

ISIL/Da'esh: From Mosul to Mosul

In June 2014, ISIL/Da'esh took over the city of Mosul in Iraq, and from there declared the advent of an Islamic State. Three years later, in July 2017, after nine months of battle involving Iraqi security forces, popular militias and Kurdish troops, ISIL/Da'esh has been expelled from its Iraqi stronghold, adding to the past two years' severe territorial losses. This is an important victory; however, it does not yet represent the eradication of a terrorist group that still has many supporters.

ISIL/Da'esh origins

[Sunnis](#) and [Shiites](#), the two main [branches](#) of Islam, live peacefully together in many parts of the world. However, divergence in their religious beliefs has also pitched them into power conflict throughout the centuries. Among the Sunnis, some believe that the only way to be a 'good Muslim' is to adhere, in the strictest possible way, to the code of behaviour of Muhammad and his immediate successors. A fraction of these so-called '[Salafis](#)' claims their duty is to fight those who hold any other belief. These violent extremists are often referred to as '[Salafi jihadis](#)' (although violence is not implied in the word '[jihad](#)', which simply refers to [efforts](#) to be 'a good Muslim'). Traditional Salafis deny that these violent extremists are entitled to call themselves Salafis. Among the violent Salafi jihadi groups, ISIS or ISIL (Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham/Levant), originally a branch of [Al-Qaeda](#), known as 'Al-Qaeda in Iraq', was founded in 2002 to resist the US invasion and the Shiite-led government it imposed. [Political and theoretical differences](#) led to a split following Bin Laden's death.

Following the beginning of the Syrian uprising, ISIL entered Syria and took over large portions of territory in the north of Syria and at the border with Iraq. There, ISIL competed for control of Syrian territory with other jihadi groups, such as [Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham](#) (formerly known as Jabhat Al-Nusra). This did not exclude cooperation on some battlefronts. After further expansions in Iraq in summer 2014, the group renamed itself 'the [Islamic State](#)' ('Da'esh' is the Arab acronym used by those fighting against it), with the ambition to govern the lives of all Muslims in the world, under Islamic law ('[Sharia](#)'). In Mosul, the ISIL/Da'esh stronghold in Iraq, its leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi [declared](#) himself the new Caliph – a symbolic reference to the [Caliphate](#), an institution abolished in 1924. Neither [Muslim authorities](#), nor the [Muslim community](#), recognise this self-appointment.

ISIL/Da'esh resources

Human resources

Despite its record of [crime and violence](#), ISIL/Da'esh enjoyed some support in Iraq: from [Sunni tribal leaders](#) pitted against the Shia regime, to Saddam Hussein's [former collaborators](#). The fall of Mosul would not have been so swift without the help of [other armed Sunni factions](#). Nevertheless, the [conflict](#) has not been sectarian: a number of Sunni tribes [took up arms](#) against ISIL/Da'esh.

In the territories under its control, in particular in [Raqqa](#) in Syria and [Mosul](#) in Iraq, ISIL/Da'esh installed its own [administration](#), by means of coercion and violence, but also by recruiting its own [workforce](#) for its courts, police, and education. In mid-2015, before the [International Coalition](#) strikes intensified, some [8 million people](#) were estimated to live under ISIL/Da'esh rule. While the number of ISIL/Da'esh fighters – among them [children](#) – has never been evaluated precisely (estimated at between [9 000 and 200 000](#)), it is certain that a large number [died or fled](#), even before the battle for Mosul.

ISIL/Da'esh has also recruited its members among [radicalised Muslims globally](#). To reach them, ISIL/Da'esh used all available channels, from paper [magazines](#), to the full range of social media. The ISIL/Da'esh '[communication plan](#)' is sophisticated, and videos of violent executions are only a part. ISIL/Da'esh media not only disseminate the call to take up arms, but also deliver testimonials from Western volunteers declaring they have found a more meaningful life as ISIL/Da'esh fighters. On the ground, 'welcome actions' included English-speaking [schools](#) in Raqqa for foreign fighters' children.



Military equipment

According to [conflict armament research-iTrace](#), an EU-funded project, most of the military equipment in ISIL/Da'esh possession was seized from the defeated Iraqi army in northern Iraq, or from the Free Syrian Army. ISIL/Da'esh holds 'significant quantities of US-manufactured small arms'. Jihadis may have [diverted](#) arms meant for the Kurdish troops fighting ISIL/Da'esh. ISIL/Da'esh also certainly used [chemical weapons](#).

