

Factsheet: Top 6 ISIS Myths De-Bunked

#1. ISIS is a Syrian Rebel Group:

At no point in its history has ISIS's leadership or rank-and-file been primarily Syrian. The group was originally an Iraqi branch of Al-Qaeda, meaning that it was staffed by a mixture of foreign fighters and hardline Iraqis. Many of its Iraqi members did time in Saddam Hussein's prisons or were Saddam-era ex-Army officers.ⁱ ISIS did not originate from the Syrian civil war, but took advantage of it to seize territory, attain valuable battlefield experience, and glean treasure from Gulf patrons who wanted an Islamic state in Syria.ⁱⁱ

ISIS only contributed to the rebel cause in one significant battle, at Minnagh airbase in August 2012. Aside from that one battle, ISIS has focused its efforts in Syria on attacking opposition areas, so as to force them 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."ⁱⁱⁱ 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.

#2. Assad is the Main Opponent to ISIS in Syria:

The Assad regime has actually maintained a tacit collaboration with ISIS and its predecessor groups for over a decade. During the 2003 – 2011 Iraq war, the regime let Islamist fighters transit through his country in order to fight the U.S. backed coalition.^{iv} 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.^v More than any other Middle Eastern leader, it was Assad who bolstered al-Qaeda's ranks in Iraq.^{vi} 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. Just 10 days into pro-democracy protests, Assad released 260 "mainly Islamist" prisoners from Saydnaya prison, which is known for housing radical Islamists.^{vii} Assad also released the notorious international terror mastermind Abu Musab al-Suri from his prisons in December 2011.^{viii} When rebels launched their "Second Revolution" against ISIS, Assad subjected the newly ISIS-free areas to the fiercest air raids of the entire war.^{ix} This allowed ISIS to regroup, seize the Iraqi border from Syrian rebels, and storm into Mosul.

#3. ISIS is al-Qaeda:

While ISIS and its predecessor organizations have at times worked closely with Al-Qaeda, the groups are not identical. 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. However, the relationship was fraught with tension over goals, tactics and different styles of leadership.

Following Zarqawi's death in 2006, Al-Qaeda in Iraq formed an umbrella coalition with like-minded Iraqi insurgent groups and renamed itself the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI).^x In late 2011, ISI despatched an emissary to establish an Jabhat Nusra as an Al-Qaeda/ISI branch in Syria. However, when ISI announced a merger of its Syrian and Iraqi branches in 2013, Jabhat Nusra rebuffed the arrangement. ISI then formed the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) as an organization distinct from Nusra in its immediate focus on transnational holy war.

In February 2014, the Al-Qaeda general command reciprocated ISIS's move by declaring that ISIS was "not a branch of the al-Qaeda group . . . [al-Qaeda] does not have an organizational relationship with it and is not the group responsible for their actions."^{xi} Al-Qaeda and ISIS are now seen as competitors attempting to pull recruits from the same parts of the world and advocating differing goals in shared spaces, especially Syria.^{xii} Today, ISIS holds far more territory in Syria than al-Qaeda.^{xiii}

#4. ISIS is Invincible:

A long string of strategic military victories over the course of 2014 and its recent forays into Lebanon have all perpetuated this myth. The truth is, the Islamic State's geographic borders in Iraq are limited to northern and western, Arab-majority, Sunni-majority Iraq.^{xiv} Even high-end estimates of ISIS's strength (50,000 troops) make it much smaller than the Iraqi army or the Kurdish Peshmerga. ISIS's brutality and sectarian ideology would make it impossible for them to hold hold onto majority Shia or Kurdish areas.^{xv}

The ISIS economic model also does not seem sustainable. With only about \$2 billion in funds, the organization seeks to govern several million people and engage in a multi-pronged war across two countries. However, some that estimate ISIS takes in almost \$3 million in oil revenue per day.^{xvi}

The declaration of a caliphate, which brings to mind the precipitous decline of Islamic civilization since its heyday, was intended to galvanize Muslim extremists around the world.^{xvii} However, if ISIS starts to lose ground, its declaration will backfire as serious doubts emerge about its original claims.

