; Dawla al Islamiyya; Al-Furqan Establishment for Media Production; Islamic State; ISIL; ISIS; Amaq News Agency; Al Hayat Media Center; Al-Hayat Media Center; Al Hayat

Description: Al-Qa'ida in Iraq (AQI) was designated as an FTO on December 17, 2004. In the 1990s, Jordanian militant Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi organized a terrorist group called al-Tawhid wal-Jihad to oppose the presence of U.S. and western military forces in the Middle East as well as the West's support for, and the existence of, Israel. In late 2004, Zarqawi joined al-Qa'ida (AQ) and pledged allegiance to Usama bin Laden. At that time, his group became known as al-Qa'ida in Iraq (AQI). Zarqawi led the group in Iraq during Operation Iraqi Freedom to fight against U.S. and Defeat-ISIS Coalition forces until his death in 2006.

That year, AQI publicly renamed itself the Islamic State in Iraq. In 2013, it adopted the moniker of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) to express its regional ambitions as it expanded operations to include the Syrian conflict. ISIS was led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who declared an Islamic caliphate in 2014, but he was killed in 2019. In 2017 the U.S. military fighting with local Syrian allies announced the liberation of Raqqa, the self-declared capital of ISIS's so-called caliphate. Also in 2017, then-Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi announced the territorial defeat of ISIS in Iraq. In 2018 the Syrian Democratic Forces, with support from the U.S.-led Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, began a final push to oust ISIS fighters from the lower Middle Euphrates River Valley in Syria. 2019 marked the full territorial defeat of ISIS's so-called caliphate; however, ISIS in Syria remains a serious threat. The group benefits from instability, demonstrates intent to cause attacks abroad, and continues to inspire terrorist attacks around the world.

Activities: ISIS has conducted numerous high-profile attacks, including IED attacks against U.S. military personnel and Iraqi infrastructure, videotaped beheadings of U.S. citizens, suicide bombings against both military and civilian targets, and rocket attacks. ISIS perpetrated these attacks using foreign, Iraqi, and Syrian operatives. In 2014, ISIS was responsible for most of the 12,000 Iraqi civilian deaths that year. ISIS was heavily involved in the fighting in Syria, and had participated in numerous kidnappings of civilians, including aid workers and journalists. In 2015 and 2016, ISIS claimed responsibility for several large-scale attacks in Iraq and Syria. In 2016, ISIS claimed responsibility for a car bombing at a popular shopping center in Baghdad that killed nearly 300 people, making it the single deadliest bombing in Iraq's capital city since 2003.

Since at least 2015, the group has integrated local children and children of FTFs into its forces and used them as executioners and suicide attackers. ISIS has systematically prepared child soldiers in Iraq and Syria using its education and religious infrastructure as part of its training and recruitment of members. Further, since 2015, ISIS abducted, raped, and abused thousands of women and children, some as young as 8 years old. Women and children were sold and enslaved, distributed to ISIS fighters as spoils of war, forced into marriage and domestic servitude, or subjected to physical and sexual abuse. For further information, refer to the [2020 Trafficking in Persons Report](#).

ISIS also directs, enables, and inspires individuals to conduct attacks on behalf of the group around the world, including in the United States and Europe. In 2015, ISIS carried out a series of coordinated attacks in Paris, including at a rock concert at the Bataclan concert hall, killing about 130 people and injuring more than 350 others; 23-year-old U.S. citizen Nohemi Gonzalez was among the dead. In 2016, ISIS directed two simultaneous attacks in Brussels, Belgium — one at the Zaventem Airport and the other at a metro station. The attacks killed 32 people, including 4 U.S. citizens, and injured more than 250 people. In 2016 a gunman who pledged allegiance to ISIS killed 49 individuals and injured 53 others at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida. Also in 2016, ISIS claimed an attack in which a terrorist driving a cargo truck attacked a crowd in Nice, France, during Bastille Day celebrations, resulting in 86 deaths, including 3 U.S. citizens. Also in 2016, ISIS claimed responsibility for a truck attack on a crowded Christmas market in Berlin that killed 12 people and injured 48 others.

In 2017, ISIS claimed responsibility for a terrorist attack on London's Westminster Bridge when a man drove his car into pedestrians and stabbed others, killing five people. In 2017 a man who claimed to be a member of ISIS drove a truck into a crowded shopping center in Stockholm, killing five and injuring many more. Also in 2017, ISIS claimed a suicide bombing in Manchester, England, that killed 22 people outside of a live concert.

In 2018, ISIS attacked the city of Suweida and nearby towns and villages in southwestern Syria, conducting multiple suicide bombings and simultaneous raids in a brutal offensive, killing more than 200 people.

In 2019, ISIS claimed responsibility for the suicide bombing of a restaurant in Manbij, Syria, that killed 19 persons, including 4 Americans. That same month, ISIS reportedly launched a missile attack that seriously wounded two British commandos in eastern Syria. On Easter Sunday 2019, more than 250 people were killed in Sri Lanka when ISIS-inspired terrorists carried out coordinated suicide bombings at multiple churches and hotels. Later that year, ISIS claimed responsibility for killing a U.S. servicemember while he was participating in a combat operation in Ninewa province, Iraq. Also that year, ISIS claimed responsibility for a stabbing attack near the London Bridge in which a man killed two people and injured three others. That same month, ISIS claimed responsibility for an attack on a border post in Tajikistan that killed four Tajik servicemembers.

In November, ISIS claimed responsibility for a rocket attack on the Siniya oil refinery in Salahuddin province, Iraq. In December, ISIS attacked a convoy of Syrian regime soldiers and militiamen in Deir ez-Zor province, Syria, killing at least 37 people.

Strength: Estimates suggest ISIS fighters in Iraq and Syria number between 11,000 and 18,000, including several thousand FTFs.

Location/Area of Operation: Iraq and Syria, with branches and networks around the world

Funding and External Aid: ISIS received most of its funding from a variety of criminal activities in Iraq and Syria. Criminal activities included extortion of civilian economies, smuggling oil, and robberies. ISIS also maintains stockpiles of as much as hundreds of millions of dollars scattered across Iraq and Syria it looted during its occupation of those countries in 2013 to 2019. ISIS continues to rely on trusted courier networks and money services businesses to move its financial resources within and outside of Iraq and Syria. The territorial defeat of ISIS that eliminated its control of territory in Syria in 2019 reduced ISIS's ability to generate, hold, and transfer its financial assets. Despite this, ISIS continues to generate revenue from criminal activities through its many clandestine networks in Iraq and Syria and provides significant financial support and guidance to its network of global branches and affiliates.

ecoi.net summary:

Brief description of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (Excerpt of chapter 5 of the country report on terrorism 2020)



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