

# Can ISIS Be Stopped?

By Bryan Brown | January 11, 2016



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If there's one thing world leaders can agree on, it's that ISIS must be crushed.

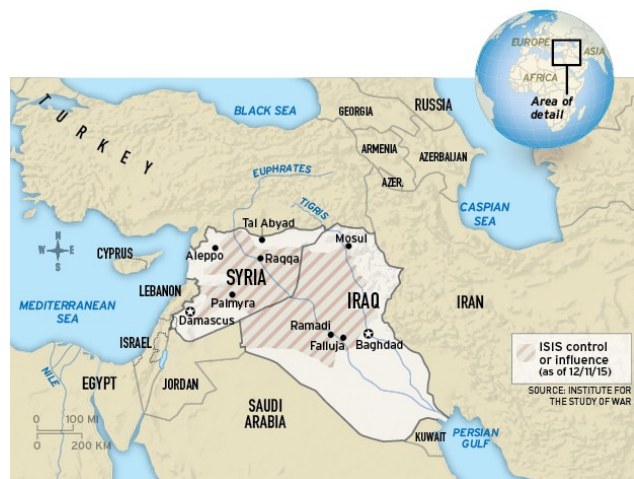
Over two weeks this fall, the terrorist group killed nearly 400 people in attacks in three different countries: A Russian passenger jet was blown up over Egypt; a calm Friday evening in Paris was shattered by terrorists detonating explosives and firing into crowds at restaurants and a concert; and suicide bombers unleashed the deadliest attack in Beirut, Lebanon, in 25 years. And in December, a Muslim couple in the U.S., claiming allegiance to ISIS but apparently acting on their own, killed 14 people and wounded 21 others in San Bernardino, California.

These are just a few of the atrocities that ISIS—the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, also known as the Islamic State or ISIL—has been linked to in recent years. The radical Islamist group has seized large swaths of Syria and Iraq, where it's trying to create its own state (*see map, below*). There, it has imposed laws based on a strict interpretation of Islam.

ISIS's stated ambition is to re-establish an Islamic caliphate like the ones that ruled the Middle East and North Africa in past centuries. But recently it's also made it clear that it intends to wage a holy war with the West. After the attacks in France, ISIS issued a warning: The events were merely the "first of [a coming] storm."

Now the world is vowing to fight back. ISIS "cannot be tolerated," President Obama declared following the attacks in France. "It must be destroyed."

The day after the Paris attacks, representatives from 17 countries met in Vienna, Austria, and promised to coordinate their efforts to defeat ISIS.



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But that will require uniting longtime rivals such as the U.S. and Russia, and Iran and Saudi Arabia. Beyond that, it means addressing a complex set of problems in the Middle East.

ISIS is the product of recent chaos in the Arab world, and it also feeds off centuries of sectarian strife within Islam. ISIS followers are Sunni Muslims, and the group considers Islam's other major sect, the Shiites, to be infidels. That's why ISIS sees the Shiite-led governments of Iraq and Syria as enemy states.

In 2011, a civil war broke out in Syria, with many rebel groups—including some that had U.S. support—fighting against Syria's tyrannical Alawite\* president, Bashar al-Assad. ISIS, which began as an Al Qaeda affiliate

in Iraq, took advantage of the chaos and started seizing territory in Syria. With its brutal tactics—including on-the-spot executions and public beheadings of opponents—ISIS became the most powerful of the rebel armies there.

“As ISIS won victory after victory and took more and more territory, it attracted fighters from all over the world,” says political scientist Karl Kaltenthaler of the University of Akron, in Ohio.

In December 2013, ISIS pushed back into Iraq, conquering territory about the size of Great Britain. ISIS terrorized regions under its control, forcing Christians and religious minorities to convert or die, and selling thousands into slavery. It seized oil refineries and stole \$425 million from Iraq’s central bank. Six months later, the group’s leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, declared all land under its occupation the new caliphate of the Islamic State.

In many ways, ISIS has functioned as a real, organized state. It has proved adept at financing itself by selling oil, collecting kidnapping ransoms, and heavily taxing people within its territory.

Through sophisticated social media programs targeting disaffected Muslims around the globe, ISIS has attracted thousands of recruits worldwide—including an estimated 4,000 Westerners, about 250 of them American. As was apparently the case with the San Bernardino attackers, ISIS has inspired some people to carry out terrorist attacks in its name (*see “A New Threat at Home,” below*).

It’s clear that ISIS’s influence is spreading. While most experts believe ending the Syrian war is key to stopping ISIS, tensions run high over how to do it.

Years of costly U.S.-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have left many Americans wary of getting stuck in another conflict. Although President Obama has refused to send ground troops to Syria, he authorized bombing raids in August 2014. Since then, the U.S. and its allies have conducted more than 8,000 airstrikes on ISIS targets.

Until the most recent terrorist attacks, Obama’s goal had been to “contain” ISIS within its territory. Some experts think that’s the best way to gradually reduce its influence. But others blame Obama’s caution for allowing the group to grow.

Most of the 2016 presidential candidates have called for a more aggressive fight with the enemy.

