

1. **Mark your confusion.**
2. **Show evidence of a close reading.**
3. **Write a 1+ page reflection.**

How America is Beating ISIS in Iraq and Syria

Source: TheWeek.com, April 30, 2016

ISIS is losing battles, territory, and money in Iraq and Syria, while still expanding elsewhere. Can it be stopped? Here's everything you need to know:

How is the war going?

The U.S. and its allies are riding a wave of successes. In the past few months, Iraqi forces backed by American airstrikes have liberated the city of Ramadi, while Kurdish peshmerga and Yazidi fighters have retaken several northern towns. The Pentagon says it has killed about 26,000 ISIS fighters altogether, cut into the group's cash flow, and driven the terrorists out of 40 percent of the land the organization once controlled. The population living under ISIS's brutal reign has dropped from 9 million to 6 million people. U.S. strikes have killed several top ISIS strategists, and there are reports that ISIS fighters are retreating wherever they're attacked, rather than fighting as fiercely as they once did. "We have momentum," President Obama said, "and we intend to keep that momentum." His administration has announced it's launched a cyberwar against ISIS (see below), and is sending more troops and arms, including American-operated Apache attack helicopters, to help Iraqi forces retake Mosul, ISIS's Iraqi headquarters, later this year. About 250 U.S. military personnel are also being sent to Syria to help coordinate the Sunni tribes battling ISIS there.

How many American troops are in Iraq?

The official cap is just over 4,000 troops, there to advise and train Iraqi forces. But Pentagon officials said the true number is closer to 5,000 at any given time, if you take into account soldiers on temporary assignments and those rotating in to relieve others. A large Marine force of three amphibious warships with an additional 4,500 personnel was also just deployed to the Persian Gulf. It's far from the 150,000 American troops in Iraq during the 2003–2011 war, but a significant escalation of the 275 troops Obama sent in June 2014. And U.S. soldiers are starting to get more involved. The Pentagon announced last week that U.S. advisers will now embed with Iraqi brigades, putting them close to the fighting.

Why the change?

After coming under heavy criticism for limiting U.S. involvement, the president seems determined to make demonstrable progress against ISIS before his term ends. U.S. troops are still theoretically not authorized to initiate direct combat, but that distinction is getting increasingly blurry in the stepped-up campaign. U.S. special operations forces have used raids and airstrikes to target what the Pentagon calls ISIS's cabinet, assassinating the group's finance minister, war minister, and other top officials. U.S. airpower has been pounding ISIS in Iraq and Syria, dropping more than 11,000 bombs from November through February. Much of that barrage targeted the oil fields and buildings believed to store ISIS's cash.

Is ISIS now hurting for funds?

The losses of oil fields and territory have taken a toll. Last year, ISIS was raking in some \$80 million a month from oil smuggling, antiquities sales, and taxes. That revenue has now been cut by about 30 percent, U.S. intelligence sources say. ISIS is reportedly paying its fighters half what

they once made and rationing medical supplies. But ISIS is still the best-funded militant group in the world. Its leaders continue to sell oil, have piles of cash plundered from Iraqi banks, and heavily tax citizens in the areas of Syria and Iraq under their control.

How much is Iraq helping?

The Iraqi Army is more professional than it once was, but it is still hampered by the country's political dysfunction. The Shiite-dominated government of Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi has been inept and corrupt, criticized even by fellow Shiites. Radical Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr recently led thousands of followers in a sit-in at the gates of Baghdad's Green Zone until al-Abadi agreed to fire many of his top cabinet ministers. Preoccupied by infighting, the government has failed to do any real outreach to the disgruntled Sunni tribes who have been marginalized ever since Saddam Hussein was toppled in 2003. These angry Sunnis remain ripe for recruitment by extremists. "ISIS could be defeated tomorrow," wrote military analyst Max Boot, "and we will simply see a successor organization arise unless Sunni political grievances are addressed." Meanwhile, ISIS is seeding its fanatical, end-times ideology throughout the Muslim world, like a cancerous tumor that's metastasizing.

Where is the group spreading?

ISIS affiliates have sprung up in Algeria and Sudan and as far away as Pakistan and the Philippines. But the group's main focus outside the Levant is its new stronghold in Libya, where it controls the coastal city of Sirte. Right now it has about 6,000 fighters there, including experienced militants sent by ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi to run the group, and they're fighting to take control of the oil fields in the Sirte Basin, the center of Libya's oil industry. At the same time, ISIS's sophisticated propaganda arm continues to use the internet and local sympathizers to recruit Westerners as jihadists, encouraging them to carry out attacks in their home countries. Belgian officials said last week they had evidence that ISIS had just sent a new wave of militants to Europe to conduct terrorist attacks. "You can defeat ISIS in ISIS-controlled territories, but you're not going to defeat ISIS itself," said analyst Jonathan Schanzer of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. "The ideology of jihadism continues to evolve."

The new cyberwar on ISIS

The U.S. has launched a cyberwar to disrupt ISIS's recruiting and propaganda operations online. "We are dropping cyberbombs," said Deputy Secretary of Defense Robert Work. The high-tech offensive is being led by the U.S. Cyber Command, which is attempting to disrupt ISIS's social media recruitment, block its cash transfers, and even pose as ISIS leaders and issue bogus commands. That last trick has been used before. During the Iraq war in 2006, Fred Kaplan reports this week at *Slate*, the U.S. hacked into insurgents' online and cellphone communications and used leaders' names to order fighters to meet at a certain time and place, where they were destroyed by special operations soldiers. About 4,000 Iraqi insurgents were killed this way, Kaplan says, "and command and control fell apart."

Possible Response Questions:

- Should the U.S. send more troops to the Middle East to fight ISIS? Explain.
- Pick a passage from the article and respond to it.