



WHAT ISIS WANTS

TOM JOSCELYN

It seems that hardly a day goes by in which the Islamic State, also known as ISIS or ISIL, doesn't appear in a newspaper or on a TV news screen. And the news is always bad—hideous death and wanton destruction of a type rarely seen in modern history.

So, what is the Islamic State? Where did it come from? What does it want? And why? Let's try to answer these questions in turn.

First, ISIS is the illegitimate child of Saddam Hussein's regime and al Qaeda. Saddam's former military and intelligence officers hold many of ISIS's most senior positions and have overseen the group's rise to prominence. In 2002 and early 2003, some al Qaeda members relocated from Afghanistan to Iraq, where they prepared to fight the Americans, who toppled Saddam Hussein's regime in March 2003. These jihadists became known as al Qaeda in Iraq when their leader Abu Musab al Zaraqawi swore his allegiance to Osama bin Laden in 2004. Zaraqawi, a murderous psychopath, was finally killed by U.S. and Iraqi forces in June 2006. Following his death, al Qaeda in Iraq was rebranded as the Islamic State of Iraq.

In 2010 a new leader took control of the group—Abu Bakr al Baghdadi. Taking advantage of the power vacuum left by the complete U.S. withdrawal from Iraq in 2011 and the Syrian Civil War that began that same year, Baghdadi and his lieutenants greatly expanded the size and scope of the organization. At first, Baghdadi was loyal to al Qaeda's senior leadership. But in 2013 he defied orders from his superiors and declared that his group was now the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or Levant, known by its acronyms ISIS and ISIL. It's worth noting that ISIS continues to market Osama bin Laden's endorsement of them to this day.

What does ISIS want and why? ISIS is attempting to resurrect an empire similar to those that arose in Islam's early history. These empires were referred to as "caliphates" and led by a "Caliph," the Muslims' chief ruler, also known as the "Emir of the Faithful." This is, in fact, how Baghdadi's followers now refer to him.

ISIS relies on a rich Islamic mythology, with citations from Islamic texts, to justify its actions and portray itself as the true heirs of Mohammed. Their propaganda videos use Islam's early history to frame their actions as part of an ongoing conflict with the "Crusaders." ISIS's leaders want their followers to believe they are fighting as part of this same religious war. When ISIS's Libyan branch executed 21 Egyptian Coptic Christians in 2015, ISIS advertised the slayings in a video titled, "A Message Signed With Blood to the Nation of the Cross" – "the Nation of the Cross," of course, meaning Christians. That's why on Libya's Mediterranean shores, the lead executioner of the Egyptian Coptic Christians pointed his knife in the direction of Italy and promised to conquer Rome, the symbolic seat of Christendom.

Despite seeking to spark an inter-faith war, however, most of ISIS's victims are Muslims, especially Shiite Muslims for whom ISIS, which is Sunni Muslim, harbors a special animosity. ISIS claims that any Muslim who does not swear bay'ah (an oath of allegiance) to Baghdadi is an "infidel" or an "apostate." Even ISIS's rival jihadists in al Qaeda are considered apostates, because they refuse to genuflect to Baghdadi.

In November 2014, Baghdadi announced that his "caliphate" had expanded into several areas outside of Iraq and Syria. Baghdadi's people set up "provinces" everywhere from West and North Africa to the Arabian Peninsula to South Asia. ISIS argues that Muslims owe these "provinces" their loyalty. Most of these "provinces" control little territory, but they have become prolific killers. Just over one year after Baghdadi's announcement, the Islamic State's "provinces" had already engaged in hundreds of terrorist attacks. On Oct. 31, 2015, for example, the Islamic State's "province" in Sinai brought down a Russian airliner, killing all 224 people on board.

In sum, ISIS is attempting to become a permanent totalitarian state, inspired by the "caliphates" of Islam's first decades. From this base, they will spread their ideology to the rest of the world. Anyone who stands in the way is marked for death. But ISIS's "caliphate" claim rests on its ability to control territory. This is both its strength and Achilles heel. Should it lose significant ground in Iraq and Syria, its caliphate claim will become tenuous, severely damaging its legitimacy in the eyes of many Muslims.

How this might happen is a key question for the United States, Europe, Asia and many in the Arab World. But this much we know: It will take much more than air strikes.

I'm Tom Joscelyn of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies for Prager University.