

Understanding the rise of ISIL/Da'esh (the 'Islamic State')

SUMMARY

Already in control of a third of Syrian territory (most of it uninhabited), the jihadist terrorist group that has declared itself 'the Islamic State' (known variously as IS, ISIS or ISIL, and by the Arabic acronym 'Daesh' or 'Da'esh'), also seized large portions of Iraqi territory in a matter of days in summer 2014.

Beyond the daily account of atrocities committed by ISIL/Da'esh, analysts have tried to fathom how this group, now boasting tens of thousands of fighters and several billion euros in resources, emerged on the international scene and made its claim to power with such sweeping assertiveness.

Syria and Iraq's neighbours now find themselves on the frontlines of further expansion: a US-led international coalition, including countries in the region, is trying to halt the ISIL/Da'esh advance.

The conflict has triggered considerable EU humanitarian effort, and a review of the EU's counter-terrorism strategy to better address the global dimension of the terrorist threat.



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- Origins
- What are ISIL/Da'esh's resources?
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Origins

Sunnis–Shiites; Jihadists

Soon after the Prophet Muhammad's death (632 AD), a [conflict](#) erupted over who should be his successor ('caliph' in Arabic). Although some of his companions were in favour of his cousin and son-in-law Ali, the majority decided to nominate Abou Bakr, who was not of Muhammad's bloodline but was deemed more fit for the task. After years of successive battles, Ali was killed in 661 AD, and Hussein, his son and the grandson of Muhammad, was beheaded in 680 AD by the caliph's supporters. Since then, Muslims are seen as divided between the Sunnis, who recognise the caliphs succeeding Muhammad as legitimate, and the Shiites, and Shi'a, the partisans of Ali, who believe the true leaders ('imam' in Arabic), should have been his descendants.

Sunnis make up 87-90% of Muslims, 10-13% are Shiites; the latter live predominantly in an area between southern Lebanon and Bahrain, commonly known as the '[Shiite Crescent](#)'. A third branch of Islam (the Kharadjites), produced the Ibadis, who are in the majority in Oman. In addition, there are also Muslims who identify themselves as 'just Muslim'.

[Sunnis and Shiites](#) live peacefully together in many parts of the world, but their religious divergences have also pitched them into power conflicts with each other for many centuries. There is also great [diversity](#) within these two main groups: in particular, among the Sunnis, [Salafis](#) 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 them claims it is their duty to fight against those who believe anything else. These violent extremists are often referred to as 'Salafi jihadists' or '[Jihadi Salafis](#)' – although violence is not implied in the word 'jihad', which simply refers to '[efforts](#)' to be a "good Muslim" or believer, as well as working to inform people about the faith of Islam'. Traditional Salafis deny that these violent extremists are entitled to call themselves Salafis.

The 'Islamic State' and the 'Caliphate'

Among Salafi jihadists, ISIS or ISIL (Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham/Levant) was originally a branch of Al-Qaeda, known as 'Al-Qaeda in Iraq', founded in 2004 to resist the US invasion and the Shiite-led government it imposed. Political and theoretical differences led to a split after Osama Bin Laden's death. After the beginning of the Syrian uprising, ISIL entered Syria and, unsuccessfully, tried to take over the [Al-Nusra Front](#), Al-Qaeda's Syrian branch. The two groups have been fighting each other for control of Syrian territory, but cooperate on some battlefronts.

On 29 June 2014, the group renamed itself 'the Islamic State' ('Da'esh' is the Arab acronym used by those fighting against it), to mark its will to restore an institution weakened and subsequently abolished by Turkey's secular leader, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, in 1924: the '[Caliphate](#)', i.e. theocratic rule of a territory where all inhabitants should abide by 'Sharia' – the Islamic law. Current ISIL/Da'esh leader Abou Bakr Al-Baghdadi [declared](#) himself the new caliph, with an ambition to govern the lives of all Muslims in the world. This act of self-declaration has not been recognised by [Muslim authorities](#), or by the [Muslim community](#), and is even [rejected](#) by other Salafi jihadists. More generally, support for ISIL/Da'esh in the [Arab world](#) is not high.