#5. The U.S. Can Destroy ISIS by Purely Military Means:

At its core, the ISIS phenomenon is a result of political and social problems, even these problems have manifest themselves in the military sphere. In Iraq, a series of missteps, abuses and sectarian provocations by the Shiite-dominated government convinced Sunnis that even ISIS would be better.^{xviii} In Syria, a brutal crackdown by the Assad regime and its mainly-Shiite allies left Sunni locals too weak to fight both Assad and ISIS simultaneously, allowing ISIS to establish a foothold.^{xix}

The U.S. alone cannot destroy ISIS. The defeat of ISIS will require the support of locals now under ISIS control, as well as regional allies. A military defeat for ISIS that does not ensure the rights of local Iraqis and Syrians will only prove fleeting. Furthermore, Iraqis and Syrians have both said that they do not want American ground troops in their country.^{xx} Therefore, the U.S. must partner with locals to defeat ISIS.

#6. ISIS Represents All of Islam:

It is true that the Islamic State has some support among Iraqi and Syrian Sunni adherents. Without this support, the group would cease to exist. But the idea, raised by extremist Muslims and non-Muslim bigots alike, that ISIS is somehow a true representation of Islam does not stand up to scrutiny. As was stated above, the ISIS phenomenon is a result of political and social problems.

Following the U.S. war in Iraq, a Shia sectarian nation was built on the ruins of Saddam Hussein's old Sunni-majority government.^{xxi} In 2013, a peaceful Sunni protest movement for increased democratic representation was met with government violence, culminating in a massacre at Hawija Square that killed over 40 protesters.^{xxii} Only at that point, when Iraqi Sunnis turned to violence, did ISIS acquire a real presence. Iraqi Sunnis who had sought peaceful redress of their grievances felt that had no better option.

More broadly, studies have shown that most Muslims repudiate the extremist ideologies espoused by Al-Qaeda and ISIS.^{xxiii} Among the 11 different Muslim publics surveyed by Pew Research in September 2013, 57% of respondents had an unfavorable view of these extremist groups.^{xxiv}

End Notes

Hubbard, Ben and Eric Schmidt. 08/27/2014. *The New York Times*. nyt.com. "Military Skill and Terrorist Technique Fuel Success of ISIS."

Rogin, Josh. 06/14/2014. *The Daily Beast*.

"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

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

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

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>

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.

This marks the first time that al-Qaeda has officially repudiated the group. This also means that al-Qaeda officially now has no presence in Iraq. Ibid.

Barry, Ellen. *The New York Times*. nyt.com. "al-Qaeda Opens New Branch on Indian Subcontinent."

Beauchamp, Zack. 10/01/2014. *Vox*. vox.com. "The Nine Biggest Myths About ISIS."

Hart, Andrew. *The Huffington Post*. huffingtonpost.com. "The Nine Biggest Myths About ISIS De-Bunked."

ISIS tactics and harsh legal system raise doubts about its viability in Sunni areas as well. Abbas, Mushreq. 06/24/2014. *Al-Monitor*. *Iraq Pulse*. al-monitor.com. "Iraq's Sunni Rebellion Shows Splits Between ISIS, Others."

Money.”

Winter, Charlie. 11/18/2014. *The Daily Beast*. “To Kill The ISIS Monster You Gotta Do More Than Cut Off Its

Hamid, Shadi. 10/31/2014. Defense One. defenseone.com. “The Roots of the Islamic State’s Appeal.”

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/rise-of-isis/>

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/syrias-second-front/>

<http://www.ibtimes.com/iraqis-say-they-dont-want-us-troops-return-1607854>

http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/24/world/middleeast/clashes-at-sunni-protest-site-in-iraq.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

<http://www.pewglobal.org/2013/09/10/muslim-publics-share-concerns-about-extremist-groups/>