

The international coalition to counter ISIL/Da'esh (the 'Islamic State')

SUMMARY

The rapid advance of the terrorist group ISIL/Da'esh in Iraq and Syria during the summer of 2014 and its stated expansionist goals has convinced the region and the entire world of the imminent security threat that the group represents. As large parts of Iraqi and Syrian territory are now under ISIL/Da'esh control, and as the group is expanding its influence over armed groups in several countries in the Middle East and North Africa, the United States (US) has led efforts to create a global coalition to combat ISIL/Da'esh.

At the moment, the coalition comprises more than 60 countries, contributing in various ways to the joint effort. While only a small number of these countries, led by the US, have launched a military airstrike campaign against ISIL/Da'esh positions in both Iraq and Syria, other members of the coalition have pledged troops to advise and train the Iraqi and Kurdish forces (and soon also selected Syrian moderate forces), military equipment or humanitarian aid in coordination with the United Nations.

The briefing aims to present the context of the formation of the international coalition against ISIL/Da'esh, the contributions of participating countries, as well as a brief assessment at this stage of the coalition's role in combatting ISIL/Da'esh.



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Background

In 2014, the terrorist group ISIL/Da'esh¹ advanced rapidly in securing control over large portions of [territory](#) both in Iraq and in Syria. In summer 2014, ISIL/Da'esh took hold of Mosul, one of Iraq's largest cities, and proclaimed the capital of its self-proclaimed 'caliphate' in the eastern Syrian city of [Raqqa](#). ISIL/Da'esh's expansionist goals and massacres of Iraqi forces, Syrian adversaries and civilians, in particular on ethnic and religious grounds, turned the [terrorist group](#) into a significant threat to the entire region in a matter of months. ISIL/Da'esh relies on significant financial resources stemming from control over oil fields and refineries in Iraq and Syria, over banks in captured cities, smuggling of antiquities, ransoms from hostage-taking, as well as alleged funding from some states in the region. It has also drawn a significant flow of fighters into its ranks.

In August 2014, the United States (US) began launching a series of military airstrikes in Iraq against ISIL/Da'esh forces. On the margins of the NATO summit in Wales (4-5 September 2014), the [US](#) pushed for the formation of a coalition of the 'willing and the capable' to deal with ISIL/Da'esh. Nine other NATO allies (France, UK, Denmark, Germany, Canada, Turkey, Italy, Poland) and partners (Australia) [joined](#) the US call for action. On 10 September, US President Barack Obama [announced](#) a strategy to counter ISIL/Da'esh, prior to the [gathering](#), in Paris, of representatives of more than 20 countries. At the UN General Assembly, on 24 September, Obama [reiterated](#) his call to UN members to join the US-led coalition against ISIL/Da'esh, together with global action against the financing of extremist groups and against their propaganda. Currently, the US-led coalition counts [more than 60 nations](#), contributing in different ways to the fight against ISIL/Da'esh, including military strikes in Syria and Iraq against the terrorist group's positions.

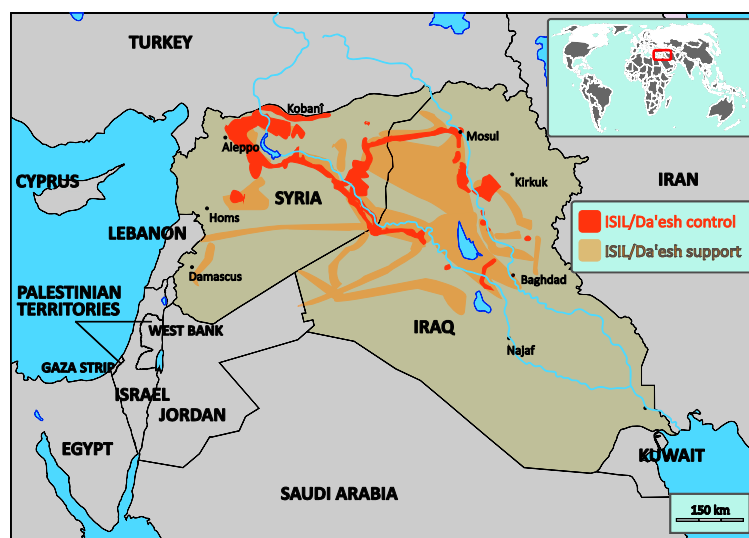
The security threat posed by ISIL/Da'esh in the region

The rapid advance of [ISIL/Da'esh](#) in conquering substantial territory in Iraq and then Syria, the terrorist group's brutality, stated expansionist goals and financial strength have [plunged](#) the Middle East into more chaos and violence. In Iraq and Syria, ISIL/Da'esh has [seized](#) control of major cities situated near supply routes (where it [governs](#) according to its fundamentalist ideology and self-proclaimed 'caliphate'), of critical infrastructure and border crossings. By September 2014, the group had managed to control many of Syria's and Iraq's oil fields, producing revenues in the order of US\$1 to 2 million daily. Its [ranks](#), estimated at between 20 000 and 31 500, have also seen constant inflows of [foreign fighters](#), a majority of the 15 000 to 21 000 in Iraq and Syria having reportedly joined ISIL/Da'esh.

