



Islamic State in Syria Update

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Since declaring an Islamic Caliphate three months ago, the Sunni militant group Islamic State (IS) has gained territory in northern Iraq and northeastern Syria. Estimates place IS fighters in the two countries at a total of 31,000. The group has terrorized non-Muslims, and Muslims out of step with IS, by driving them from their homes and conducting brutal killings. In response, a coalition of more than 60 countries - including several Arab states such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan and U.A.E. - has formed to oppose Islamic State. Beginning in early August, this U.S.-led coalition directly attacked IS targets in Iraq through airstrikes; by mid-September the airstrikes targeted IS in Syria. In all, the coalition has launched over 250 airstrikes. President Obama has stated that he does not intend to send U.S. ground troops into the region, instead electing to train pro-western Syrian rebels to augment the airstrikes. Obama has also stated that he wants to see Syria's president Assad out of power.

Perhaps not surprisingly, these attacks have brought some unintended consequences. For one, the official al Qaeda branch in Syria - al Nusra Front - has taken some hits from the air, which has provoked the ire of many anti-Assad Syrians who support this homegrown opposition group. Abu Qusay, a brigade commander in the U.S. backed Free Syrian Army, succinctly stated what many Syrians seem to feel: "I personally won't be allied with the West in a war against Islam." There is even talk of reconciliation between al Nusra Front and Islamic State, despite their fallout in 2013 when Islamic State ignored al Qaeda's request to stay out of Syria. Already, IS has released all of its al Nusra prisoners in Raqqah, Syria, suggesting that these groups see the airstrikes as a general threat to Muslims. Meanwhile, unexpected partnerships have formed on the opposite side - a major Sunni tribe in Iraq partnered with Iraqi Kurds to drive IS out from a strategic border crossing with Syria.

Time will tell if the coalition can turn the tide against the well-financed, well-armed, and highly motivated Islamic State. But there is little time available for

people like the Kurds in northeastern Syria, over 150,000 of whom have sought refuge in Turkey in the past three weeks as IS launched an offensive in this region. The Syrian Kurds remaining in the border city of Kobane (also known as Ain al-Arab) have fought recent bloody battles against IS that have ended in dozens of deaths on both sides. Fighters include Kurdish women from the Women's Protection Unit (YPJ), a many thousands-strong force organized to fight Assad's government, al-Nusra Front, and Islamic State. Islamic State's incursions just miles from Turkey's border has prompted the Turkish parliament to vote to allow Turkish troops to fight in Syria and Iraq, and to allow foreign troops greater access to Turkish bases from which to stage military actions. Turkey fears that Kobane may fall to IS, giving the group access to key areas of the Turkish-Syrian border, and ultimately access to supplies and recruits.

In areas under Islamic State's control, school children and their teachers have to operate under strict new guidelines, monitored by religious law enforcement officials. Islamic State requires that female students and teachers wear the full hijab, and be separated from their male counterparts. Teachers must take a course in Islamic law, and if they refuse they will have to appear in court. Music, social studies, history, arts, philosophy, P.E., and psychology will all disappear, as will the teaching of evolution. The stakes couldn't be higher as Islamic State seeks to impose its radical ideology on what it hopes will be an extensive caliphate.

Recent timeline:

July - IS captures multiple cities in Syria, including the country's largest oil field.

August 8 - U.S. begins airstrikes against IS in Iraq.

August 19 - IS releases video of the execution of U.S. journalist James Foley, the first of several beheadings of westerners in the region, including American Steven Sotloff.

Mid-September - IS launches offensive on Kurdish territory in Syria, close to border with Turkey.

September 23 - U.S.-led coalition begins airstrikes in Syria.

October 2 - Turkey votes for greater military engagement in fight against Islamic State.