Republican Marco Rubio wants the U.S. and other nations to send ground troops. “We will only be able to protect our people at home if we defeat [ISIS] abroad,” he says.

“Our goal is not to deter or contain ISIS, but to defeat and destroy ISIS,” says Democrat Hillary Clinton.

The challenge of getting American leaders to agree on how to fight ISIS is dwarfed by the problem of uniting the international community against it. The countries that met in Vienna want to stop the war in Syria, lay the foundations for a new government, and tackle ISIS. But among the parties involved, there’s huge disagreement over critical issues, particularly relating to Syria.

Chief among them: the fate of Syrian President Assad. Russian President Vladimir Putin insists that Assad, his longtime ally, be part of any future Syrian government. The Shiite government of Iran also supports Assad.

For the U.S. and regional Sunni powers like Saudi Arabia and Turkey, however, keeping Assad in power is out of the question. The U.S. blames Assad for atrocities committed against Syria’s people—including the

use of chemical weapons and the relentless bombing of Syrian cities by his own air force. Despite their deep divisions, experts say the fact that these adversaries are meeting together to talk about ISIS is a step in the right direction.

But it will take much more than talking to defeat ISIS.

Graeme Wood of the Council on Foreign Relations in Washington, D.C., believes the terrorists, who lack an air force and sophisticated weaponry, could be beaten on a battlefield. The problem, he says, is that kind of all-out military fight could backfire in the long run.

“ISIS has a story about what the war is: Muslims versus everyone else, especially Christians,” Wood says. Simply crushing ISIS militarily might generate sympathy for them among angry Muslims around the world, he explains.

Most experts agree that defeating ISIS can't be accomplished solely with armies. It must involve cutting off ISIS's funding and creating stable and effective Middle Eastern governments and armed forces, as General Joseph Dunford, head of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, told Congress in July.

Ending terrorism itself will require an even greater effort, says Rami Khouri, a Middle East scholar at the American University of Beirut, in Lebanon. He says it means changing the repressive Arab governments—such as those in Egypt and Iraq—that for years have sowed a sense of hopelessness among their citizens.

“The terrible people who created Al Qaeda and ISIS did not come out of a vacuum,” Khouri says. “Their movements came as a consequence of decades and decades of ordinary people in the Arab countries being subjected to continuous mistreatment by their own societies.”

Jobless, subject to police brutality, and often jailed for religious or political activities, many Arabs have turned in desperation to militant Islam, Khouri says.

Even the most optimistic of observers see a long road ahead. Still, there are signs of progress: U.S.-led airstrikes have already allowed other rebel groups in Syria and the Iraqi army to reclaim some ground they'd lost to ISIS. The U.S. has successfully targeted the largest source of ISIS's funding by bombing trucks carrying oil in Syria. President Obama is sending special forces into Iraq to direct further airstrikes and assist the Iraqi military and the Kurdish forces already battling ISIS.

Meanwhile, Secretary of State John Kerry and other diplomats are working hard behind the scenes to hammer out a plan to address the crisis in Syria and the larger problem of ISIS. No one knows exactly what that will look like or how possible it will be to implement.

The fight against ISIS is an uphill battle and a long-term project, says Anthony Cordesman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

“These are problems that don't go away,” he says. “That doesn't mean you can afford *not* to fight ISIS. But at some level, the kinds of problems related to Islamic extremism are going to go on for a long time after ISIS.”

**\*Alawites are a sect of Shiite Islam.**

**On the same day** she and her husband killed 14 people and wounded 21 at an office party in San

Bernardino, California, Tashfeen Malik pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in a Facebook post.

Authorities declared the December 2 attacks by Malik and her husband, Syed Rizwan Farook, to be an act of terror apparently inspired, but not ordered, by ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria).

The rampage was the first time terrorists linked to ISIS have successfully struck in the United States.

“The terrorist threat has evolved into a new phase,” said President Obama, addressing the nation from the Oval Office several days after the attack. “As we’ve become better at preventing complex, multifaceted attacks like 9/11, terrorists turned to less complicated acts of violence like the mass shootings that are all too common in our society.”

Obama said the U.S. would intensify airstrikes against ISIS in Syria and Iraq and reassured Americans that the growing coalition of nations vowing to defeat the terrorist group would soon produce results. But he also urged Americans not to give in to fear or be suspicious of all Muslims. And he reiterated his refusal to be dragged into another ground war in the Middle East.

Republican leaders and presidential candidates mocked the speech. House Speaker Paul Ryan called it “disappointing: no new plan, just a halfhearted attempt to defend and distract from a failing policy.”

Juan Zarate, a counterterrorism official in the administration of President George W. Bush, says Obama’s basic problem is that his message until now—that the U.S. is making progress against ISIS—seems contradicted by the recent spate of attacks linked to ISIS.

“If you’re making progress, terrorist threats shouldn’t be appearing on your shores,” Zarate says. “This threat seems to call for war, but that’s exactly what Mr. Obama does not want to do. It’s a real dilemma.”

—*Gardiner Harris and Michael D. Shear*