The ISIS Threat: Teaching About the Complex War Raging in Iraq and Syria

By MICHAEL GONCHAR
SEPTEMBER 17, 2014

ISIS, a shorthand name for the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, has made news in the past few months for its dramatic military conquest of Iraqi territory.

The situation in Iraq and Syria is complex, to say the least. It presents a continuing humanitarian crisis, with millions of people fleeing for their lives, and hundreds of thousands being killed. It presents a threat to Middle East stability, with ISIS promising to create an Islamic caliphate, or state, erasing modern borders and imposing its own version of fundamentalist law.

Organization

The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria has a detailed structure that encompasses many functions and jurisdictions, according to ISIS documents seized by Iraqi forces and seen by American officials and Hashim AlHashimi, an Iraqi researcher. Many of its leaders are former officers from Saddam Hussein’s long-disbanded army who augmented their military training with terrorist techniques during years of fighting American troops.

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the self-proclaimed caliph of ISIS, has two deputies. One is responsible for Syria and the other for Iraq.

Leadership council
Mr. Baghdadi relies on a number of advisers with direct access to him. Members of this council help handle religious differences, order executions and ensure that policies conform to ISIS doctrine.

Cabinet
Managers oversee departments like finance, security, media, prisoners and recruitment.

Local leaders
At least a dozen deputies across Iraq and Syria report to the deputy of each country. Many of these officials were military officers during Saddam Hussein’s rule.

ISIS in Iraq

Eleven years ago the United States declared war on Saddam Hussein’s government in Iraq. The president then, George W. Bush, acted based on American intelligence, stating that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction. While the United States never found
the purported W.M.D. (PDF), it did help to create a new democratically-elected
government in Iraq after the Iraqi regime fell.

The new government was weak, however, and many Iraqis claimed that it favored the
majority Shiites at the expense of Sunnis and Kurds. Meanwhile, the new president,
Barack Obama, promised to pull out the remaining United States forces from Iraq to
fulfill a campaign promise and encourage Iraqis to maintain their own security.

Now in 2014, Iraq is in chaos. Sunni insurgents, an uneasy alliance between former
Saddam Hussein loyalists and Islamic fundamentalists, have overrun large swaths of
Iraq, including the country’s second-largest city, Mosul.

By early summer they had positioned themselves within a two-hour drive of Baghdad,
and they threatened the Iraqi Kurdish regional capital, Erbil. ISIS has waged a war of
intimidation and ethnic cleansing as it has conquered territory, killing and forcing
religious minorities such as the Yazidis to flee to the mountains.

ISIS in Syria

In neighboring Syria, a civil war has been devastating that nation since the spring of
2011. The civil war started as an uprising to overthrow the president, Bashar al-Assad,
but has devolved into a calamitous three-way conflict between Syrian government
forces, moderate rebels and ISIS extremists.

A year ago President Obama seriously considered launching airstrikes against the Assad
regime as punishment for waging chemical warfare against civilians, but the Assad
government agreed to destroy its chemical weapon stockpile, and the Obama
administration backed down.

The United States has been quietly supporting moderate Syrian rebels, known as the
Free Syrian Army, but has largely stayed on the sideline. The emergence of ISIS this
summer as a major threat to not just Syria, but also Iraq, has changed the stakes,
however, and now the United States is making plans to launch airstrikes within
Syria and arm and train moderate Syrian opposition fighters.

ISIS Financing

Photo
ISIS has reaped wealth by seizing property, selling oil, collecting ransoms and even robbing banks as it has advanced through Syria and Iraq. Some of its impressive firepower, for example, includes arms that the United States originally provided to the Iraqi military.

**Questions to Consider:** How can the international community interrupt ISIS’ substantial cash flow? How can the United States prevent military hardware it provides to Iraqi forces and moderate Syrian fighters from falling into the hands of ISIS?