Links:

New York Times article: http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/06/12/world/middleeast/the-iraq-isis-conflict-in-maps-photos-and-video.html?_r=0

Wall Street Journal article: <http://online.wsj.com/articles/obama-says-u-s-intelligence-underestimated-developments-in-syria-1411918072>

-Shelley Brooks, Ph.D., CHSSP Statewide Office



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The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, sometimes called ISIS) is a Sunni jihadist group. It branched off from al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) in early 2013 with the goal to create an Islamic state (caliphate) that straddles Iraq and Syria. Syria has been engaged in a civil war since 2011, while Iraq is a young and fragile democracy with considerable sectarian strife. ISIL has capitalized on the unrest in both countries by joining the Sunni rebels fighting against President Bashar al-Assad's Syrian government, and bringing the violence across the border into Iraq, where Shiites dominate state politics. In late June 2014, after capturing numerous cities and oil fields in both countries, and advancing on Baghdad, ISIL declared the establishment of an Islamic caliphate. It now calls itself the Islamic State, under the leadership of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, a former leader of AQI, who claims absolute political and religious authority as the caliph, a political successor to Mohammed. A recent statement by the group asserted that "It is incumbent upon all Muslims to pledge allegiance to (him) and support him... The legality of all emirates, groups, states, and organizations, becomes null by the expansion of the khalifah's authority and arrival of its troops to their areas." The Islamic State's ranks have grown as they capture new territory, oil fields, and most recently, a former chemical weapons plant - prompting some Iraqi security forces to defect and drawing other Sunnis to the group's bold and successful advance. Territorial gain has also enriched the group; it is estimated that the Islamic State has cash and assets around \$2 billion.

The present-day political tensions derive in part from the Sunni-Shia divide dating back to the year 632. The two sects formed in the wake of Mohammed's death, as disagreement ensued over his political successor. Shiites maintained he must be a relation of Mohammed, while Sunnis allowed for a pious individual committed to Mohammed's teachings. A small offshoot of Shiism - the Alawites - invested

divine qualities in Mohammed's son-in-law. Syria's President Assad is Alawite, as is 12% of the Syrian population. Sunnis comprise close to 90% of the world's Muslims and are the majority population in most of the Middle East's Arab nations, including Syria. While a minority of Iraq's population is Sunni - 25% (50% are Shiite) - Sunnis ruled Iraq for hundreds of years from the time of the Ottoman Empire until 2003 when the U.S. deposed Saddam Hussein. Since Hussein's fall from power, Shiites have dominated Iraqi politics. Shiite Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki has been accused of failing to implement appropriate power-sharing agreements. It is under Maliki that ISIL emerged; his governance has provoked the ire of many Sunnis who perceive government discrimination against Sunni politicians and civilians. According to the group Human Rights Watch, an overwhelming majority of prisoners in Iraq are Sunni.

The Islamic State has a tense relationship with other insurgents. The group reportedly defied al-Qaeda's request to leave Syria to al-Qaeda, and instead both groups have helped drive the rebellion against President Assad. The Islamic State has developed a brutal reputation due to its handling of fellow rebels and civilians, including crucifixions and mass executions of those perceived as too moderate or out of line with its goals. Its tactics have brought sufficient success that President Obama has debated the U.S. response to Iraq's current disorder. After a long and expensive war, the U.S. is highly invested in a stable Iraq, based on a democratic system. In addition, U.S. reports point to promising economic signs in Iraq, namely its expanding energy sector. Continued investment in oil production would mean that Iraq could extract 8 million barrels a day by 2035, four times what the country produced under Hussein, and roughly twice what it is currently achieving. President Obama has pledged not to send American troops back into Iraq, but he has increased arms sales and military training assistance in order to boost Iraq's efforts to combat the Islamic State. Ultimately, the U.S. hopes to see Iraq increase its economic and political connections to the West, and avoid a closer relationship with neighboring Iran, especially, a country the U.S. accuses of nuclear ambitions and abetting terrorists. The Islamic State, meanwhile, hopes to make irrelevant today's political borders by establishing a caliphate that stretches from Africa to Asia. While its extensive goals appear unrealistic to most observers, the Islamic State has the means and the will to continue fighting into the foreseeable future.

-Shelley Brooks, Ph.D., CHSSP Statewide Office



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632 – Mohammed’s death, followed by Shiite and Sunni division over his successor.

16th Century - 1918 – Present day Iraq part of the Ottoman Empire

1920 – Britain creates the state of Iraq with the approval of the League of Nations.

1932 – Iraq gains independence.

1958 – Monarchy overthrown and Iraq declared a republic.

1980 – The Iran-Iraq war begins.

Aug 1990 – Iraq invades Kuwait over oil disputes, prompting first Gulf War with U.S. involvement to liberate Kuwait. Iraq troops withdrawal from Kuwait Feb 1991.

