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The Islamic State: Background, Current Status, and U.S. Policy

The Islamic State (IS) is a transnational Sunni Islamist insurgent and terrorist group. At its 2015 height, the group controlled large areas of Iraq and Syria from which it launched attacks in the region and beyond. While the group no longer controls territory outright in Syria and Iraq, U.S. military officials warn that it continues to operate and has worked to expand its global presence through affiliates in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. The 2024 Annual Threat Assessment (ATA) of the U.S. Intelligence Community assessed that “ISIS will remain a centralized global organization even as it has been forced to rely on regional branches ... [and will attempt] to conduct and inspire global attacks against the West and Western interests.” Congress has authorized and overseen the use of various policy tools to counter IS, including kinetic and economic actions.

Origins and Leadership

The Islamic State grew out of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), which comprised former Al Qaeda elements that fought in the insurgency in Iraq. In 2011, some ISI members traveled to Syria to establish a new Al Qaeda affiliate there, known as the Nusra Front. In 2013, then-ISI leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi announced that ISI and the Nusra Front had merged into the Islamic State of Iraq and Al Sham (ISIS/ISIL). Al Qaeda rejected Baghdadi’s move to subsume the Nusra Front under his leadership and severed ties with the group in 2014. Baghdadi later declared the establishment of a “caliphate” and renamed the group the Islamic State. After years of U.S.-led coalition operations, the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) captured IS’s last territorial outpost in Syria in 2019. Baghdadi died in a U.S. raid on his compound in northern Syria later that year. He was succeeded by Abu Ibrahim al Hashimi al Quraishi, who was killed in a 2022 U.S. military operation. His successors were killed by Turkish-backed Syrian forces (October 2022) and under disputed circumstances (April 2023). Current IS leader Abu Hafs al Quraishi was named in August 2023.

IS Status in Syria and Iraq

The Islamic State continues to wage a low-level insurgency across Syria and Iraq. As of early 2024, U.N. sanctions monitors reported that IS was “effectively suppressed” in Iraq and Syria but remained a threat. U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) Commander Gen. Kurilla testified in March 2024 that a “premature Coalition departure” before U.S. partners “can operate independently” would enable IS to regain territory “within two years.”

Islamic State Detainees. As of late 2023, the SDF continued to hold about 9,000 IS fighters in detention facilities, which remain targets for IS attacks. The SDF also retains custody of some 44,000 people linked to IS (93% women and children) at the Al Hol and Roj camps, where U.S. officials have warned of susceptibility to IS radicalization. In 2023, repatriation efforts reduced Al Hol’s population by 17%.

Selected Global Affiliates

Local armed groups in various countries have affiliated with the Islamic State; they vary in their goals, tactics, leadership structures, and threat profiles. The State Department has designated nine IS affiliates as Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs). In June 2023, the U.S. State Department designated two leaders associated with IS’s General Directorate of Provinces, which provides “operational guidance and funding around the world,” as Specially Designated Global Terrorists (SDGTs). In addition to the groups below, reportedly less operationally active FTOs affiliated with IS operate in Bangladesh, Egypt, and the Philippines.

Middle East/North Africa

Islamic State in Libya (IS-Libya) was established in 2014. U.S. airstrikes weakened the group, helping oust it from its last stronghold in the city of Sirte in 2016. The “significantly degraded” group remains concentrated in southern Libya, where it finances itself through illicit activities, including trafficking in persons and smuggling.

Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) was established in Afghanistan in 2015 by Pakistani, Afghan, and Central Asian militants. ISKP has accelerated attacks in Afghanistan since the Taliban’s return to power in 2021 and “is trying to conduct attacks that undermine the legitimacy of the Taliban regime,” per the 2024 ATA. Though the Taliban has exerted some counterterrorism pressure on ISKP, the group retains a “safe haven” in Afghanistan. CENTCOM Commander Gen. Kurilla testified in 2024 that ISKP “retains the capability and will to attack U.S. and Western interests abroad in as little as six months and with little to no warning,” echoing a similar warning from 2023. In early 2024, ISKP conducted mass casualty attacks in Russia and Iran; U.S. officials stated that the United States warned both Russia and Iran ahead of the attacks.

Sub-Saharan Africa

After IS’s territorial defeat in Iraq and Syria, U.S. officials warned that IS leadership aimed to expand elsewhere, particularly in Africa. The 2024 ATA noted “the shift of the center of gravity in the Sunni global jihad to Africa,” and U.N. sanctions monitors cited Africa or Afghanistan as “viable locations for a new [IS] leader, with the former more likely.” Many observers have identified a deterioration in the security situation in West Africa, where regional IS and Al Qaeda affiliates exploit “government instability, communal conflict, and anti-government grievances” as well as a lack of “international counterterrorism support [and] weakening leadership in regional efforts.” The Biden Administration and some Members of Congress have voiced concern about the potential spillover of violence into coastal West Africa.

Islamic State West Africa Province (IS-WA) was formed in 2015 as an offshoot of the Nigerian Islamist armed group

Boko Haram, and has grown to surpass it in size and capacity. It primarily operates in the Lake Chad Basin areas of Nigeria, Niger, Cameroon, and Chad. IS-WA reportedly includes between 4,000 and 7,000 fighters.