In the areas ISIL/Da'esh controls, in particular its 'capital' [Ragga](#) in Syria and [Mosul](#) in Iraq, it installs its own [administration](#), by means of coercion and violence, but also by

[spending money](#) and recruiting its own [workforce](#) for courts, police, and education, Some [6 million people](#) live under ISIL/Da'esh rules.

What are ISIL/Da'esh's resources?

Human resources

Estimates of the number of ISIL/Da'esh fighters in Iraq and Syria vary from [9 000 to 200 000](#) (20 000-31 500 as of September 2014, according to the CIA) – among them [children](#). This variation may be explained by the fact that the highest figures take into account ISIL/Da'esh's core troops plus allied factions. Despite its record of [crime and violence](#), particularly based on ethnic and religious motivation,¹ ISIL/Da'esh enjoys some support in Iraq. The country's former Prime Minister, Nouri al-Maliki, is said by many observers to have pitted [Sunni tribal leaders](#) against the regime. Furthermore, some of Saddam Hussein's [former collaborators](#) see ISIL/Da'esh as a route back onto the political and military scene. The seizure of Mosul would not have been so swift without the help of [other armed Sunni factions](#). Nevertheless, a total sectarian conflict has not taken place: a number of Sunni tribes have now [taken up arms](#) against ISIL/Da'esh to combat its violent methods and aspirations for dominance.

ISIL/Da'esh also recruits its members among radicalised Muslims globally.² To reach them, it has a very sophisticated '[communication plan](#)', of which the appalling videos of violent executions are only a part. ISIL/Da'esh uses all available channels, from a paper magazine, [Dabiq](#), to the full range of [social media](#). Social platforms deliver messages in several languages, tailored to a broad spectrum of target audiences. These are not only calls to take up arms, but also testimonials from Western volunteers, declaring they have found a more meaningful life as ISIL/Da'esh fighters. Online chat rooms and forums afford ISIL/Da'esh direct contact with prospective recruits. On the ground, 'welcome actions' are implemented: ISIL/Da'esh has for example allegedly opened English-speaking [schools](#) in Raqqa for foreign fighters' children.

Since the international coalition's strikes, attracting new fighters has become more difficult: ISIL/Da'esh is more prudent in the use of social media, as some posts or text messages have helped the international coalition³ locate its strongholds and identify its forces. Recent [testimonies](#) also suggest that the bloodshed by ISIL/Daesh troops deterred new local recruitment, and that foreign recruits are reluctant to go into battle.

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'. Jana Hybášková, a former MEP and now head of the EU Delegation in Iraq, also voiced concerns that arms aimed at helping the Kurdish Peshmerga troops fighting ISIL/Da'esh, may have been [diverted](#) by the jihadists. Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan stated that 'some of the weapons' the US dropped to help the Kurdish forces fighting in Kobanî 'were [seized](#) by ISIL'.

Financial resources

There are suspicions that ISIL/Da'esh receives [funding](#) from some Gulf States, but it generates [most of its income](#) from the territories it occupies, according to the inter-governmental Financial Action Task Force (FATF). For instance, ISIL/Da'esh has revived a practice once applied by Muhammad and the early caliphates: the so-called '[jizya](#)' – a

tax imposed on other 'religions of the Book' (mainly Christians, as there are very few Jews in Iraq).

Money also flows in from ransoms paid for hostages, from human trafficking and bank robbery. In a robbery of the largest bank in the city of Mosul, ISIL/Da'esh obtained 500 billion Iraqi dinars (around €330 million), and it has also plundered other banks.

