

Alternate names: The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS)
The Islamic State of Iraq in the Levant (ISIL)
The Islamic State (IS – *preferred by group*)
Daesh (*Arabic acronym – derogatory*)

Flag:



The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), is a transnational terrorist organization, with tens of thousands of forces in Iraq and Syria, and a network of recruiting and financing cells around the world. The group has established its capital in the Syrian provincial capital of al-Raqqa, with the ultimate goal of ruling a [Jihadi-Salafist](#) Sunni caliphate in the greater Levant.

ISIS emerged in April 2013 when Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq (ISI), announced that the group was rebranding as ISIS and expanding into Syria by subsuming al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate – Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) – back into the ISI fold. The leaders of JN and al-Qaeda central rejected this decision after months of internal mediation, and Baghdadi publicly split with al-Qaeda. Today, JN and ISIS both operate in Syria, but ISIS's brutal tactics – including mass killings, crucifixions, abductions, rapes, beheadings, the use of child soldiers, the demolition of historical sites, the forcible imposition of an extreme version of sharia law, and [aggressive expansion](#) – make it a more immediate threat for both Syrians and the international community. Estimates of the total size of ISIS's fighting force range from [17,000-31,000](#) fighters in Syria and Iraq, with more than half believed to be foreigners.

ISIS's aggression towards other armed groups in Syria has made it an enemy of most of the Syrian opposition, including Jabhat al-Nusra, and ensured that it has no popular support. ISIS has violently wrested large swathes of territory in northern and western Syria from opposition forces. Though much of the ISIS-controlled area is sparsely populated desert, the group has formed a large, contiguous area of control between Iraq and Syria, and seized strategic oil and water resources. ISIS is considered the world's wealthiest militant group, with assets estimated at [\\$875 million](#) in June 2014, which it acquired through illicit oil sales, antiquities smuggling, ransom, spoils of war, and the [extortion](#) of wealth from subjugated populations through taxes and bribes.

Though at times ISIS engages in combat against Assad's army, most of ISIS's military efforts in Syria have been directed against armed opposition groups. ISIS's war against the Syrian opposition as well as its aggressive persecution of Syrian activists, media, and civil society, have shaped the battlefield and significantly impacted the course of the conflict. Incidences of tactical cooperation between the Syrian Army and ISIS on the battlefield, oil sales from ISIS to the government, and the regime's history of cooperation with the group's predecessor (ISI), have led to speculation of collaboration between ISIS and Assad. Notably, the Syrian government has never seriously attempted to regain population centers from ISIS, such as al-Raqqa and parts of Deir Ezzor, and has been known to withdraw from locations such as the ruins of Palmyra without contestation, relinquishing them to ISIS.

ISIS has already spread its violence beyond the immediate borders of Syria and Iraq. Terrorist groups across the wider Middle East, from [Algeria to Pakistan](#), have pledged allegiance to ISIS, and begun conducting operations in its name. Lebanon has experienced direct spillover as ISIS forces clash with Hezbollah on both sides of the border and recent ISIS-linked [attacks in Turkey](#), near the Syrian border, have put the country on high alert. Beyond the Middle East, ISIS presents a broad threat to international peace and security. The group has proven adept at using social media to recruit foreign fighters from around the world and spread its messages of violent jihad. Governments are on high alert to the threat of returning fighters and the development of ISIS-inspired domestic terrorist cells or lone wolf attacks. In response to this growing threat, a U.S.-led international coalition began "[Operation Inherent Resolve](#)," launching airstrikes against ISIS in Iraq in August 2014, and in Syria a month later.

Moving forward, things are poised to get worse before they get better. The U.S. led anti-ISIS coalition has made minimal progress in destroying ISIS despite launching more than 6,500 acknowledged airstrikes against the group as of September 1, 2015. Several other countries are using "anti-ISIS" efforts with clear ulterior motives. Russia is ramping up military support and potentially sending troops to Syria to prop up the Assad regime, Iran is fighting ISIS in Iraq to cement its influence over the country, and Turkey has joined the Coalition in part to strike the Kurdish PKK in Iraq. These oblique interventions are further complicating the conflict and increasing the potential for all out regional war.