Summary Article: Islamic State (IS)
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Radical Islamist political and terrorist group. In June 2014 it proclaimed a worldwide caliphate. It adheres to an extreme interpretation of Sunni Islam and seeks, through jihad (holy war), to establish an Islamic state ruled by a caliph (a religious leader) under the strict interpretation of Sharia (Islamic law). It capitalized on civil wars and failed central governments in Iraq and Syria to carve out substantial areas under its control. Originating in 2004 as al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), it was known from 2013 as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIS, or ISIL) and from June 2014 as Islamic State (IS). IS was so brutal that even al-Qaeda disowned it in 2014. Particularly barbarous were its beheadings of Western hostages, which it broadcast on the Internet, its massacres and forced conversions of Christians and Yazidis in northern Iraq, and its destruction of cultural heritage sites. Its Arabic-speaking detractors refer to IS as Daesh (an acronym of ISIL's Arabic name) since this resembles an Arabic word for one who crushes and sows discord. IS claims religious, political, and military authority over all Muslims worldwide, but mainstream Muslim groups reject this, viewing IS and its ideology as a perversion of Islam. By the summer of 2017, IS was militarily in retreat, losing control to Iraqi forces of the key city of Mosul in July 2017 and struggling to hold on to Raqqa, its stronghold in Syria. But IS-inspired activists remained across the world, carrying out terrorist bombings and killings.

IS ‘caliphate’ and support On 29 June 2014 IS declared a caliphate in the area it controlled in northern Iraq and Syria, covering 60,000 sq km and with 8 million people. In this area, it enforces its interpretation of sharia law. IS aims to create an even larger state, to ‘break the borders’ of Jordan and Lebanon, and ‘free Palestine’. From August 2014 the USA responded by launching airstrikes against IS targets, joined later by France and the UK (in Iraq) and, from September 2015, by Russia (in Syria). By autumn 2014 IS was well entrenched; it had 30,000 fighters, including 8,000 foreigners from Chechnya and Europe, and was the world’s best funded militant group, with $2 billion in cash and assets. By autumn 2015 the US and other attacks on IS had some impact in pushing back the areas under its control in Iraq and Syria and killing more than 10,000 IS fighters. But IS was still believed to have between 20,000 and 30,000 fighters in Iraq and Syria and turned to conscription in some areas under its control. In autumn 2016 IS faced a concerted offensive by the Iraqi army, Kurdish and Shia militia aimed at taking back control of the city of Mosul, which IS had held since June 2014. IS lost control of Mosul to the Iraqi army in July 2017 and suffered significant losses of territory in Iraq and Syria in the following months.

IS was believed to receive financial support from individuals in some Arab Gulf states and had become self-financing through the cash and bullion it looted from banks in conquered towns and from gas and oilfield revenues. It exerted influence beyond the areas it controlled in Iraq and Syria through IS affiliates in Afghanistan, Libya, and Nigeria (Boko Haram) and terrorist cells which have carried out killings and bombings in Europe (including the Paris attacks of November 2015, suicide bombings in Istanbul in January 2016, and in Brussels in March 2016, a truck attack in Nice in July 2016, and a van attack in Barcelona in August 2017); in Africa (in Tunis in March 2015 and near Sousse, Tunisia in June 2015); and in the Middle East (in Sana’a, Yemen in March 2015).

Leadership IS traced its roots to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (1966–2006), a Jordanian militant Islamist

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who, a year after the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, set up AQI and pledged allegiance to Osama Bin Laden. AQI took part in the insurgency against Iraq's US-backed and predominantly Shia regime. Al-Zarqawi was killed by US forces in 2006. AQI merged with other Sunni Islam insurgent groups to form Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), but was severely weakened in 2007–08 by the US troop surge and opposition from Sunni tribesmen (the Sahwa, 'awakening'). Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi became leader of ISI in 2010 and rebuilt its military capability. He took full advantage of the civil war that broke out in Syria in 2011 to establish a stronghold around Raqqa in northern Syria, controlling oilfields and agricultural land.

In April 2013 al-Baghdadi merged his forces in Iraq and Syria to create the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIS, or ISIL). In December 2013, this took the Sunni-dominated city of Fallujah in Anbar province in western Iraq. In June 2014 ISIS forces surged into northern Iraq's Sunni heartland, capturing Mosul and Tikrit cities, the oil hub of Kirkuk, and proclaiming al-Baghdadi caliph. The retreating Iraqi army left behind modern weapons, including tanks, high mobility vehicles (Humvees) and anti-tank missiles, which ISIS used in further military campaigns in northeast Iraq and northwest Syria.