Beyond Syria and Iraq, ISIL/Da'esh appears to be [seeking to expand](#) in Lebanon, Jordan, Israel/Palestine, and as far away as Libya and possibly to Nigeria and the Sahel. In all these countries, the existence of elements supporting ISIL/Da'esh might offer an entry route for the group, which is actively trying to establish terrorist cells and trigger and exploit sectarian tensions in the wider region. Lebanon and Jordan seem to be the most exposed, as direct neighbours of Syria and Iraq; together with Turkey, they have also experienced major inflows of refugees, in particular from Syria. In the [Gulf States](#), the ISIL/Da'esh threat has been on the rise: several organised cells planning attacks linked to ISIL/Da'esh were uncovered in Saudi Arabia in 2014, while radicalisation based on sectarian sentiment presents an increasing challenge to these states (paradoxically, after having long supported Sunni extremist groups in the region, particularly against

President Bashar al Assad in Syria, these states find themselves combatting a Sunni jihadist group alongside the US). Nevertheless, a series of factors, particular to each country in the complicated fabric of Middle Eastern politics, constrain the expansionist objectives of ISIL/Da'esh. Also, for the time being, analysts see the [priorities](#) of ISIL/Da'esh as being the consolidation of its military and economic power in Iraq and Syria, although the danger that ISIL/Da'esh supporters might target citizens of those Western and Arab states fighting the group remains very high.

Figure 1 – Areas under ISIL/Da'esh control in Iraq and Syria



Sources: Adapted from [BBC](#), [Congressional Research Service](#).

The conflict in Iraq contributed to the rise of ISIL/Da'esh, and increasingly there seems to be a [shared perception](#) between Western and Middle Eastern/Gulf countries that ISIL/Da'esh is a real security threat. Against the background of civil war in Syria, fighting in Libya, the Sunni-Shia divide, geopolitical competition between major regional players such as Saudi Arabia and Iran, Kurdish aspirations and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, cooperation against ISIL/Da'esh in the context of the US-led coalition not only is not a given, but is also influenced by the diverging interests of the countries in the region.

Iraq

[Iraq](#) represents one of the two main battlegrounds of ISIL/Da'esh. The rise of the terrorist group started in January 2014, when ISIL/Da'esh (splitting from Al-Qaeda) captured the city of Fallujah and parts of Ramadi, in Iraq's Anbar province, and culminated in June 2014 when, following a massive offensive, ISIL/Da'esh managed in just days to take over the northern city of [Mosul](#), facilitated by the desertion en masse of Iraqi security forces. ISIL/Da'esh forces continued their advance, but were stopped from reaching Baghdad by Iraqi security forces and Shiite militias (most supported by Iran). At the same time, in the north-east of Iraq, Kurdish peshmerga fighters [seized](#) Kirkuk and its large oil fields, bringing the city under the [control](#) of Massoud Barzani's Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), adding another challenge to Iraq's unity. On the other hand, the Kurdish peshmerga fighters proved more effective than the Iraqi security forces in defending and regaining territory in north-western Iraq from ISIL/Da'esh, particularly after support from the US and the coalition. The advances of ISIL/Da'esh in Iraq were supported by parts of the Sunni population, dissatisfied with Shia-majority rule in Baghdad and the Nouri al Maliki government. The ISIL/Da'esh offensive was [joined](#) by Sunni tribal fighters, members of Saddam Hussein's Baath party and other Sunnis, showing the sectarian dimension to the rise of ISIL/Da'esh.

The changes in Iraqi leadership in September 2014 – with Haydar al-Abadi becoming Prime Minister – supported by both the US and Iran, the [agreement](#) between Baghdad and the KRG on energy exports and revenue-sharing, as well as increased cooperation between the peshmerga and Iraqi security forces appear to point to a first step towards a common front in Iraq against ISIL/Da'esh (Kurdish independence goals falling out of

the spotlight in the meantime). Moreover, Baghdad seems to [hope](#) that Sunnis in the ISIL/Da'esh-controlled areas will soon become disaffected by the group's rule and brutality and, motivated by meaningful political reform, they will ultimately side with the government against ISIL/Da'esh. According to the [Special Envoy of the UN Secretary-General for Iraq](#), the Iraqi Government has made some important steps since September 2014 on political and institutional reform, economic and social reconstruction and national reconciliation, and has strived to engage with countries in the region. Political unity in Iraq and national reconciliation should remain the ultimate goal, although the immediate objective should be regaining territory from ISIL/Da'esh. In this regard, the Government should accomplish its pledge to give military and financial assistance to local leaders and tribal fighters against ISIL/Da'esh, work towards the reform of the security sector, including by creating the Iraqi National Guard that would give more responsibility to provinces for their security and by bringing all armed groups under the Government's control.

Meanwhile, the human-rights and humanitarian situation in the country is dire. A February 2015 UN [report](#) documents serious human-rights abuses of a sectarian nature during a three-month period (September-December 2014). ISIL/Da'esh has been identified at the origin of systematic, intentional and widespread violations of international humanitarian law and human-rights abuses against members of ethnic and religious communities, such as killings of civilians, abductions, slavery and trafficking of women and children, and recruitment of children. The report also identifies human rights and humanitarian law violations committed by Iraqi security forces and linked groups.

