

# Understanding the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant

## INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the START Training Module on Understanding the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. My name is Bill Braniff, and I am the Executive Director of the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, a Department of Homeland Security Center of Excellence also known as START.

This online training event was created to share research-based findings on the Islamic State with interested decision-makers, analysts and operators. These research findings are the result of a highly collaborative research network facilitated by the Strategic Multilayer Assessment office within the Department of Defense. We will provide you with the overall findings from this multi-faceted effort, and introduce you to some of the individual projects to make certain point, but I would strongly encourage those interested to go to the START website to download the full report and explore the research in greater depth.

Before going forward, I must add that the views and conclusions expressed in this training module should not be interpreted as necessarily representing the official policies, either expressed or implied, of the U.S. government, the Department of Defense, the Department of Homeland Security or START.

Are intent here is to explore two key questions that are essential for those seeking to understand, anticipate, and respond to the terrorist organization known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (alternatively known as ISIL, ISIS, or the Islamic State). For the purposes of this training, we will refer to this organization as ISIL.

The first question we consider is:

What makes ISIL so magnetic, inspirational, and deeply resonant with a small, but significant, portion of the Muslim population?

This training explores the environmental factors, organizational characteristics—including the traits of its leaders—that have made ISIL a compelling and attractive organization to specific populations in Iraq, Syria, and abroad.

And the second question: Is ISIL a durable organization, and what are the characteristics of ISIL that can help us anticipate its durability?

We will approach these two key questions by examining ISIL from three angles:

We will examine ISIL's genesis, and the geopolitical context of its origins in Part 1 of this training.

In Part 2, we will consider ISIL's core capabilities.

And in Part 3, we will share some perspectives on ISIL's potential durability and resilience.

Before we begin, it's important to mention the context in which the research upon which this training is based took place.

This research was conducted between July and November 2014, at the request of the Special Operations Command- Central Command (or SOCCENT), and was carried out by researchers and other experts in government agencies, academia, think tanks, and private industry.

Between November 2014 and September 2015, the time of this recording, we can already observe changes in ISIL's behavior. The value of this research and this training module, then, is not necessarily to describe ISIL's current reality.

Rather, the value of this research over time is to illustrate some of the underlying characteristics of the organization, and way that those characteristics relate to the environmental conditions.

As will be discussed in this training, much of ISIL's power to inspire and motivate its followers has flowed from the synchronicity of its words and actions. As ISIL's rhetoric diverges from reality, perhaps because the environmental conditions force the organization to change behavior, this power may begin to change shape or perhaps even to dissipate.

In other words, we believe that this body of research provides a valuable illustration of the relationship between a Violent Extremist Organization's strengths and contextual factors enabling those strengths, as well as the utility of assessing a VEOs momentum in terms of the relationship between their actions and their words or rhetoric.

We must be honest, as well, to acknowledge the limits of research based on time-limited data.

This concludes the introduction to this training module.

You are now ready to move on to Part 1 of "Understanding the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant."



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