



## What is ISIS and how did it emerge?

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is the successor to The Islamic State of Iraq (IS). It is a hardline Sunni Muslim jihadist group operating in Iraq and Syria.<sup>1</sup> It emerged in a nascent form a decade ago as an offshoot of al-Qaeda in Iraq, which itself arose in response to the US invasion of 2003. It is currently led by Awwad Ibrahim al-Badri al-Samarri, a.k.a. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.<sup>2</sup>

When sectarian fighting broke out in Syria in 2011, Baghdadi sent an envoy there to create the al-Nusra Front. Al-Nusra became the main Sunni jihadist group fighting the Alawite-dominated<sup>3</sup> government of President Bashar al Assad.

In 2013 al-Baghdadi's people came into conflict with other jihadist groups in Syria as al-Baghdadi tried to consolidate his forces in both Iraq and Syria. Al-Qaeda's leader also disagreed with Baghdadi's attacks on Muslim offshoot sects — e.g. Shia and Ismaeli Muslims, Sufis, etc.

ISIS's brutality and imposition of harsh *sharia* law led to open conflict with other opposition groups in northern Syria in January 2013. During this period, al-Nusra, as well as more moderate rebel groups, fought against ISIS. In February 2013, Al-Qaeda and al-Nusra severed all ties with ISIS, citing ISIS's brutality and insubordination.<sup>4</sup>

In 2014, ISIS troops became more active in Iraq. They captured Iraq's second largest city, Mosul, June 10, 2014, after just three days of fighting. Iraq's armed forces—which number 350,000 and into which \$41.6 billion had been poured—offered little resistance.<sup>5</sup>

## How big is ISIS, how much territory does it control and how well armed is it?

Estimated number of fighters: US officials believe ISIS has about 15,000 fighters. However, an Iraqi expert on ISIS, Hisham al-Hashimi, estimated in August 2014 that IS had 30,000 to 50,000 fighters, of whom 30 percent were "ideologues" and the remainder there through fear or coercion.<sup>6</sup> Many are neither Syrian nor Iraqi.<sup>7</sup>

Estimated size of territory controlled: ISIS is estimated to control between 40,000 sq km (15,000 sq miles) and 90,000 sq km (35,000 sq miles) of Iraq and Syria—about a third of both countries. (An area about the size of New Brunswick.) It controls the cities of Mosul, Tikrit, Falluja

and Tal Afar in Iraq and Raqqa in Syria, and areas including oil fields, dams, main roads and border crossings. About 8 million people are living under full or partial ISIS control.<sup>8</sup>

Weaponry: ISIS has sophisticated weapons, many seized following the US invasion of Iraq, or more recently from fleeing or captured Iraqi or Syrian troops. They also obtain sophisticated weapons from other anti-Assad groups. As veteran Middle East correspondent Patrick Cockburn notes, there is no dividing wall between extreme jihadist groups and the supposedly "moderate" allies some western powers are supporting. A Middle East intelligence official commented to Cockburn:

*ISIS members are always pleased when sophisticated weapons are sent to anti-Assad groups of any kind because they can always get the arms off them by threats of force or cash payments.<sup>9</sup>*

## What are ISIS's primary goals?

Establishment of an Islamic state ("caliphate"): ISIS's original goal was to establish an Islamic state in the Sunni territories of Iraq, to be governed according to its literalist interpretation of the Koran. A 2007 IS pamphlet indicated that modern notions of statehood and national borders must be discarded, and that improving people's living conditions matters less than "improving" their observance of Islam.<sup>10</sup> When civil war broke out in Syria, ISIS announced that the Sunni territories in Syria would also be part of its intended caliphate.

Elimination of Shia Muslims and Iraqi security forces: On seizing the Iraqi province of Mosul in June 2014, ISIS imposed strict *sharia* and released a public relations film, "Rattling the Sabres", outlining another major goal: the elimination of Shia Muslims and Iraqi security forces.<sup>11</sup>

To draw the US into a war: Baghdadi is apparently eager to draw the US into war with IS. Al-Hashimi states that Baghdadi believes that drawing the US into a war with IS will fulfil an alleged prophecy of an eventual Christian-Muslim confrontation, and that such a war will position him as leader of the Muslim world.<sup>12</sup> In August and September 2014, ISIS provocatively beheaded two US journalists.

## Why do some Iraqis and Syrians support ISIS?

- Marginalization of Sunni Muslims from political power by the governments of both Syria, where Sunnis are the majority, and Iraq, where Sunnis are 35 percent of the population. Abuses by Iraqi military, predominately Shia, have also angered Iraq's Sunnis.
- High death toll during the US and UK invasion of Iraq and subsequent occupation. An estimated 601,027 Iraqis died of violence between March 18 2003 and June 2006, 31 percent at the hands of Coalition forces; another 53,938 died due to the war's impact on health infrastructure, lawlessness, etc.<sup>13</sup>
- Outrage over abuses by US and UK occupation forces in Iraq, and by their local allies: The physical abuse, torture, rape and murder of male and female Iraqi detainees by US forces at Abu Ghraib prison, abuses of the civilian population, and the occupation itself have angered many Iraqis.
- Outrage over the Syrian government's violence against peaceful protesters, since 2011.
- Resentment of foreign meddling, beginning with Britain and France's post WWI division of the Middle East and creation of artificial states such as Iraq.
- The failure of most secular Arab governments to bring prosperity and to establish inclusive democracies.
- The influence of Wahhabism, promoted by Saudi Arabia.