Syria

[Syria](#) is the other battleground between ISIL/Da'esh and the US-led international coalition. An estimated [one third](#) of Syria's territory (most of it uninhabited), and a majority of its oil and gas fields, is under the control of ISIL/Da'esh. ISIL/Da'esh has not only managed to maintain key strongholds in northern and eastern Syria, including the city of Raqqa, capital of the group's self-proclaimed caliphate, but has also emerged as the strongest opponent of President al Assad, among the various opposition armed groups in the three-year long Syrian civil conflict. From this vantage point, ISIL/Da'esh seems to be gaining, as in Iraq, increasing support from many Sunnis in their fight against Assad. For Assad, ISIL/Da'esh allows him to picture the Syrian regime as an opponent of Islamic extremism. The Syrian Government has begun its own massive airstrike campaign against ISIL/Da'esh, although [reportedly](#) the regime targets other opposition groups in order to reinforce a 'regime versus extremism' narrative.

Like the peshmerga in Iraq, the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) emerged as an important [force](#) fighting against ISIL/Da'esh in Syria (and in Iraq). During the conflict in Syria, Syrian Kurds have established their hold on areas in the north-east and engaged in fighting with ISIL/Da'esh (as well as with the Al-Nusra Front, previously associated with ISIL/Da'esh). In September 2014, YPG and ISIL/Da'esh started a five-month battle over the city of Kobanî at the border with Turkey. Although YPG forces – assisted by coalition airstrikes and Kurdish peshmerga forces – have announced their taking control of Kobanî at the end of January 2015, the surrounding areas are still under ISIL/Da'esh control. Currently, YPG fighters are engaged on several fronts in Syria against ISIL/Da'esh, and have also extended into Iraq, where they helped protect and train [Yezidis](#) from Sinjar. However, unlike Iraq's Kurdish peshmerga, the YPG militias did not receive much military assistance from other countries in their battle against ISIL/Da'esh. This has partly been due to accusations they were close to Assad or subject to Iranian

influence, and to the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) – designated by Turkey and other countries as a terrorist organisation; partly because of the international community's continued insistence on a [political process](#) in Syria, based on the full implementation of the Geneva Communiqué of 2012.² Suspicions of the YPG abound as well from the side of the Iraqi KRG, as different allegiances among Kurds in the Middle East perpetuate their [divisions](#). [Christian](#) militias are also reported to be fighting in north-east Syria to protect Assyrian Christians from ISIL/Da'esh.

The fight against ISIL/Da'esh in Syria is inextricably linked with the wider [civil war](#), which has left more than 220 000 dead, 12.2 million in need of humanitarian assistance and 3.8 million refugees in neighbouring countries, and prompted serious daily human-rights and humanitarian law [violations](#). Various interests and expectations have arisen with the coalition strikes in Syria and the planned 'train and equip' programmes that would enable selected Syrian groups to fight ISIL/Da'esh. While it is [understood](#) that for most of these groups and for some neighbouring countries (e.g. Turkey, Saudi Arabia) the primary goal is to defeat Assad, with the fight against ISIL/Da'esh a secondary objective, the US now takes an 'ISIL-first' approach. Nevertheless, calls to collaborate with Assad against ISIL/Da'esh were [rejected](#) by countries such as France and UK.

Potential expansion into Libya

ISIL/Da'esh has also set its sights on [Libya](#), a country engulfed in a [new civil war](#) pitting the internationally recognised Government in Tobruk and its associated armed groups ('Operation Dignity') against the Islamist coalition in Tripoli and its militias ('Operation Libya Dawn'). As Libya rapidly turns into a failed state, ISIL/Da'esh has already established a physical and media [presence](#) and gathered supporters, with some Libyan groups pledging allegiance to ISIL/Da'esh. The terrorist group is [said](#) to have established an important presence in at least three major cities besides Derna – Benghazi, Tripoli and Sirte – all close to Libya's major [oil fields](#), and ISIL/Da'esh leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi has proclaimed some Libyan 'provinces' as belonging to his 'caliphate.' Following the beheading of 21 Christians, including 20 Egyptian Coptic Christians, by a Libyan branch of ISIL/Da'esh, Egypt launched a series of airstrikes against ISIL/Da'esh positions in Derna – with the agreement of the Government in Tobruk. Egypt also [called](#) for a UN-mandated coalition in Libya to fight against the spread of ISIL/Da'esh and for the lifting of the arms embargo on the Libyan government forces – demands [echoed](#) by the Tobruk Government. In retaliation for Egypt's airstrikes, ISIL/Da'esh militants [launched](#) a series of suicide car bombings in eastern Libya, killing at least 45 people.

