Can ISIS Be Stopped?

If there’s one thing world leaders can agree on, it’s that ISIS must be crushed.

Over two weeks this fall, the terrorist group killed nearly 400 people in attacks in three different countries. A Russian passenger jet was blown up over Egypt; a calm Friday evening in Paris was shattered by terrorists detonating explosives and firing into crowds at restaurants and a concert; and suicide bombers unleashed the deadliest attack in Beirut.

In Lebanon, in 25 years. And in December, a Muslim couple in the U.S. claimed allegiance to ISIS but apparently acting on their own, killed 14 people and wounded 11 others in San Bernardino, California.

These are just a few of the atrocities that ISIS—the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, also known as the Islamic State or ISIL—has carried out in recent years. The radical Islamist group has seized large swathes of Syria and Iraq, where it’s trying to create its own state (see map, p. 10).

There, it has imposed laws based on strict interpretation of Islam. ISIS’s stated ambition is to re-establish an Islamic caliphate like the ones that ruled the Middle East and North Africa in past centuries. But recently it’s also made clear that it intends to wage a holy war with the West. After the attacks in France, ISIS issued a warning: The events were merely the “first of a coming storm.”

Now the world is vowing to fight back. ISIS “cannot be tolerated,” President Obama declared following the attacks in France. “It must be destroyed.”

The day after the Paris attacks, representatives from 17 countries met in Vienna, Austria, and promised to coordinate their efforts to defeat ISIS.

**Executions & Beheadings**

But that will require uniting longtime rivals such as the U.S. and Russia, and Iran and Saudi Arabia. Beyond that, it means addressing a complex set of problems in the Middle East.

ISIS is the product of recent chaos in the Arab world, and it also fed off centuries of sectarian strife within Islam. ISIS followers are Sunni Muslims, and the group considers Iran’s other major sect, the Shiites, to be infidels. That’s why ISIS sees the Shiite-led governments of Iraq and Syria as enemy states.

In 2011, a civil war broke out in Syria, with many rebel groups—including some that had U.S. support—fighting against Syria’s tyrannical Alawite* president, Bashar al-Assad. ISIS, which began as an Al Qaeda affiliate in Iraq, took advantage of the chaos and started seizing territory in Syria. With its brutal tactics—beheading on-the-spot executions and public beheadings of opponents—ISIS became the most powerful of the rebel armies.

“An ISIS win would alter history and force the U.S. and other powers to confront the group,” says political scientist Karl Eikenberry of the University of Alaska, in Ohio.

In December 2013, ISIS pushed back into Iraq, conquering territory about the size of Great Britain. ISIS targeted regions under its control, forcing Christians and religious minorities to convert or die, and...
A NEW THREAT AT HOME

An ISIS-inspired attack on American soil shows the terrorist threat has entered a "new phase"

On the same day she and her husband killed 14 people and wounded 21 at an office party in San Bernardino, California, Tahreen Malik pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in a Facebook post. Authorities declared the December 2 attacks by Malik and her husband, Syed Rizwan Farook, to be an act of terror apparently inspired, but not directed by, ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria). The rampage was the first time terrorists linked to ISIS have successfully struck in the United States.

The "terror threat has evolved into a new phase," said President Obama, addressing the nation from the Oval Office several days after the attack. As "terrorism became a more prevalent concern, it also became more frequent, more complex."

President Obama said the U.S. would intensify airstrikes against ISIS in Syria and Iraq and reassured Americans that the growing coalition of nations waging to defeat the terrorist group would soon produce results. He reiterated his refusal to declare another ground war in the Middle East.

Republican leaders and presidential candidates lashed out, with presidential hopefuls Ben Carson and Marco Rubio condemning the recent spate of attacks linked to ISIS.

"If you're making the analogy that terrorism threats shouldn't be appearing on your shoes," said Rubio, "This threat seems to call for war, but that's exactly what Mr. Obama does not want to do. It's a real dilemma."

Experts say ISIS can't be defeated solely with armies.

It means changing the repressive Arab governments—such as those in Egypt and Iraq—that for years have sown a sense of hopelessness among their citizens.

"The terrible people who created Al Qaeda and ISIS did not come out of a vacuum," said Khouri. "Their movements came as a consequence of decades and centuries of ordinary people in the Arab world feeling that they are not being treated fairly by their governments."

"They feel subject to brutality, and often killed for religious or political activities, many are driven to desperation to military Islam," said Khouri.

Even the most optimistic of observers see a long road ahead. ISIS, there are signs of progress. U.S.-led alliances have already allowed other rebel groups in Syria and the Iraqi army to reclaim some ground they lost to ISIS. The U.S. has successfully targeted the largest source of ISIS's funding by bombing trucks carrying oil in Syria. President Obama is sending special forces into Iraq to direct further airstrikes and assist the Iraqi military and the Kurdish forces in Syria.

Meanwhile, Secretary of State John Kerry and other diplomats are working hard behind the scenes to hammer out a plan to address the crisis in Syria and the larger problem of ISIS. No one knows exactly what will look like or how possible it will be to implement.

"The fight against ISIS is an uphill battle and a long-term project," said Anthony Cordesman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

"These are problems that don't go away," he says. "That doesn't mean you can afford to not fight ISIS. But at some level, the kinds of problems related to Islamic extremism are going to get worse over time."

With reporting by Patricia Smith.