2003 – The United States invades Iraq, toppling Saddam Hussein, who had ruled since 1979. Sectarianism increases in Iraq after the dictator’s fall.

2005 – Iraqis approve a new constitution, guaranteeing basic rights. Parliamentary democracy with a federal system of government. President is head of state, Prime Minister holds executive authority and is commander in chief.

2006 – Poll reveals that 47% of Iraqis approved of violent attacks on U.S. led forces in their country. 88% of Sunnis in Iraq approved.

2006-07 – Sectarian fighting peaks in Iraq

May 2011 – Syrian President Assad begins using military force to repress domestic protests.

November 2011 – The Free Syrian Army attacks a Syrian military base near Damascus, one of several rebel-led attacks to come.

Dec 2011 – The final U.S. troops pull out of Iraq, urging Prime Minister Maliki to work on a power-sharing agreement for Iraq’s Shiites, Sunnis, and Kurds. Most would argue that Maliki has failed to do this.

Aug 2012 – U.N. accuses Syria of war crimes in a May government attack that killed more than 100 civilians, roughly half of whom were children.

Sept 2012 – Iraq government convicts Sunni Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi, for allegedly ordering his security staff to commit acts of assassination. The VP flees the country.

Dec 2012 – The well-respected Iraq President, Talabani, suffers a stroke and leaves the country for medical treatment.

Dec 2012 – Prime Minister Maliki arrests 10 bodyguards of Iraq’s Sunni Finance Minister. The Finance Minister resigns, leading to anti-Maliki demonstrations in Sunni areas of Iraq.

Apr 2013 – Britain and France inform U.N. that it appears that the Syrian government has used chemical weapons against rebel forces. Later U.S. report concludes that the attack killed nearly 1,500 people.

Apr 2013 – ISIL forms, out of al-Qaeda in Iraq.

Dec 2013 – Prime Minister Maliki moved to arrest a Sunni parliamentarian on charges of inciting anti-government activity, causing Sunni-Shiite violence.

Jan 2014 – ISIL takes over Iraqi city of Fallujah, closing in on Baghdad.

Jun - Jul 2014 – ISIL captures Mosul, Iraq’s second largest city, takes over additional cities in addition to oil field holdings in Iraq and Syria, and controls main border crossing between Iraq and Jordan. ISIL declares an Islamic caliphate, renaming itself Islamic State.

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CURRENT CONTEXT

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CIA Map, 2008 <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/cia-maps-publications/Iraq.html>



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Additional Resources*

Background Materials:

- The New York Times: <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/24/world/middleeast/sunni-militants-seize-crossing-on-iraq-jordan-border.html>
- PBS News: <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/what-is-islamic-state-iraq-and-syria/>
- The Guardian: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/16/terrifying-rise-of-isis-iraq-executions>
- Pew Research: <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/06/18/the-sunni-shia-divide-where-they-live-what-they-believe-and-how-they-view-each-other/>
- Council on Foreign Relations: <http://www.cfr.org/iraq/islamic-state-iraq-greater-syria/p14811>
- CNN: <http://www.cnn.com/2014/06/23/world/meast/iraq-crisis/>
- The Wall Street Journal: <http://online.wsj.com/articles/why-the-new-jihadists-in-iraq-and-syria-see-al-qaeda-as-too-passive-1405096590?KEYWORDS=Islamic+state>
- Michigan State University: <http://globaledge.msu.edu/countries/iraq/government>
- George Mason University: <http://hnn.us/article/156280>
- Congressional Research Report: Iraq: Politics, Governance, and Human Rights, Kenneth Katzman, Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs, June 13, 2014

Maps:

- BBC News: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27970894>
- The New York Times: http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/06/12/world/middleeast/the-iraq-isis-conflict-in-maps-photos-and-video.html?_r=0
- National Geographic: <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2014/07/140702-iraq-history-maps/>

Timeline of events:

- Wisconsin State Journal: http://host.madison.com/news/local/interactive/timeline-the-rise-of-isis-in-syria-and-iraq/html_df09d4d6-fb21-11e3-acdb-0019bb2963f4.html

*The resources listed above are provided for further research and do not imply an endorsement by the California History-Social Science Project or the University of California.