If ISIL/Da'esh succeeds in consolidating its expansion into Libya, observers [suggest](#) that it will pose an increased threat to southern Europe, besides destabilising the whole of northern Africa and creating a possible corridor to [Boko Haram](#)³ in Nigeria and Islamists in Mali and Sahara. The [challenge](#) to countering ISIL/Da'esh in Libya rests on the difficulty of finding the appropriate interlocutors on the ground, among fragmentation and shifting alliances. EU Member States [France](#) and [Italy](#) have expressed readiness to take measures against Islamists in Libya. France will sell 24 fighter jets to Egypt in a multi-billion euro [contract](#), while Italy's Interior Minister called on NATO to intervene and expressed Italy's willingness to lead a UN-mandated coalition of European and North African states against jihadists in Libya. Italy also expressed its [readiness](#) to train a regular army in the framework of a UN mission. The Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General, Bernardino León, has [insisted](#) that the success of the political dialogue and a national unity government are essential to combat terrorism, as ISIL/Da'esh uses the political divisions to consolidate its presence in Libya.

Forming a global coalition to defeat ISIL/Da'esh

On the margins of the NATO summit in September 2014, the [US](#) called for the formation of an international coalition to fight against the threat posed by ISIL/Da'esh. Nine NATO allies and partners (France, UK, Denmark, Germany, Canada, Turkey, Italy, Poland and Australia) [supported](#) the US call for action. On 10 September, US President Obama [announced](#) a 'comprehensive' strategy to counter ISIL/Da'esh that 'in concert with coalition partners (...) will defeat ISIL and deny them safe haven'. The strategy is devised along several lines, including: supporting effective governance in Iraq; supporting Iraqi forces and regional partners to militarily defeat ISIL/Da'esh; building the capacities of partners with training, intelligence and equipment; enhancing intelligence collection on ISIL/Da'esh; disrupting the group's finances and flow of foreign fighters; countering ISIL/Da'esh propaganda; and providing humanitarian aid to Syrians and Iraqis.

On 12 September, ten Middle Eastern nations meeting with US representatives in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, expressed their [commitment](#) to join the US in fighting ISIL/Da'esh. Days later, France [hosted](#), in Paris, representatives of more than 20 countries, including Middle Eastern nations, to discuss peace and security in Iraq. The joint [statement](#) of the conference underlined the commitment of participants to support the new Iraqi Government in its fight against ISIL/Da'esh, by any means, including appropriate military assistance. Following US airstrikes against ISIL/Da'esh positions in Iraq in August 2014, on 19 September France also [announced](#) strikes in Iraq, marking the beginning of the international military campaign against the group. Soon after, the US and some Arab states started to launch airstrikes against ISIL/Da'esh in Syria. On 24 September, US President Obama [called](#) on UN members to join the US-led coalition against ISIL/Da'esh, and urged global action against the financing of extremist groups and their propaganda.

The strategy of the Counter-ISIL coalition

According to the [Joint Statement Issued by Partners at the Counter-ISIL Coalition Ministerial Meeting](#), in December 2014, 'the [global coalition](#) to degrade and defeat ISIL' – over 60 nations and partner organisations, such as the Arab League and the European Union – follows a strategy built on several areas of [effort](#):

- Supporting military operations, capacity building, and training;
- Stopping the flow of foreign terrorist fighters;
- Cutting off ISIL/Da'esh's access to financing and funding;
- Addressing associated humanitarian relief and crises; and
- Exposing ISIL/Da'esh's true nature (ideological de-legitimation).

The coalition members' contributions are not necessarily military, but can [fall](#) in any of the five fields of action, including political support. A dozen nations committed to train Iraqi security forces at five locations across Iraq, while for Syria, partners are trying to establish regional sites for training and equipping moderate opposition forces. Other countries and regional organisations, such as the EU, have committed financial resources for curbing the flow of foreign fighters. Coalition partners also agreed to share information and common practices in order to deny ISIL/Da'esh access to banks, regionally and globally. Other states are offering humanitarian assistance to Syrians and Iraqis, in coordination with the UN. Finally, actions to combat ISIL/Da'esh's propaganda are being implemented by regional partners. The December meeting also [formalised](#) the cooperation and put in place mechanisms for coordination among partners. There have also been calls for ground forces to fight against ISIL/Da'esh in [Syria](#), and for increased support to moderate opposition forces.'

