

Islamic State (ISIS)

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The Islamic State (al-Dawla al-Islamiyya) is a transnational nonstate radical Sunni neo-Salafist Islamist armed group primarily active in the period 2013–2017 in Iraq, in Syria, and internationally. The group, which came to be known formally as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria/the Levant (ISIS or ISIL, al-Dawla al-Islamiyya fi'l-Iraq wa'l-Shaam) in 2013–2014, was an offshoot of the transnational radical Islamist organization, al-Qaeda.

Led from 1989 to 2011 in Afghanistan by the Saudi militant Osama Bin Laden and his Egyptian deputy Ayman al-Zawahiri, al-Qaeda conducted the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington. Following these attacks, the United States invaded Afghanistan in October 2001 and Iraq in March 2003 (claiming misleadingly a relationship between al-Qaeda and the regime of Iraqi president Saddam Hussein). The American occupation of Iraq gave birth to an insurgency led by radical Islamist factions, which initially aligned themselves with al-Qaeda and subsequently split from it to become a local group precursor of the Islamic State.

Following the start of the Syrian civil war in 2011, in the aftermath of the Arab Spring pro-democracy revolts, and in parallel with the United States' withdrawal from Iraq that same year, ISIS emerged a year and a half later regionally occupying large swathes of territory in both countries. The group led terrorist attacks in the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe, and was eventually defeated territorially by an international military coalition in late 2017, losing control of the twin bases it had established for half a decade in the cities of Mosul in Iraq and Raqqa in Syria. The group's leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (Ibrahim al-Badri al-Samarrai), was subsequently killed in a US air raid in Barisha, Syria, in October 2019.

The history of the Islamic State encompasses national, regional, and international dimensions, a characteristic which endowed the group with a unique global imprint. Combined with the organization's military prowess and its versatile use of communication technologies, this positions the Islamic State as arguably the most influential nonstate armed group in contemporary history.

The genesis of the Islamic State harkens back to late 1999 when a radical Islamist militant group known as Jama'at al-Tawhid wa'l-Jihad (the Group of Unity and Jihad) led by the Jordanian militant and Afghan–Soviet war veteran Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi (Ahmed Fadil Nazzal al-Khalayla) was set up in Afghanistan (Devji 2005; Tawil 2007; Soufan 2018). In May 2002, the group moved to northern Iraq and, a year later, started conducting operations against the United States' occupying troops and other international actors present in the country (including the 19 August 2003 deadly attack on the United Nations compound in Baghdad). In October 2004, al-Zarqawi folded his organization – which by then had emerged as the leading insurgent group domestically – into Osama Bin Laden's al-Qaeda, renaming the local group al-Qaeda in Iraq (Tanzim al-Qaeda fi Bilad al-Rafidayn, the Organization of al-Qaeda in the Land of the Two Rivers, or Mesopotamia). A few months after the killing of al-Zarqawi by a US air raid in June 2006, al-Qaeda in Iraq became the Islamic State in Iraq. The first mention

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of the project of setting up an “Islamic State” had come from al-Zarqawi in his last videotaped message in April 2006. For the next six and a half years, the Islamic State in Iraq would remain the dominant Sunni extremist group in Iraq, battling the US and the Iraqi armed forces as well as the various Shia militias affiliated with the government, notably the Popular Mobilization Forces (al-Hashd al-Sha’bi). The Islamic State in Iraq was led, successively, by Abu Hamza al-Muhajir (also known as Abu Ayyub al-Masri), Abu Omar al-Baghdadi (Hamid Daoud Mohammed Khalil al-Zawi), and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (also known as Abu Du’a). Between July 2012 and July 2013, the group led eight high-profile prison breaks in Iraq (including from Abu Ghraib prison in July 2013), freeing some 500 veteran militants who would join it, many of whom had experienced torture at the hands of US or Iraqi troops (Danner 2004; Greenberg and Dratel 2005). In April 2013, the group took its penultimate form, under which it would be widely known internationally, namely the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria/Levant (ISIS or ISIL). Finally, a year later in June 2014, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced that ISIS had become simply the Islamic State (IS), that it was reestablishing the Islamic Caliphate (which was set up in the seventh century following the death of the Prophet Mohammad, had been passed on from one Islamic dynasty to the other, and had ceased to exist in 1924 upon the end of the Ottoman Empire; Pankhurst 2013; Sayyid 2014), with himself as new “Caliph” under the name Ibrahim. That declaration was denounced by al-Qaeda, and this moment marked in effect the divorce between the two organizations.

The next three and a half years represented the heyday of the group; in terms of military affairs, state-building, global reach, and media communication. Using upgraded military capability and relying on the experience of former Iraqi officers who had joined the group, IS went on to defeat the Iraqi and Syrian armed forces respectively, which were opposed to it and several coalitions of armed groups in the two countries. It established control of key sectors in north-eastern Iraq and northeastern Syria, bridging these territories by occupying the cities straddling the border and by securing the support of tribal leaders on both sides. The group was able to seize weapons which the US Army had provided to the Iraqi military for its counter-terrorist special forces. Announcing that it was establishing an “Islamic state” and urging Muslims from around the world to join it, the group witnessed the rapid arrival of large numbers of these militants. By 2015, the Islamic State had recruited approximately 35,000 individuals from some 80 countries. Between June 2014 and June 2016, the group conducted or inspired 75 attacks in 20 countries, not counting Iraq and Syria (where it was active daily), killing a total of 1280 people. High-profile attacks took place in Paris in January and November 2015, Brussels in March 2016, and London in March 2017.

