



To: Democratic Candidates
From: Mike Ryan, DCCC Policy Director
Date: October 2, 2014
Re: ISIS Backgrounder

Origins

In short: Our invasion created the atmosphere for a Jordanian to start a Muslim sectarian war, which ultimately created ISIS.

Zarqawi enters Iraq: When the U.S. invaded Iraq in 2003 we triggered a massive insurgency against our presence. Around this time, a Jordanian ex-convict named Zarqawi travelled to Iraq with one goal: to establish a religious state just for Sunni Muslims. Zarqawi wanted a civil war between Sunnis and Shias and led attacks on Shias that triggered counterattacks. Zarqawi's attacks on Muslims in the name of Islam drew condemnation from other jihadist groups and figures (including Bin Laden).

Iraqi Mistakes: The Administration of Iraq's Prime Minister (Maliki) was discriminatory to Sunnis, which helped recruit Sunni Iraqis to Zarqawi's group. Maliki's prejudicial governing style worsened after U.S. troops left Iraq, helping quickly deteriorate the situation further.

Now called ISIS: Zarqawi was killed by American forces in 2006. His successors now lead the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

Profile

In short: ISIS is rich, well-armed, sophisticated, and commits atrocious crimes against humanity.

Overall: It's the most extreme and powerful Sunni jihadist group worldwide and has rapidly taken control of large parts of Iraq and Syria.

Structure: It is a self-proclaimed caliphate, which is an Islamic religious nation-state led by someone who is both the political and religious leader.

Composition: It's made up of the remnants of the terrorist organization formerly known as al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and even has a presence of Saddam's former Baath party members.

Fighters: 20,000-31,500 fighters, and as many as 15,000 of them are believed to be foreign recruits. Those 15,000 come from 80 different countries. Reports indicate that approximately 100 are from the United States.

Leadership: Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, a self-proclaimed caliph, is the leader. He says he doesn't recognize any borders. Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey are considered by many to be the most at risk of further ISIS expansion.

Media: ISIS has been remarkably effective in their use of social media to recruit and build regional influence.

Assets: With \$2 billion reportedly on hand, ISIS is the richest terrorist organization worldwide. Some estimate it collects \$1-3 million each day from seized oil sales and millions more each month from schemes including protection rackets and traditional plundering. ISIS's relative financial independence renders traditional American counterterrorism strategies that aim to disrupt financing channels less effective. ISIS owns hundreds of millions of dollars of sophisticated weapons, including vehicles and GPS-equipped weapons. Many of these are American-made and were captured from Iraqi troops.

Crimes: ISIS engages in a broad array of horrific crimes against humanity including beheadings, mass executions, the sale of girls as sex slaves, attempting genocide against religious minorities, and killing both journalists and humanitarian workers.

U.S. Role

In short: We're trying to train Iraqis and Syrians to fight ISIS. Airstrikes alone won't defeat ISIS.

US Actions: The president has ruled out a massive deployment of U.S. troops to directly fight ISIS. Instead, the U.S. will focus on (1) airstrikes, (2) training of Iraqi security forces and their counterparts in the Free Syrian Army, (3) coordinated international efforts to disrupt ISIS's recruiting and financing, and (4) humanitarian assistance.

AUMF: Two relevant Authorizations for the Use of Military Force (AUMF) passed by previous congresses are still in effect and relate in some way to the effort to defeat ISIS. However, these AUMFS are insubstantial to justify a full-scale U.S. military involvement in the region.

In Sept. 2014, a majority of Members in both parties voted for legislation the president signed that allows our military to train Syrian rebels to fight ISIS, no additional Authorization for the Use of Military Force was passed. A broader debate over a new AUMF could take place after the election.

International Coalition: A growing number of countries in Europe and the Middle East are joining the coalition against ISIS. The participation of Arab countries is significant. In general, the goals of many countries involved in countering the Islamic State include strengthening the Iraqi Security forces, moderate Syrian groups, and the Kurdish peshmerga. Iran has cooperated to a large degree with U.S. policy in Iraq recently. This has not occurred, however, in Syria.

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