The US-led military campaign and international law

The military campaign in Iraq has been justified by the US on the basis of the right to individual and collective self-defence, as enshrined in Article 51 of the UN Charter, and the consent of the Iraqi government (any UNSC initiative would have been [blocked](#) by Russia's veto). In June 2014, Iraq [asked](#) the international community for support against ISIL/Da'esh, in particular, assistance with military training, advanced technology and weapons; followed on 20 September, by another [letter](#) to the UN in which the Iraqi government expressed its consent to the US-led airstrike campaign against ISIL/Da'esh with the purpose to enable Iraqi forces to regain control of Iraq's borders, and pleaded for additional assistance from the international community. The US [informed](#) the UN Secretary-General on 23 September 2014 about conducting airstrikes both in Iraq and Syria, on the basis of the Iraqi request and the right to collective self-defence. With regard to Syria – where coalition strikes have been denounced by [Russia](#) as contrary to international law, due to the lack of consent by the Syrian government – the US justifies its military actions on the basis of collective self-defence and on the assertion the Syrian Government was 'unwilling or unable' itself to destroy the ISIL/Da'esh safe havens located on Syrian territory. The US further characterises its actions on Syrian soil as 'necessary and proportionate' in order to eliminate the threat to Iraq, and mentions the al-Qaeda linked Khorasan Group, which poses a threat to the US and its allies, as another target of strikes. Moreover the US [invokes](#) a right to defend its personnel in Iraq against ISIL/Da'esh, not stated in the letter. In November 2014, the United Kingdom also [informed](#) the UN about the measures taken against ISIL/Da'esh, based on the request for assistance of the Iraqi government and Article 51 of the Charter, while mentioning support for the strikes against ISIL/Da'esh sites in Syria as 'necessary and proportional' measures. The debate about the legality of the US/coalition strikes focuses on Syria. As mentioned, Russia maintains that the use of force must be based on the approval of the government authorities of the country where the force is used – in this case the Syrian government and President al Assad. As the US did not seek or receive the express permission of the Syrian Government, according to the Russian argument, the strikes were contrary to international law. Moreover, Russian representatives have reportedly [accused](#) the US and other members of the coalition of 'self-serving geopolitical goals under the guise of fighting terror', namely regime change in Syria. On the other hand, the US [argues](#) its actions are legal, because they were done in defence of Iraq and because the Syrian regime does not exert effective control over its territory. The UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki Moon, acknowledged that ISIL/Da'esh represented a [threat](#) to international security and reportedly implicitly accepted the strikes, taking [note](#) of the fact they took place on territory no longer under the Syrian Government's effective control. Some international law [scholars](#) seem to agree with the US invoking Iraq's right to self-defence but consider controversial the 'notion that Syria's sovereignty could legally be violated because it was unable or unwilling to suppress the threat.' For other [observers](#), the fact that the US strikes in Syria were joined by several Sunni Arab states – Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, with Qatar offering logistic and Turkey political support – offered some legitimacy to the US operation.

The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) action against ISIL/Da'esh

Even though two of its permanent members – Russia and China – are not taking part in the US-led coalition, the UN Security Council managed to adopt several important resolutions targeting ISIL/Da'esh. On 30 May 2013, Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and the Nusra Front were [designated](#) as terrorist groups by the Security Council under resolution 1267 (1999). Two UNSC resolutions adopted under Chapter VII, namely [2170](#) (2014) of 15 August 2014 and [2178](#) (2014) of 24 September 2014, recognise the threats to international peace and security posed by terrorist groups such as ISIL/Da'esh, Al Nusra Front and other entities associated with Al-Qaeda, condemn the terrorist acts perpetrated by them, and urge all states to take measures to suppress the flow of foreign fighters, against terrorism financing and to counter incitement to

terrorism. The second resolution, in particular, expands the obligations of states with regard to the threat of foreign fighters. Also in September 2014, the UNSC issued a [statement](#) in which it welcomed 'the formation of a new Iraqi Government and supported the "collaboration of all States" to help it fight the armed group calling itself the "Islamic State", or ISIL'. On 12 February 2015, the UNSC adopted [Resolution 2199](#) (2015) which [targets](#) some of the sources of funding of ISIL/Da'esh and Al-Nusra Front (ANF) – e.g. illegal oil exports, traffic of cultural heritage, ransom payments and external donations. More recently, the UNSC [denounced](#) 'the latest "barbaric terrorist acts" in Iraq by ISIL/Da'esh, including the destruction of religious and cultural artefacts'.

Specific contributions to the coalition

Of the 60-plus members of the international coalition, only a few have [conducted](#) the more than 2 000 airstrikes against ISIL/Da'esh targets in Iraq (eight nations) and Syria (five nations). The US has dominated the military campaign having flown approximately [85%](#) of total combat missions in both Syria and Iraq. According to the [US Central Command](#), Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Jordan, the Netherlands, United Kingdom and US have conducted strikes in Iraq, while Bahrain, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and US launched strikes in Syria.

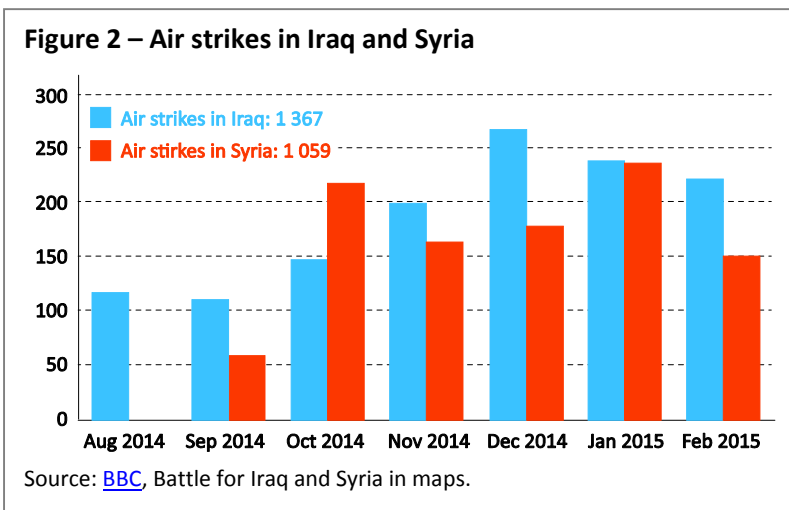


Figure 3 – Contributions to the international coalition

International coalition against ISIL/Da'esh			
Military aid	Military and Humanitarian aid	Humanitarian aid	Political support / Type of aid not defined
Albania Bahrain Croatia Jordan Singapore	Australia Belgium Bulgaria Canada Czech Republic Denmark Estonia France Germany Greece Hungary Italy Kuwait	Lithuania Netherlands New Zealand Norway Qatar Romania Saudi Arabia Slovakia Spain Turkey United Kingdom United Arab Emirates United States	Austria European Union Finland Georgia Iceland Ireland Japan Latvia Luxembourg Poland Switzerland South Korea Sweden Taiwan
Arab League Bosnia and Herzegovina Cyprus Egypt Kosovo Lebanon Macedonia Moldova Montenegro Morocco Oman Portugal Serbia Slovenia Somalia Ukraine			