The group’s “statehood” project was fleshed out through the establishment of a large-scale territorial administration (Mohamedou 2017). Teams from the group refurbished roads, fixed telephone lines, collected garbage, set up police check points, disbursed salaries, offered banking services, and imposed law and order (including by way of beheadings and public executions). A proto administration was announced, with departments of water, electricity, communication, and transport. The group seized the oil fields around Mosul and set up black market routes to sell the oil, averaging 50,000 barrels a day in mid-2015, and reportedly earning one million US dollars per month during that period.

The group announced that its “state” (*dawla*) was composed of 35 “regions” (*wilayat*) in ten countries (Afghanistan, Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Libya, Nigeria, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Yemen), with nineteen of these “regions” in Iraq and Syria. From February 2014 to July 2016, the Islamic State received formal public pledges of allegiance or support from 40 organizations

in the Middle East, Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin America. In that context, the group's territorial structure featured four different sectors: centers of immediate importance (Iraq and Syria), areas of control and action (Libya, Egypt, Turkey, and Yemen), places of active influence (Sahel, Afghanistan), and strategic locations with active operators (Europe, notably France, Belgium, and Germany). In Derna, Libya, the group was able to seize vast territory along the Mediterranean coast, which it controlled sporadically over two years in 2015–2017.

By 2018, the group had lost control over the territories it had occupied in Iraq and Syria since 2013. The combined effect of the military campaigns led, in Iraq, by the Iraqi military and several Shiite militias, and, in Syria, by the Syrian armed forces as well as the air and ground interventions by Russia, the United States, and Turkey, ended up defeating the group in both countries. Internationally, IS's operational control of other groups dwindled, though its influence persisted. The group did not, however, disappear altogether and indeed started to reconstitute and lead increased attacks in 2020 in Syria and Iraq. A new leader, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi (Mohammad Abdul Rahman al-Mawli al-Salbi), was appointed in October 2019, and he pursued IS's reemergence primarily on the basis of the financial resources the group had acquired.

Beyond its militarization, avowed statization, and globalization, IS was particularly efficient, and indeed revolutionary, when it came to its use of information technology. Taking al-Qaeda's already professionalized media communication to another level, IS invested massively in a large-scale international multimedia information campaign. In August 2014, immediately after the takeover of Mosul, the group launched a media branch named al-Hayat Media Center. Videos were released in 19 languages and produced to professional standards, with specific and narrative arcs (serialized features, trailers, testimonials, battlefield reports, verisimilitude health services presentations, music videos, and "top ten videos of the month"). This was the first time in history that a terrorist group was communicating globally – at times in real time (one of its followers livestreamed a terrorist attack in June 2016 in France) – in such an elaborate fashion (including CGI effects), strategically articulating its propaganda beyond that of states or mass media. The group published five different magazines (in English, French, German, Turkish, Russian, Indonesian, and Uyghur) and operated an online radio channel. It released a mobile telephone app named The Dawn and produced a manual for evading geolocation, which it disseminated to its militants and supporters internationally. Before being shut down, Twitter and Facebook accounts held by IS operators and sympathizers totaled 45,000 by November 2014, generating a daily average 200,000 tweets at the time.

Analyses of the group varied. Some authors highlighted its religious and apocalyptic nature, as well as its anchoring in Middle Eastern problems (McCants 2016; Weiss and Hassan 2016). Others placed emphasis on its political character and postmodern nature (Rogers 2016; Mohamedou 2017). Ultimately, the Islamic State was an eminently hybrid entity: part al-Qaeda legacy, part Islamist insurgency, part Iraqi Ba'athist regime renaissance movement, part Syrian armed rebellion, part regional post-Arab Spring security phenomenon, part global Islamist movement displacing al-Qaeda, and part Western-world youth terrorist group. The ability to stay the course and reinvent itself continuously is what made the group potent. It painted its enemies' plans as the source of its strength: US failed imperial adventurism in Iraq, the new Iraqi authorities' authoritarianism, Syrian President Bashar al-Asad's ruthlessness, and al-Qaeda's post-Bin Laden discomposure. Importantly and differently from earlier terrorist groups including al-Qaeda, its tech-minded, self-empowered message tapped into

the very heart of European and North American cities and a tempest of political, cultural, and socioeconomic discontent and malaise.

SEE ALSO: Al-Qaeda; Extremism; Global Salafism; Globalization and Movements; Jihadi Culture; Muslim Activism (Europe); Political Socialization and Social Movements; Radicalism; Religion and Social Movements; Terrorist Movements; Violence and Social Movements; War and Social Movements.

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