## How does ISIS operate?

Lightweight "occupation" strategy: According to Patrick Cockburn, ISIS uses its forces as shock troops to take easy targets but does not get dragged into prolonged fighting in which its fighters would be tied down and suffer heavy casualties. Instead, it picks off government garrisons in Sunni-majority districts, but does not necessarily leave many of its militants behind, instead relying on local allies to maintain control.<sup>14</sup> It swiftly eliminates Shias and other non-Sunnis and non-Arabs, installs Sunnis in positions of responsibility, and sets up control of public services. As it moves from area to area, it activates sleeper cells and picks up new fighters who either share its anger over Sunni marginalization or join out of fear.

Brutal against opponents: According to Amnesty International "... Islamic State (IS) has carried out ethnic cleansing on a historic scale in northern Iraq. ... IS has systematically targeted non-Arab and non-Sunni Muslim communities, killing or abducting hundreds, possibly thousands, and forcing more than 830,000 others to flee the areas it has captured since 10 June 2014." Groups persecuted include Assyrian Christians, Turkmen Shia Muslims, Shabak Shia Muslims, Yezidis, Kakai and Sabean

Mandaeans, who had peacefully co-existed in the area for centuries.<sup>15</sup>

ISIS also claimed to have executed 1700 Iraqi soldiers in June and 250 Syrian soldiers in August 2014, and has published corroborating photos on social media. The mass executions of Iraqi soldiers have been confirmed by survivor testimony published by Human Rights Watch in September 2014.<sup>16 17</sup>

Financing through resource control and provision of services: Although initially partially financed by wealthy individuals in the Gulf states, ISIS has become self-financing by controlling oil wells in eastern Syria and many of Syria's grain stores, smuggling Syrian antiquities, trading in internationally prohibited weapons, extorting those using highways, and collecting ransoms from foreign journalists and private companies. On capturing a town, it secures the area's water, flour and hydrocarbon resources and centralises their distribution,<sup>18</sup> making residents dependent on it and enabling it to generate revenues. It also looted Mosul's banks. It is now the world's wealthiest jihadist group, with cash and assets worth over \$2 billion.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>1</sup> IS is strongly influenced by Wahhabism, a fundamentalist 18<sup>th</sup> century version of Islam promoted throughout the Middle East by US ally Saudi Arabia. Wahhabism considers women second-class citizens, and deems Shia Muslims heretics, to be persecuted along with Jews and Christians. IS also deems Hamas an "apostate" group, and strongly opposes it.

<sup>2</sup> Baghdadi fought in a rebellion in western Iraq following the US invasion. He was captured by US forces in 2006, jailed for several years, then rejoined al-Qaeda affiliates in Iraq on his release.

<sup>3</sup> Alawites are a small Shia Muslim sect, most numerous in Syria, where they number 2.2 million, 12 percent of the Syrian population.

<sup>4</sup> Sly, Liz., "Al-Qaeda disavows any ties with radical Islamist ISIS group in Syria, Iraq." Washington Post. February 3, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Cockburn, Patrick. "Crisis in the Middle East: The end of a country, and the start of a new dark age". The Independent. August 10, 2014.

<sup>6</sup> "What is Islamic State?". BBC. September 3, 2014.

<sup>7</sup> The Soufan Group, a private intelligence and security firm, estimates that 12,000 of ISIS fighters are neither Syrians nor Iraqis.

<sup>8</sup> "What is Islamic State?". BBC. September 3, 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Cockburn, Patrick. Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> "What is Isis and what are its aims?" The Guardian. June 17, 2014

<sup>11</sup> "What is Isis and what are its aims?" The Guardian. June 17, 2014

<sup>12</sup> Chulov, Martin. "What next for Islamic State, the would-be caliphate?" The Guardian. September 3, 2014.

<sup>13</sup> Brown, David. "Study Claims Iraq's 'Excess' Death Toll Has Reached 655,000". Washington Post. Oct. 11, 2006

<sup>14</sup> Cockburn, Patrick. Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> "Ethnic cleansing on historic scale: the Islamic State's systematic targeting of minorities in northern Iraq." Amnesty International, Sept 2, 2014.

<sup>16</sup> "Iraq: Islamic State Executions in Tikrit." Human Rights Watch, September 2, 2014.

<sup>17</sup> Saul, Heather. "Youtube video posted by Isis militants shows 'execution of 250 Syrian soldiers'". The Independent, August 28, 2014.

<sup>18</sup> "Islamic State: Where does jihadist group get its support?" BBC. September 1, 2014.

<sup>19</sup> Chulov, Martin. "How an arrest in Iraq revealed Isis's \$2bn jihadist network". The Guardian. June 15, 2014.