Islamic State Sahel Province (IS-Sahel) emerged in 2015 as an offshoot of Al Murabitoun—itsself an offshoot of Algerian-led Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb—and was elevated as an IS “province” in 2022. The group operates primarily in border regions of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, where military juntas have expelled French counterterrorism troops and strengthened security ties with Russia. IS-Sahel has been implicated in civilian massacres, some along ethnic lines. U.N. reports in 2023 highlighted IS-Sahel’s growing capacity and in 2024 noted its efforts at increasing popular support.

Islamic State Democratic Republic of the Congo (IS-DRC), established in 2019 as a rebranding of the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), is a long-active Ugandan-origin insurgent group that operates in DRC and Uganda. A 2024 U.N. report indicated that regional military pressure had reduced the group’s size but that it remained resilient, comprising between 1,000 and 1,500 fighters.

Islamic State-Mozambique (IS-M), which affiliated with the Islamic State in 2019, originated in 2017 as an insurgency that has killed over 6,500 people and displaced more than 1.3 million. Though counterterrorism efforts by regional military forces from southern Africa since 2021 have reduced the group’s size, experience, and efficacy, violence surged in early 2024 as those forces prepared to withdraw.

Islamic State-Somalia, which split from Al Qaeda’s largest affiliate, Al Shabaab, in 2015, is based in the Puntland region of Somalia. Estimated to have 100-200 fighters, it hosts an IS regional office, Al Karrar, that has reportedly acted as a financial hub for IS elements around the world.

U.S. Policy Responses

Military Operations

The creation of Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) in 2014 formalized U.S.-led coalition operations against IS forces in Iraq and Syria. While the campaign was largely carried out by local Syrian and Iraqi partner forces, the United States provided advice, airstrikes, artillery, and intelligence support. In 2020, OIR entered a new phase, which aims to enable partner forces to operate independently against IS remnants. The U.S. military has also conducted operations against IS-Somalia.

Global Partnerships

The United States formed the Defeat (D)-ISIS coalition in 2014. Most of its 87 members did not participate militarily in Iraq and Syria, but U.S. officials sought their cooperation to counter the flow of foreign fighters, financing, and propaganda. Two subgroups (the Africa Focus Group and the D-ISIS Small Group) continue to meet regularly.

Training, Equipping, and Advising Partner Forces

The United States has trained local partner forces in Iraq and Syria with the goal of limiting the size and duration of the U.S. military presence required to counter the Islamic State. U.S. personnel have been deployed in Iraq and Syria in advisory, planning, training, and intelligence capacities since late 2015, and to secure U.S. personnel and facilities.

U.S. forces in Iraq transitioned from combat operations to the ongoing “advise, assist, and enable” mission in 2021; as of April 2024, the United States and Iraq are engaged in talks about the future of the U.S. military presence in Iraq.

Congress has authorized U.S. train and equip programs for Iraq and Syria through December 2024. The Administration’s FY2025 budget request seeks \$529 million for the Department of Defense (DOD) Counter-ISIS Train and Equip Fund (CTEF), including \$381 million for Iraq and \$148 million for Syria. This reflects an increase from enacted funds from the prior two years (\$475 million enacted for CTEF in FY2023). These funds include stipends for Iraqi Kurdish and Syrian fighters, as well as equipment and logistical support for these forces. DOD reports that it seeks “to consolidate gains achieved against ISIS...and help prevent its resurgence” in Iraq and Syria.

Over 1,000 U.S. forces in Niger conducted intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance and security cooperation until a 2023 coup; in April 2024, U.S. officials stated plans to withdraw troops after the ruling junta rescinded the U.S. status of forces agreement. The United States has supported a five-country African Union-authorized Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNJTF) established in 2014 to counter Boko Haram and IS-WA, and has provided funding to the U.N. peacekeeping mission in DRC, which seeks to protect civilians, including in areas affected by IS-DRC.

Foreign Assistance

The United States has used aid for both prevention and stabilization efforts. Stabilization assistance in liberated areas of Syria and Iraq has aimed to prevent the group’s re-emergence, including more than \$1.3 billion in stabilization assistance for Syria between 2011 and 2022. Under the Global Fragility Act (Title V of Division J, P.L. 116-94), the Biden Administration is undertaking the U.S. Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability, and has identified six African countries, some threatened by IS affiliates, as priorities for assistance to “prevent the destabilizing expansion of terrorism and violent extremism” through security and governance support.

Sanctions

The United States seeks to limit the Islamic State’s ability to finance its operations, in part by preventing the group and its affiliates from accessing the U.S. financial system. To that end, the State Department has designated the above affiliates as SDGTs and FTOs. U.S. sanctions block SDGT and FTO property and interests in property within U.S. jurisdiction. Foreign financial institutions that facilitate significant transactions on behalf of SDGTs may also be subject to certain U.S. sanctions. 18 U.S.C. 2339B prohibits persons from providing material support or resources to FTOs and requires U.S. financial institutions to freeze assets linked to such activity. IS affiliates also are subject to U.N. sanctions under U.N. Security Council Resolution 2368 (2017), which requires member states to apply an asset freeze, travel ban, and arms embargo to any individual or entity on the ISIL (Da’esh) & Al Qaida Sanctions List.

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