
ISIS

- ✓ **Can the U.S. and other countries defeat ISIS without the introduction of ground forces?**
- ✓ **How can the U.S. and allies stem the tide of Westerners joining ISIS?**
- ✓ **Does a territorially weakened ISIS imply a long-term upsurge in terrorist attacks abroad?**

Facts

Names: ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria), ISIL (Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant) or Daesh (an acronym for the group's name in Arabic).

Number of fighters: 19,000–25,000 (2016 est.).

Leader: Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, 44, self-proclaimed caliph.

Important Dates.

March 2011: The Syrian civil war breaks out.

June 10, 2014: ISIS forces capture Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, in an initial streak of victories.

June 29, 2014: ISIS declares a caliphate over the territory it controls.

Background.

Originally formed as al-Qaeda in Iraq, the Islamic State rose to prominence in 2011, taking advantage of the instability caused by the Syrian civil war. As the country rapidly deteriorated, ISIS was able to recruit large numbers of fighters.

After capturing Mosul in northern Iraq, ISIS declared a caliphate—developing its own state institutions and providing public services—with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as its leader. ISIS has taken advantage of the Internet and social media to spread its message and recruit thousands of supporters worldwide. ISIS currently controls areas in eastern Syria and northwestern Iraq. This past year, international efforts resulted in significant territorial losses for the group, including half of the major cities it once claimed, as well as access to key resources like oil. The loss of territory has been accompanied by an increase in ISIS-inspired or directed terrorist attacks abroad.

Current U.S. Policies

The stated objective of the Obama administration is to “degrade and ultimately destroy” ISIS. This has led to a three-pronged policy aimed at stopping the flow of money, cutting off recruitment and using direct military force against the group in its core territory.

Operation Tidal Wave II.

Launched in October 2015, this U.S. military operation seeks to diminish ISIS’ oil revenue by conducting tactical air strikes on ISIS-controlled oil fields and refineries in Syria and Iraq. Convoys and transports of oil and gas are also subject to attack, although these targets pose a higher risk of civilian casualties.

UN Resolution 2170 and 2178.

Much of U.S. policy to stop recruitment of foreign fighters to ISIS is formulated through UN resolutions. The theory is that practices adopted by the UN General Assembly are more likely to be successful in stopping the flow of fighters to Syria and Iraq. Resolution 2170 and 2178 assert that states must take actions to restrict the travel of individuals looking to join groups like ISIS and al-Qaeda. They must also restrict the transfer of weapons and money.

Training Programs, Leadership Decapitation and Special Forces.

The Obama administration has put forward multiple programs to combat ISIS forces, including the arming and training of groups within Syria and Iraq. The National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) outlines the vetting process for these groups, and the amount of money they receive. Among the groups receiving aid are the Syrian Democratic Forces, the Iraqi Armed Forces and the military wing of the Iraqi Kurds, known as the Peshmerga.

The Obama administration is concentrating on a leadership decapitation campaign, employing special forces on the ground in combination with air strikes. Secretary of Defense Ash Carter explained current U.S. strategy: “We are systematically eliminating ISIL’s cabinet,” in order to “hamper the ability for them to conduct operations inside and outside of Iraq and Syria.” This new approach comes after the conspicuous failure of a \$500 million train-and-equip program for Syrian moderates. There is talk of a new training program for Syrian fighters, this one more closely focused on key personnel. President Obama is set to deploy 250 military personnel to Syria, in addition to the 50 already on the ground in the country. As the recapture of Mosul draws nearer, the president has also ordered the deployment of hundreds of additional troops to Iraq.

Candidate Positions



Hillary Clinton's plan to defeat ISIS consists of three overarching goals, representing a continuation of Obama administration strategy. She says she would break up ISIS' strongholds in Iraq and Syria by ramping up the ongoing air campaign and increasing support for local ground forces, including deployment of additional U.S. special operations forces, but excluding deployment of ground troops; she would thwart ISIS' global infrastructure, particularly digital recruitment strategies; and she would employ an "intelligence surge," including increased aerial reconnaissance and electronic surveillance, and the addition of more operations officers and linguists. She calls for greater action from Sunni Arabs and Kurdish forces in defeating ISIS in Syria and Iraq.

Mrs. Clinton has criticized the Obama administration's delay in arming moderate Syrian rebels. She also favors a coalition-backed no-fly zone to shield Syrian refugees, a notable departure from President Obama's position. As secretary of state, she led U.S. diplomatic efforts to end the conflict in Syria and oust President Bashar al-Assad.



Donald Trump says he has a plan to defeat ISIS, but will not divulge its contents. He has also said that, once in office, he will give military leaders 30 days to formulate a plan to defeat the group. Mr. Trump blames the rise of ISIS and other Islamic extremist groups directly on Obama administration policies, notably those executed by Hillary Clinton as secretary of state. He repeatedly claimed that the president and former secretary were the "co-founders" of ISIS. Following public criticism, he said those remarks were sarcastic.

Mr. Trump calls for an end to the "era of [U.S.] nation building" abroad. He invokes the Cold War in framing an ideological battle against radical Islam. His administration would be willing to ally with any country to counter ISIS. He supports U.S.-Russia "joint military operations" against the group, in addition to coalition operations, and favors increased bombing of ISIS' oil resources. He has suggested that he would be willing to deploy 30,000 U.S. troops to Iraq and Syria. He calls for safe zones—to be financed by Germany and the Gulf States—for Syrian refugees. He supports limiting ISIS' digital propaganda and recruiting capabilities by "shutting down" the group's access to the Internet. Mr. Trump favors the use of torture, and has suggested killing the families of terrorists as a deterrence strategy.

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