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Islamic State (Daesh)

A Salafi Islamist militia based in Syria and Iraq, commonly called ISIS or ISIL, that emerged as a franchise of al-Qaeda, with the distinctive vision to establish a territorial state under strict *sharia* law. Arabs who despise the group calling itself al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi al-Iraq wa al-Sham (The Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria) use the acronym *Daesh* because it sounds close to the Arabic word *daes*, meaning, “one who crushes something underfoot.”

Daesh originated as a terror organization founded by Jordanian-born Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in Iraq, exploiting the chaos caused by the U.S.-led coalition invasion to depose Saddam Hussein. Zarqawi despised the majority Shi’as in Iraq as heretical and directed his forces to launch a series of suicide bombings against Shi’a gatherings and shrines. In 2004, he pledged loyalty to Osama bin Laden, and his group took the name Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). For two years, Zarqawi directed insurgent operations against the occupation forces, until he was killed in an airstrike on June 7, 2006. After his death, an Egyptian, Abu Ayyub al-Masri, led his organization to join with other groups to establish the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), led by Abu Omar al-Baghdadi.

In response to its attacks on the population of Iraq, coalition forces targeted the group, and within two years nearly eradicated it with airstrikes and ground operations. On April 18, 2010, a special operations raid killed Al-Masri and Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, creating a leadership vacuum. Ibrahim Awad Ibrahim al-Badri, taking the name Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, took control of the group and gave it a new purpose and energy. He appointed former Ba’athist Iraqi military and intelligence officers to leadership positions. They brought a sophisticated understanding of military operations, as well as access to major weapons caches throughout Iraq. During the summer of 2011, while the group prepared for major operations, protests in Syria against President Bashar al-Assad intensified, triggering the Syrian Civil War. In May 2011, U.S. forces killed Osama bin Laden, creating a struggle for leadership in al-Qaeda. Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi announced that his organization had merged with Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN) to form the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Both bin Laden’s successor, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and the JAN disagreed. Daesh formally broke with al-Qaeda, took most of JAN’s foreign fighters, and expelled the group from Raqqa.

Unlike al-Qaeda, Daesh resolved to hold territory, establish permanent institutions, redefine national borders, and proclaim the existence of a caliphate. Its open defiance of the al-Qaeda leadership triggered heated debate among militant Islamists over the value of establishing the caliphate. Daesh argues that only a militant Islamist state can purify and promote Islam. Daesh recruited thousands of foreign fighters through a sophisticated online operations campaign.

In Iraq, Daesh raided prison facilities, freeing hundreds of prisoners from the Iraqi insurgency. This aided recruitment to the group, while international fighters streamed into Iraq and Syria to join attacks against both governments. Daesh soon had more than 10,000 trained fighters and in 2014 captured Fallujah and Mosul, driving out elements of the Iraqi Army and threatening to seize Baghdad. Fresh from these victories, al-Baghdadi proclaimed the Islamic State as a caliphate and

declared himself Caliph Ibrahim, with political, military, and religious authority over his followers and their territory. Daesh has engaged in human smuggling, systemic rape, public executions, and mass killings and has used every available means of violence, including chemical weapons, to gain and control territory.

Sunni terror organizations in Libya, Saudi Arabia, Uzbekistan, and Yemen pledged allegiance to the Islamic State, expanding its reach and deadly capacity, in competition with al-Qaeda. In early 2015, Nigerian-based Boko Haram, the deadliest terror organization in Africa, swore formal allegiance to al-Baghdadi's group, making it the most prominent Sunni terrorist group in the world. The United States formed a coalition to fight Daesh, which began a major aerial campaign in Iraq and Syria, and trained military forces in both nations to conduct ground offensives against Daesh. At the height of its power, Daesh controlled an area with more than 10 million people in eastern Syria and northwestern Iraq. Although the combined efforts of airpower and ground attacks have eradicated any Islamic State claims to hold territory, it remains a large and deadly international terror organization, due to the number of allied organizations. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi remains at large, and in May 2019 released a video declaring his intention to continue building his global caliphate, regardless of the forces arrayed against him.

Fouad Gehad Marei

See also: Al-Qaeda Central; Foreign Fighters; Iraq, Republic of; Islamism; Salafism; Sectarianism; Syrian Arab Republic; Syrian Civil War; Takfiri Doctrine; Turkey, Republic of

Further Reading

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