International smuggling is yet another important source of ISIL/Da'esh income. Analysts estimate ISIL/Da'esh already controls 60% of [Syrian oil fields](#); in Iraq, it took control of seven [oil fields](#) and two refineries. Illicit oil trade might have provided around [€1.5 million](#) a day, but it could now be less, as US airstrikes have [destroyed](#) part of the refineries – and also because crude oil prices have declined globally. The head of the EU Delegation in Iraq [accused](#) EU countries – without naming them – of buying oil from ISIL/Da'esh, and the UN Security Council [warned](#) ISIL/Da'esh clients that they could face sanctions.

ISIL/Da'esh communicates widely on its [destruction](#) of 'idols of the past', but it also makes a lot of money out of Iraqi heritage. [Smuggling of antiquities](#) from Shiite mosques, Christian churches, and archaeological sites is probably worth hundreds of millions of euros.

[Organ trafficking](#) has also been alleged by Iraq's ambassador to the UN.

Spillover at the Syrian and Iraqi borders

The ISIL/Da'esh advance in [Iraq](#) and [Syria](#) raises concerns that it will sooner or later spill over into other countries in the neighbourhood, already destabilised by the influx of refugees. Threats have also been identified far beyond Iraqi and Syrian borders, especially in [Libya](#), where attacks have been perpetrated under the ISIL/Da'esh banner, and [Nigeria](#) where Boko Haram⁴ has pledged allegiance to ISIL/Da'esh. (This expansion is not covered in this document, nor are the Iraqi and Syrian governments' positions.)

In August 2014, ISIL/Da'esh attacked, without success, the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and Internal Security Forces (ISF) on the Syria-[Lebanon](#) border. To better resist ISIL/Da'esh, the government fostered better cooperation between the LAF and Hezbollah-led forces; it also gave more political responsibilities to Sunni leaders, in order to prevent them forming a tactical alliance with ISIL/Da'esh. Nevertheless, ISIL/Da'esh and other armed groups still pose a threat on the Syria-Lebanon border, in the mountain region of [Qalamoun](#).

Fighting on the Golan Heights has led the UN peacekeeping mission (UNDOF) to withdraw its troops, *de facto* removing a buffer zone between Israel and Syria; however, [Israel](#)'s military superiority might thwart ISIL/Da'esh attack. At the UN General Assembly (UNGA), Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu [declared](#) that ' Hamas and ISIS are branches of the same poisonous tree' but no concrete alliance between the two groups has been identified to date.

The four month siege by ISIL/Da'esh of the Kurdish-populated Syrian city of Kobanî, close to the Turkish border, put [Turkey](#)'s diplomacy under severe pressure. President Erdoğan, motivated by domestic policy considerations, was reluctant to help the Turkish Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and its Syrian allies. The Turkish government reluctantly allowed Kurdish forces, led by PKK and its Syrian ally, the People's Protection Units (YPG), to access the battlefield via Turkish territory only after the US ordered

airstrikes in support of the Kurdish fighters. Later in February, to demonstrate its will to fight against ISIL/Da'esh, the Turkish army entered a [Turkish enclave](#) in Syria.

[Jordan](#)'s army has also blocked several ISIL/Da'esh [attempts](#) to invade its territory. The immolation of the Jordanian pilot Moaz al-Kassasbeh in February 2015 has not deterred King Abdullah's engagement against ISIL/Da'esh; on the contrary he pledged to '[wipe out](#)' ISIL/Da'esh and called for a quick delivery of sophisticated US military materiel. This position is likely to raise [concern](#) among the Israeli leadership and their allies in the US Congress.

[Kuwait](#) and [Saudi Arabia](#), suspected of funding Salafi terrorism, now fear a backlash on their territories, and are increasingly engaged in securing the region and combating the illicit financing of ISIL/Da'esh. The perception of ISIL/Da'esh as a common risk to both Saudi Arabia and [Iran](#) did not trigger the expected rapprochement between the two [rival states](#) in the region, embroiled in other conflicts (in particular in Yemen).

[Iran](#) has not confirmed ISIL/Da'esh incursions on its territory, but the Shiite-led Islamic Republic considers a possible Islamic state led by Sunni Salafi extremists at its borders as a serious security threat. For this reason, Iran keeps [close connection](#) with the Iraqi government and supports Iraqi unity— with a Shiite majority – rather than a partition into three distinct entities (Shiite, Kurdish and Sunni).

