

# Factsheet: ISIS

## ***Precursors to ISIS***

The earliest precursor to ISIS was Jamaat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad, founded by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in 1990, with the goal of overthrowing the Jordanian monarchy. In 2004, following the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Zarqawi formally joined Al-Qaeda and took the name Al-Qaeda in Iraq. He was aided by hundreds and perhaps thousands of skilled officers from Saddam Hussein's disbanded army.<sup>i</sup>

Following Zarqawi's death in 2006, Al-Qaeda in Iraq transformed into the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) and began to focus far more on seizing territory.<sup>ii</sup> Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi became head of ISI in 2010. He shifted the group's tactics from ransom and robbery to generating revenue through large-scale attacks aimed at capturing and holding large portions of territory.<sup>iii</sup> Since 2013, it has taken over large portions of Northern and Central Iraq,<sup>iv</sup> as well as eastern and northern Syria.<sup>v</sup>

## ***What is ISIS? Background:***

ISIS is unique in its immediate focus on establishing a Sunni state that recognizes no existing borders.<sup>vi</sup> The Islamic State in Iraq and Sham (ISIS), sometimes called ISIL or "Islamic State," took its current form in April 2013 after a dispute between the heads of Al-Qaeda affiliates in Iraq and in Syria. Abu Muhammed al-Jolani, head of Syrian Al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat Nusra, had been sent to Syria in 2011 by Al-Qaeda in Iraq head Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. By April 2013, Nusra had become a powerful fighting force.

Therefore, Baghdadi declared a merger between Nusra and Al-Qaeda in Iraq. But Jolani refused, stating that he "was neither consulted nor commanded" on the merger and declaring that the "banner of the Jabhat will remain as it is." Baghdadi then formed ISIS as a separate organization from Nusra. From the start, ISIS was distinguished from Nusra by its focus on waging an immediate transnational battle.

## ***How do Syrian rebels relate to ISIS?***

For the first few months, Syrian rebels treated ISIS similar to how they treated Nusra: rebels would work tactically with ISIS against Assad, but they would not enter formal coalitions due to ISIS's extreme ideology. ISIS only contributed to the rebel cause in one significant battle, at Minnagh airbase in August 2012.

In Syria, ISIS has devoted few resources to fighting the Assad regime. It has focused the overwhelming bulk of its efforts on forcing opposition areas to embrace its totalitarian version of Islamic governance. ISIS took control of its current capital, Raqqa, from rebel brigades in August 2013. They killed popular rebel commander Kamal Hamami in Latakia in July 2013, and stormed the media offices of activist Raed Fares in Kafranbel from December 30, 2013 to Jan 2, 2014.

In January 2014, rebels held what some activists called a "Second Revolution" against ISIS. Mass protests erupted against ISIS across opposition areas. A new coalition of moderate rebels called Mujahideen Army formed to "fight ISIS, which has violated the rule of God, until it announces its dissolution."<sup>vii</sup> The Mujahideen Army and other rebel brigades expelled ISIS from almost all its Syrian territories. Since then, ISIS and the rebels have been in a state of open war.

## ***How does the Assad regime relate to ISIS?***

During the 2003 – 2011 Iraq war, Bashar al-Asad let Islamist fighters transit through his country in order to fight the U.S. backed coalition.<sup>viii</sup> Assad allowed al Qaeda operatives to set up a "rat line" through his country and into northeastern Iraq, prompting the U.S. to conduct airstrikes on Al-Qaeda transit posts in Syria in

2008.ix More than any other Middle Eastern leader, it was Asad who bolstered al-Qaeda's ranks in Iraq.x This move allowed ISIS to establish the logistics foothold it now exploits in Syria.