Legend:
 ✈️ Airstrikes in Iraq 🇸🇵 Airstrikes in Syria
 Military aid: airstrikes, military equipment including weapons and ammunition, logistics and training.

Sources: [Congressional Research Service](#), [Foreign Policy](#), [Al Jazeera](#), [Australian Strategic Policy Institute](#).

Besides [participation](#) in the air strikes, nations have [contributed](#) to the coalition through training and advising Iraqi security forces, arming Kurdish fighters, intelligence sharing, and offering humanitarian aid. What follows is an overview of contributions by the US and selected partner countries, with a focus on military aid.

The United States

In October 2014, the US named its [campaign](#) against ISIL/Da'esh '[Operation Inherent Resolve](#)'. The US [adopted](#) a policy of 'Iraq first' and 'ISIL-first' (i.e. [not focused](#) on

overthrowing the Syrian government), and seeks to stop ISIL/Da'esh advancing in Iraq and reduce its areas of operation in Syria. The main goal of the military strikes is now to support Iraqi and Kurdish forces in their defensive/offensive operations against ISIL/Da'esh.

The US provides 'train and equip' assistance for Iraqi forces – more than 3 000 US military personnel are now deployed in Iraq, of which more than two thirds are advisers and trainers. Several hundred US personnel will also [train](#) and equip (vetted) moderate Syrian forces, beginning in spring 2015.⁴ The US has already [trained](#) 2 500 troops, with another 2 500 undergoing training. The US has provided Iraqi forces with weapons and ammunition, [donating](#), in February 2015, 250 mine-resistant armour-protected vehicles (MRAPs), in addition to US\$500 million in small arms and ammunition in 2014. The US has also announced [sales](#) to Baghdad of over 5 000 Hellfire air-to-surface missiles since June 2014 and recently proposed sales of up to US\$3 billion in tanks and related equipment and Humvees. The US is also reported to have supplied light weapons and ammunition to Kurdish peshmerga and Kurdish Syrian fighters through the CIA, while under Congressional authorisation for 2015 of the two 'train and equip' programmes, assistance to Kurdish forces is now expressly allowed. Despite having already justified the military campaign against ISIL/Da'esh with a 2001 military force authorisation and the 2002 AUMF authorising the Iraq invasion, the US Administration also requested from Congress in February 2015 [Authorisation for the Use of Military Force](#) (AUMF) against ISIL/Da'esh. The Administration's proposal, [criticised](#) by Democrats and Republicans alike, limits the AUMF to three years, and excludes long-term, large-scale ground combat operations.

Canada, Australia and New Zealand

In September 2014, Canada announced it would [send](#) several dozen military advisers to Iraq and commit six fighter aircraft to the coalition. In November 2014, it launched airstrikes in Iraq under [Operation Impact](#) and has deployed 600 military personnel.

Australia's [role](#) in the international coalition consists of airstrikes on ISIL/Da'esh targets in Iraq (Operation Okra) and providing training to the Iraqi forces. Australia has contributed six fighter aircraft, a command-and-control aircraft and one multi-role tanker/transport aircraft, and has deployed around 600 military personnel, including 200 to advise and assist Iraqi security forces. New Zealand [announced](#) recently it would be sending up to 143 personnel in a non-combat role to train Iraqi troops, in a joint mission with Australia, which [pledged](#) 300 additional troops.

European states

Belgium, Denmark, France, the Netherlands and the UK have all [conducted](#) air strikes in Iraq only. Belgium committed six F-16 fighter jets and 120 troops to the coalition in Operation Desert Falcon. Denmark announced a contribution of seven fighter jets and 120 [trainers](#) for the Iraqi forces. France has carried out strikes in Iraq in Operation Chammal and contributed nine Rafale fighter aircraft, one maritime patrol aircraft, one C-135FR tanker and an anti-aircraft frigate, as well as six Mirage fighter jets deployed to Jordan; and recently the nuclear-powered [aircraft carrier](#) Charles de Gaulle. The Netherlands announced six F-16 fighter jets and deployed 250 military personnel to carry out airstrikes in Iraq and another 130 advisers for Iraqi and Kurdish forces. The UK launched strikes in Iraq in Operation Shader, has contributed Tornado GR4 fighter aircraft to the coalition, Voyager refuelling tankers and remotely piloted aircraft, as well as E3D Sentry control and surveillance [capability](#). Recently the UK [put on hold](#) its

[announced](#) plans to send hundreds of military personnel to train the Iraqi army, but will send an extra [60 Army personnel](#), to add to the existing 50 troops training Iraqi and Kurdish forces in Iraq. [France](#), the [UK](#) and [Germany](#) have been [providing](#) weapons to the Kurdish peshmerga as well as non-lethal equipment and training. Europeans continue to rule out ground combat forces against ISIL/Da'esh.

