

# Fanaticism, not weaponry, marks power of Islamic State

By Zeina Karam  
and Vivian Salama

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BEIRUT — The Islamic State group is often described as the most fearsome jihadi outfit of all: a global menace outweighing al-Qaida, with armies trembling before its advance.

But while the group has been successful at seizing parts of Iraq and Syria, it is no unstoppable juggernaut. Lacking the major weaponry of an established military, it wields outside influence through the fanaticism of a hard core of several thousand, capitalizing on divisions among its rivals, and disseminating terrifying videos on social media.

President Barack Obama outlined plans Wednesday for an expanded military and political effort to combat the group in Syria and Iraq.

## Loyalty, core leaders

It is useful to remember, though, that while it is a formidable force that controls roughly a third of Iraq and Syria, there also has been an inclination to exaggerate the group's capabilities.

"I think sometimes there's been a tendency to sort of overestimate the technical sophistication of the Islamic State," said Charles Lister, visiting fellow at the Brookings Doha Center.

Lister, like many other analysts, said much of the power of the Islamic State group lies in its centralization of command and intense loyalty within the organization.

That distinguishes the group from others, which are overstretched by years of conflict. In the case of the Syrian rebels, there are deep divisions that have hampered their cause.

## Nurse's aide guilty in terror case

A 19-year-old Colorado woman pleaded guilty Wednesday to trying to help the militant Islamic State group under a plea deal in the terrorism case that requires her to give authorities information about other Americans with the same intentions.

Shannon Conley entered the plea in federal court to one count of conspiracy to provide material support to a foreign terrorist organization. She could face up to five years in federal prison and a \$250,000 fine when she is sentenced in January.

Conley, a nurse's aide from Arvada, said nothing in court, aside from acknowledging that she understood the terms of the plea that says she must divulge information about possible co-conspirators. Prosecutors said they will seek a lighter sentence if she cooperates.

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According to a senior Iraqi intelligence official, more than 27,600 Islamic State fighters are believed to be operating in Iraq, about 2,600 of whom are foreigners.

Most analysts, however, estimate the number of Islamic State fighters in both Iraq and Syria to be about 20,000.

The group is dwarfed by its foes in the Syrian and Iraqi armies — both in numbers and firepower.

The Iraqi military and police force are estimated at more than 1 million. The Syrian army is estimated at 300,000 soldiers. There are believed to be more than 100,000 Syrian rebels, including the al-Qaida-linked Nusra Front and the powerful Islamic Front rebel umbrella group, currently fighting the Islamic State group in Syria.

The Islamic State group's greatest shortcoming is that it lacks the means to fight air power, meaning that U.S. airstrikes can go a long way in destroying its capabilities.

Still, the Islamic State group has amassed a significant amount of weapons and hardware captured from Iraqi and Syrian military installations in recent months.

The Iraqi official, who declined to be identified be-

cause he is not authorized to brief the media, said that the group's arsenal includes Kalashnikovs, machine guns, anti-aircraft guns and mortars, adding that they also have about 35 Iraqi military tanks, about 80 armored police vehicles and hundreds of Humvees.

## Using captured arms

In addition to those, the group this year paraded in its Syrian stronghold of Raqqa what appeared to be a Scud missile, although it is unclear if the group has the capability to launch it.

Richard Brennan, an Iraq expert with RAND Corporation and a former U.S. Department of Defense policymaker, said the Islamic State group has captured 155mm howitzers — artillery weapons the Iraqi army commanded. It also captured some old Soviet-era tanks.

The group has a few MiG 21s captured when it overran the Syrian army's air base in Tabqa last month. Analysts say it is extremely unlikely that they could get any of them off the ground at this point.

The group has acquired M46 130mm field cannons from bases overrun recently in Syria's Raqqa province. These weapons add to the U.S. M198 howitzers the group captured in Iraq.

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