Assad also took steps once the Syrian Revolution was underway to ensure radical Islamists would thrive. In Just 10 days into pro-democracy protests, Assad released 260 "mainly Islamist" prisoners from Saydnaya prison, which is known for housing radical Islamists.xi Assad also released the notorious international terror mastermind Abu Musab al-Suri from his prisons in December 2011.xii When rebels launched their "Second Revolution" against ISIS, Assad subjected the newly ISIS-free areas to the fiercest air raids of the entire war.xiii

### ***Anti-Assad Activists in the Shadow of ISIS***

In Raqqa, ISIS's international capitol, there have been several reports that ISIS is engaged in kidnapping anyone who speaks out against them. Twitter feeds are overwhelmed with elegies for the missing and the dead.xiv There have also been reports that the group engages in mass kidnappings of school-aged children from northern Syria in order to indoctrinate them.xv ISIS has also been kidnapping and killing doctors and aide workers in rebel-held areas, as shown by the torture and execution of activist-doctor Abu Rayan in Aleppo.xvi

*“Our civil movement is on the verge of dying out. ISIS left no room for any peaceful civilian activism. They kidnap any activist caught speaking out or participating in protests. The movement is going underground again, like under the regime.”xvii*

### ***Creation of the Caliphate:***

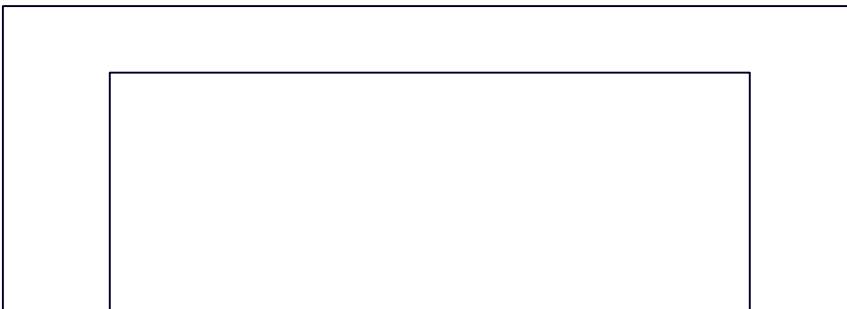
In June 2014, ISIS crossed into Iraq from Syria to conquer Iraq's second city of Mosul. Since then, ISIS has carried out its brutal practices of repression and mass violence in Iraq, both individually and on a large scale.xviii They have also continued fomenting sectarian violence with mass killings of Christians, Yazidis and Shia.xix

On June 29, 2014, ISIS declared the creation of an Islamic Caliphate, or a state founded on Islamic principles, and al-Baghdadi declared himself Caliph, and civil and religious ruler of the world's 1.5 billion Muslims.xx The dissolution of these borders and the declaration of a caliphate meant that there was a new Islamic region that had to be defended at all costs. This became a very powerful marketing message.

### ***ISIS and its Resources:***

ISIS gleans its resources from myriad places. It has wealthy benefactors in the Gulf and Turkey.xxi It engages in extortion, kidnapping for ransom, robbing and looting,xxii and control over agriculture, not to mention, ISIS has a vast black market network of resource sales. Their oil “pipeline” is said to be capable of netting \$1million per day in sales.xxiii And they are supposedly worth around \$2 billion.xxiv

There is also a theft of our shared cultural and historical heritage. The theft and sale of antiquities was said to have pulled in \$36 million this year alone.xxv There is a nefarious ring that ISIS utilizes to fence its stolen antiquities that runs from Iraq, through Syrian intermediaries, sometimes with the help of the regime, into Turkey, where customs officials often look the other way.xxvi



***End Notes:***

---

Botelho, Greg. 07.21.2014. CNN. CNN.com. "5 predictions revisited: Iraq's troubles are years in the making, experts say."

Zelin, Aaron Y. June 2014. "The War between ISIS and al-Qaeda for Supremacy of the Global Jihadist Movement." *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*. Research Notes. No. 20, June 2014.

CNN Library. CNN.com. 11.06.2014. "ISIS Fast Facts." Retrieved November 10, 2014.

Squires, Lauren, Nate Petrocine. 09/29/2014. Institute for the Study of War. "ISIS Advances In Anbar."