[NATO](#), as an alliance, is not participating in the coalition against ISIL/Da'esh, but is working to facilitate cooperation in the exchange of information about foreign fighters, as well as supporting partners in the region with capacity-building missions (Jordan). At the end of 2014, Iraq also requested this type of assistance.

Arab states and Turkey

Some of the Gulf countries have [joined](#) the US in conducting airstrikes in Syria: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), supported by Qatari aircraft (which did not launch strikes). **Bahrain** also [hosts](#) the base for the US Navy's 5th Fleet. The **UAE** contributed F-16 Falcons and hosts coalition aircraft on its bases. Since December 2014 however, the UAE has suspended its [combat missions](#) over Syria, invoking safety concerns for its pilots in cases of downed planes, following the capture and killing by ISIL/Da'esh of a Jordanian pilot. **Saudi Arabia** contributed four F-16 fighter jets, with which it conducted airstrikes in Syria, and has [moved](#) 30 000 troops along the border with Iraq. **Qatar** participated in a support capacity in the strikes in Syria and reportedly hosts a secret US base. Although Qatar has expressed its [will](#) to cooperate with the US, it has been repeatedly accused of links to al Nusra Front and of [funding](#) ISIL/Da'esh.

Jordan, an important ally of the US in the region, has carried out strikes in Syria, but since the assassination of its pilot by ISIL/Da'esh, it started [launching](#) strikes in Iraq, in a renewed determination to wage a 'harsh war' against the group, and to offer Iraq '[all military means](#) at its disposal' to fight ISIL/Da'esh. Jordan also [increased](#) troop presence at the border with Iraq to prevent infiltration of ISIL/Da'esh fighters, and at the [Syrian border](#). Other Arab states such as **Egypt**, **Kuwait**, and **Oman** also [pledged](#) to provide military support and humanitarian aid, and to halt the flow of funds and foreign fighters to ISIL/Da'esh. As mentioned above, [Egypt](#) also carried out strikes against ISIL/Da'esh in Libya (not as part of the coalition campaign) and is fighting ISIL/Da'esh-affiliated groups in Sinai. It is not clear what Egypt [pledged](#) as a contribution to the international coalition. [Lebanon](#), a country at particular [risk](#) from the ISIL/Da'esh threat, has asked the international community for military aid so that it can combat ISIL/Da'esh on Lebanon's territory. Moreover, Lebanon is bearing an enormous burden in hosting Syrian refugees.

Turkey has had an [ambivalent](#) attitude toward the coalition's fight against ISIL/Da'esh, as its strategic priorities [differ](#) from those of the US: Turkey is convinced the removal of Assad should be a priority and has been highly concerned that the coalition's weapons deliveries to Kurdish peshmerga do not end up in the hands of PKK forces. Turkey [avoided](#) taking a definite stance, refused to allow coalition combat missions to be launched from its territory and opted for passivity in the fight for the Syrian border town of Kobanî. Turkey only designated ISIL/Da'esh a terrorist organisation after the release by the group of 46 Turkish hostages, raising questions about the extent of Turkey's links to ISIL/Da'esh. Nevertheless Ankara did start to allow use of its territory and airspace for humanitarian and logistic operations, and pledged to take measures to curb the flow of foreign fighters. Under pressure to enhance its participation in the coalition, Turkey eventually approved the use of its territory to launch possible military

operations in Syria and Iraq, including its base at Incirlik, and signed an [agreement](#) with the US related to training approximately 5 000 moderate Syrian rebels over three years. Turkey recently made an [incursion](#) into Syria to evacuate the tomb of Suleyman Shah, [denounced](#) by the Syrian government as violating its territory.

The Islamic Republic of Iran – fighting ISIL/Da'esh behind the scenes

Iran, a country exerting major influence and with high stakes in [Iraq's future](#), and a supporter of Syrian President al Assad, is **not taking part** in the coalition. Nevertheless, the (Shia) Islamic Republic of Iran has identified ISIL/Da'esh as an enemy (although Tehran believes ISIL/Da'esh lacks the capacity to attack Iranian territory). According to [experts](#), Iran has three main objectives: to defeat ISIL/Da'esh in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon; to ensure the territorial integrity of these states; and to avoid the international coalition affecting Tehran's allies and strategy in the region. Iran got involved in the fight against ISIL/Da'esh behind the scenes, with [reports](#) of extensive collaboration between Baghdad, Iraqi Shiite militias and Iran. These reports put the number of Iranian advisers between 100 and several hundred, but with more influence than the [3 000](#) American trainers. Iran has also provided weapons and ammunition to Shiite militias fighting ISIL/Da'esh and also troops, such as artillery units that cooperated with Iraqi forces and Kurdish peshmerga. Reportedly, Iran also [conducted airstrikes](#) against ISIL/Da'esh positions in December 2014. Iranians [boast](#) that Iraqi advances against ISIL/Da'esh are due to 'its volunteer forces and the military consultations provided by Tehran' and not to the coalition strikes. Still, in the light of the ISIL/Da'esh threat and the US strikes, Iran [amended](#) some of its longstanding positions, such as withdrawing its support for Maliki, engaged to some extent with its [regional rival](#) Saudi Arabia and kept its condemnations of US involvement to a minimum. Notwithstanding Iranian support, some Iraqis, including Shiites and Kurds, [fear](#) the implications for Iraq, among which is the perspective of two standing armies in the future (i.e. one Iraqi and one Iranian-influenced military organisation).