Financial resources

There are suspicions that ISIL/Da'esh receives [funding](#) from some Gulf States. However, in the past, ISIL/Da'esh generated [most of its income](#) from the territories it occupied. For instance, ISIL/Da'esh has revived a practice once applied by Muhammad and the early caliphates: the '[jizya](#)' (a tax imposed on followers of other 'religions of the book'). Money also flows in from ransoms paid for hostages, human trafficking and bank reserves (ISIL/Da'esh plundered several banks, including the largest bank in Mosul where it seized IQD500 billion – around €330 million). Oil smuggling was an important source of income when ISIL/Da'esh controlled up to 60 % of [Syrian oil fields](#), several Iraqi fields, and refineries. Illicit oil trade possibly included [trade with EU companies](#) and might have provided around [€1.5 million](#) a day. ISIL/Da'esh also made considerable money from [Iraqi cultural heritage](#), as well as [smuggling](#) antiquities probably worth hundreds of millions of euro from Shiite mosques, Christian churches, and archaeological sites.

Mainly due to recent loss of territory, ISIL/Da'esh revenues more than halved between 2014 (€1.7 billion) and 2016 (€0.76 billion), according to the [International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation](#). However, the group has adapted its strategy to its financial and military losses, by using [children as human shields](#), or by sponsoring ['low cost' attacks](#) abroad.

ISIL/Da'esh and Iraq's future

After a period of rapid expansion, the territories ISIL/Da'esh controls directly in Iraq and Syria stabilised. Since 2015, they have been shrinking, due to intensified air strikes from the International Coalition, and on-the-ground fighting involving the Iraqi army, Kurdish troops, Shia and Sunni militia. However, the group managed to gain a foothold in [Libya](#), and possibly in part of Tunisia. Globally, several violent groups or individuals are suspected to have [links with ISIL/Da'esh](#), or even declared allegiance, [Boko Haram](#), for instance. ISIL/Da'esh has also claimed responsibility for some of the terrorist attacks that have occurred in Europe since 2015. Now that ISIL/Da'esh fighters have been expelled from [Mosul](#), [a new era](#) begins for the terrorist group. ISIL/Da'esh will try to retain adherents in the Middle East and [abroad](#), despite the loss of territory and the [alleged death](#) of its leader. Serious concerns are emerging about the possible [return of 'foreign fighters'](#) to their countries of origin, where they might carry out terrorist attacks. Expectations are low for a smooth return to control by the central Iraqi government in Mosul and other areas recaptured from ISIL/Da'esh. To date, no plan for the post-ISIL/Da'esh Iraq has emerged: armed groups that participated in the liberation of the territories (Kurdish *peshmergas*, Iraqi forces, Shia and Sunni militias) are vying for control of liberated areas – notably in view of a [referendum](#) for the integration of disputed territories into the Kurdistan Region. Displaced [Iraqi minorities](#) are sometimes discouraged or prevented from returning home, including by cutting their access to basic resources or the destruction of their villages. Some representatives advocate [greater autonomy](#) for minorities in post-ISIL/Da'esh Iraq, but these claims are often dismissed by Iraqi or Kurdish authorities. The role of the International Coalition in the post-war period is unclear.

Le Monde has produced an [interactive map](#), which enables users to visualise the changes in territorial control in Iraq and Syria from 2014 up to the present day.

EU position

The [EU strategy](#) for Syria and Iraq as well as the Da'esh threat, coordinates EU and Member State action within an international framework to help [stabilise](#) the region. The EU Council regularly expresses its support for Iraq's future [territorial integrity](#). The [EU counter-terrorism/foreign fighters strategy](#) combines [external](#) and [domestic policy](#) actions to prevent terrorist financing and attacks.

The **European Parliament** has adopted [several resolutions](#) condemning ISIL/Da'esh human rights abuses and terrorist attacks. Parliament calls for the trial of their perpetrators and supports the creation of an [international tribunal](#) for Syrian war crimes.

This 'at a glance' note updates a briefing from March 2015: ['Understanding the rise of ISIL/Da'esh'](#).