Syria Team. 10/30/2014. Institute for the Study of War. "Control of Terrain in Syria: October 30, 2014."  
<http://iswsyria.blogspot.com/2014/10/control-of-terrain-in-syria-october-30.html>

Worth, Robert F. 06/26/2014. New York Times. nyt.com. "Redrawn Lines Seen as No Cure in Iraq Conflict."

"New Syria Rebel Alliance Declares War on Al Qaida." AFP, January 4, 2014.

al-Abdelnour, Ziad. April, 2003. The Middle East Forum. "Syria's Proxy Forces in Iraq." *The Middle East Intelligence Bulletin*. Vol. 5 No. 4.

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/7692153.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7692153.stm)

Scarborough, Rowan. 08/19/2013. The Washington Times. washingtontimes.com. "al-Qaeda 'Rat Line' from Syria to Iraq Turns Back Against Assad."

<http://www.myfoxatlanta.com/story/17862515/syria-releases-political-prisoners>

[http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/02/abu\\_musab\\_al\\_suri\\_re.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/02/abu_musab_al_suri_re.php)

<http://www.i24news.tv/en/news/international/middle-east/19787-140202-syria-barrel-bomb-raids-kill-85-after-geneva-talks>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8qlFHqY7Jpk#t=1228>

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syria-conflict-president-assad-finally-turns-on-isis-as-government-steps-up-campaign-against-militant-strongholds-9679480.html>

---

“Mutaaz Bellah Ibrahim an anti Assad activist was kidnapped by ISIS last week and today they gave his dead body to his family

Human Rights Watch. [hrw.org](http://hrw.org). 10/30/2014. “Iraq: ISIS Executed Hundreds of Prison Inmates.” See Also: RT. [rt.com](http://rt.com). 06/27/2014. “ISIS Commits Mass Murder; advertises it. Iraq executions detailed.” See Also: Hall, John. 10/30/2014. UK Daily Mail. [dailymail.co.uk](http://dailymail.co.uk). “Massacre of the Tribes: 228 murdered in just two days as ISIS exacts bloody revenge on Sunni leaders who sided with Iraqi government against them.”

Several reports put the numbers of prisoners killed at over 600 in Badoosh prison outside Mosul. Among those killed were Sunnis, Kurds, Yazidis and Christians. Here is one report: Salaheddin, Sinan. 10/30/2014. The Huffington Post. “ISIS Kills Prisoners in Mosul.”

CNN Library. [CNN.com](http://CNN.com). 11.06.2014. “ISIS Fast Facts.” Retrieved November 10, 2014.

Details by Rogin assert that U.S. allies Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Kuwait have been funding elements in ISIS for decades, and that this money often flows through Turkey: Rogin, Josh. 06/14/2014. The Daily Beast. [dailybeast.com](http://dailybeast.com). “America’s Allies are Funding ISIS.”

Seizure of over 160 flash-drives revealed everything from foreign fighters names, where they came from and what ministry they had been attached to, to senior leaders, their code names and an accounting of the group’s finances. Chulov, Martin. 06/15/2014. The Guardian. [guardian.com](http://guardian.com). “How an Arrest in Iraq Revealed ISIS’s \$2 billion Jihadist Network.”

Giglio, Mike. 11/03/2014. BuzzFeed. [buzzfeed.com](http://buzzfeed.com). “Report: This is How ISIS Smuggles Its Oil.”

Shatz, Howard J. September 2014. The RAND Corporation. [rand.org](http://rand.org). “How ISIS Funds its Reign of Terror.”

Black, Ian, Rania Abouzaid, Marc Tran, Shiraz Maher, Roger Tooth and Martin Chulov. 06/14/2014. The Guardian. “The Terrifying Rise of ISIS: \$2bn in Loot, online killings and an Army on the Run.”

Erciyas, Cem. 09/14/2014. Al-Monitor. [al-monitor.com](http://al-monitor.com). “Islamic State Makes Millions from Stolen Antiquities.”

BBC News. [bbc.com](http://bbc.com). 06/15/2014. “Tony Blair: We Didn’t Cause the Iraq Crisis.”