Assessment and recent developments

In December 2014, participants in the [coalition](#) claimed that the campaign was showing positive results, as the advance of ISIL/Da'esh in Iraq and Syria had stopped and Iraqi and Kurdish forces were in the process of re-gaining control over some territory. Nevertheless, the acknowledgement of a long-term campaign was reiterated. In Syria, it is [estimated](#) that strikes have killed more than 1 600 people during a five-month period, of which almost all are said to have belonged to ISIL/Da'esh and al-Nusra Front. According to the US [Ambassador](#) to Iraq, as of January 2015, more than 6 000 ISIL/Da'esh fighters had been killed in both Syria and Iraq. In addition, more than 1 000 ISIL/Da'esh vehicles had been destroyed in Iraq, pointing to the reduced ability of the group to supply its forces inside Iraq. Kurdish forces also stated that they had managed to clear hundreds of square kilometres of territory in northern Iraq.

For some [experts](#), the campaign will carry on for the long-term, as, in their view, ISIL/Da'esh's positions remain strong, with core areas still under its control and with continued ability to attract fighters and financial resources. The airstrike campaign is nevertheless showing results, although much will depend on the ability of Iraqi forces (and the Syrian rebels due to be trained) to strengthen their capacity to fight ISIL/Da'esh. Sending in [ground forces](#) is for the moment an idea rejected by the US and Western allies, and not very popular among neighbouring countries either. The challenge for the rather loose coalition is to hold together in 2015, and most importantly to address the need for a wider political solution for Syria and Iraq. Moreover, [addressing](#) the long-term [Iranian](#) influence over Iraq, as well as [sectarianism](#), is another challenge for the coalition, the region and the US. Other observers have

[challenged](#) the view that the coalition was effective in seriously reversing the gains of ISIL/Da'esh, and point to the difficulty of assessing the real situation on the ground. Finally, experts insist on the importance of [regional ownership](#) (i.e. states in the region assuming responsibility) and cooperation in the fight against ISIL/Da'esh.

At the beginning of March 2015,⁵ Iraqi security forces, supported by Shiite militias, peshmerga fighters, and Sunni tribes [launched](#) an offensive to retake Tikrit from ISIL/Da'esh, with Iran in the leading role. Apparently the US-led coalition is not providing any support to the operation. There are about 30 000 fighters involved in the Tikrit operation, with an [estimated](#) 15 000 from the Iraqi security forces. The Iraqis [managed](#) to take control of two oil fields near Tikrit, and reportedly have surrounded the city. The offensive is seen as a [response](#) to the US releasing details of a planned offensive to retake Mosul in spring 2015. In Syria, there are reports of Kurdish Syrian forces disrupting [supply](#) lines for ISIL/Da'esh from Iraq, and seizing control of a key [stronghold](#) of ISIL/Da'esh in northeastern Syria. Finally, the [Arab League](#) will consider the creation of a common Arab military force to combat the spread of Islamic extremism.

Main references

[The Islamic State through the regional lens](#)/ Barnes-Dacey J., Geranmayeh E., Levy D. (Ed.), European Council on Foreign Relations, January 2015.

[The 'Islamic State' crisis and US Policy](#)/ Congressional Research Service Report, February 2015.

[Strike from the air: the first 100 days of the campaign against ISIL](#) / Australian Strategic Policy Institute, December 2014.

Endnotes

¹ On the debate surrounding the designation of the terrorist group by other actors and the evolution of the terminology applying to it, please see this [article](#) in *The Guardian*. For general background on ISIL/Da'esh, refer to EPRS Briefing, '[Understanding the rise of ISIL/Da'esh \(the 'Islamic State'\)](#)'.

² The internationally-backed efforts of UN mediator for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, for a ceasefire around Aleppo, have been [rejected](#) by the military and political opposition in the region, demanding a global plan to settle the conflict.

³ Recently, Boko Haram has [pledged](#) allegiance to ISIL/Da'esh, followed by the (still unverified) [acceptance](#) of this pledge by ISIL/Da'esh, announcing 'the expansion of the caliphate to West Africa'. The implications of this move remain unclear for the time being.

⁴ The US Congress approved in December 2014 the FY2015 National Defence Authorization Act [authorising](#) US\$3.4 billion for Operation Inherent Resolve, US\$1.62 billion for the Iraqi 'train and equip' programme, and provided authorisation for an overt 'train and equip' programme in Syria for vetted moderate forces.

⁵ See also <http://iswsyria.blogspot.com/> and <http://iswiraq.blogspot.be/>

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