EU response

The EU has repeatedly '[condemn](#)[ed] the indiscriminate attacks, atrocities, killings and abuses of human rights which are perpetrated by ISIL/Da'esh and other terrorist groups, in particular against Christians and other religious and ethnic groups'. The 'Elements for an [EU regional strategy](#) for Syria and Iraq as well as the Da'esh threat', adopted by the Council on 16 March 2015, aims at setting up a coordinated action of the EU and Member States within an international framework, provides €1 billion in additional funding for the next two years, 'for [essential priorities](#): relief, stabilisation and development in the region, as well as countering the threat posed by terrorist groups like Da'esh'.

Concerning counter-terrorism and military actions, the EU and Western states face several challenges: they have to stop financial and human outflows to ISIL/Da'esh⁵ as well as coordinate their actions in the field. The EU Counter-Terrorism/Foreign Fighters Strategy, adopted on [20 October 2014](#) urges Member States to enforce measures to tackle the financing of terrorism and to deter citizens from joining the ranks of ISIL/Da'esh as 'foreign fighters'. On [9 February 2015](#), the Council pointed out the need for an external dimension to policy on counterterrorism, complementing justice and home affairs action: 'Close coordination between internal and external action on the one hand, and between relevant EU actors and EU Member States on the other hand, will enhance the impact of our common efforts'.. On the military side, the Foreign Affairs Council of [15 August 2014](#) endorsed the supply of arms by some Member States to Kurdish regional authorities. The coordination of the response to ISIL/Da'esh goes beyond the EU framework: at the [NATO Wales Summit](#) in September 2014, six EU Member States (France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Denmark, and the UK), together with Australia, Canada, Turkey and the US, committed to 'take the necessary steps to help Iraq; to stop the advance of the terrorist organisation Islamic State'. On 15 September, representatives of the UN, the EU, the Arab League, and of 26 countries, [met in Paris](#) to coordinate their actions to 'eradicate' ISIL/Da'esh.⁶

European Parliament

The European Parliament adopted several resolutions condemning the human rights abuses perpetrated by warring parties in Iraq and Syria.⁷ In particular, in resolution [P8_TA\(2014\)0027](#) (18/09/2014), the EP approved the implementation of an international coalition against ISIL/Daesh; it emphasised the need for a better inclusion of minorities in Iraq; it called for an effective implementation of 'the arms embargo and assets freeze imposed by UN Security Council resolutions' and 'for the referral of those suspected of committing crimes against humanity in Syria and Iraq to the International Criminal Court'. On [10 February 2015](#) the 'Elements for an EU regional strategy for Syria and Iraq as well as the Da'esh threat' communication was referred to the Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET).

Main references

The main sources used for this briefing and further references can be found in our online 'keysource': ISIL/Da'esh (*The 'Islamic State'*): background information <http://wp.me/p2qdgS-4sR>.



Endnotes

- ¹ See our briefing and the related keysource: '[Minorities in Iraq – Pushed to the brink of existence](#)', EPRS, 11 February 2015.
- ² See our briefing and the related keysource: '[Foreign fighters: Member States' responses and EU action in an international context](#)', EPRS, February 2015.
- ³ [See our briefing on the international coalition against ISIL/Da'esh.](#)
- ⁴ See our briefing: '[African-led counter-terrorism measures against Boko Haram](#)'.
- ⁵ See our briefing and the related keysource on Foreign fighters (above).
- ⁶ [For further information see our briefing on the international coalition against ISIL/Da'esh, above.](#)
- ⁷ Resolutions adopted since the beginning of the eighth parliamentary term: [2015/2599\(RSP\)](#); [2015/2559\(RSP\)](#); [2014/2971\(RSP\)](#); [2014/2899\(RSP\)](#); [2014/2843\(RSP\)](#); [2014/2716\(RSP\)](#).

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