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What you need to know about the circumstances in Syria



Image by Elizabeth Banfield.

By: Chelsea Sydnor

More than a week has passed since the acts of terrorism on the city of Paris, France.

Don Berry of the Religion Department summed up the circumstances in Syria and how they led to the attacks in Paris.

According to Berry, events have been culminating since December of 2010, when almost every Middle Eastern country began rebelling against their national governments. Rebels have been attempting to overthrow the Syrian government for several years now.

"Rebels have been able to gain support from other groups," Berry explained. "Including a group called ISIS, which then complicates the whole situation."

ISIS stands for the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, also known as the ISIL, or the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant. The party was founded by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who was a member of Al Qaeda that fought against Russia in Afghanistan along with Osama Bin Laden. He was ultimately appointed the Al Qaeda representative for Iraq.

“Once Osama Bin Laden died, ISIS members were able to gain control of parts of Iraq and Syria, and declared their own caliphate,” Berry added. “They see themselves as a renewal of the Islamic empires, and are inviting Muslims to recognize him as the leader and create one Islamic country.”

Berry believes that through occurrences such as the ones in Paris, Baghdadi is attempting to gain notoriety for himself in order to gain support and recruits for his actions in Iraq and Syria. He is using some of the same techniques utilized by Al Qaeda.

However, Berry sees some major differences between the groups, as well. “Even if you disagreed with Bin Laden’s interpretation of Islam, he was still a trained religious leader carrying out religious purposes,” he shared. “Baghdadi seems to be doing this for political reasons, which I think makes him more dangerous.”

Berry mentioned as well that a distinctive belief was formed by a group called the Kharijites in the 7th century that an ‘ineffective Muslim’ is the same as a non-Muslim, which gave them the right to kill such an individual. They applied this reasoning to the assassination of the caliph of the time, Ali.

According to Berry, ISIS has adopted a similar mindset. While the Quran commands that Muslims accept the legitimacy of Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians and other Muslims, ISIS considers anyone outside of the Sunni sect of Islam a non-Muslim, including Shiite Muslims.

“What we’re seeing now is a civil war to determine whether there will be a secular government still headed by Muslims, or a more traditional government where the religious leaders would have a pivotal role,” Berry said. “Each side is trying to get support for their cause, so the more attention Baghdadi can get, the more he can recruit people.”

Due to the violence that has arisen in Syria, many refugees have been attempting to escape their homeland in order to find a safe place. There are even cases of entire communities in which the populations have disappeared. A Christian community that Berry visited in 2005 during his time teaching in Beirut has since been abandoned.

According to Berry, ISIS may also be attempting to specifically attract the attention of Americans. While most images from ISIS have portrayed words written in Arabic, there has been some footage of protests around the world depicting signs in English, a language that most of those international representatives would not speak.

ISIS has succeeded in capturing attention around the world. Inés Poncet, Gardner-Webb’s French Teaching Assistant for the 2015-2016 academic year, was taken aback when she heard the news of the attacks on her home country.

"It was very surreal," recalled Poncet. "I was checking my Facebook, and my friend was posting things about it, and I didn't know what was going on."

While Poncet is from Lyon, which is south of Paris, she has many friends that live in Paris. When she checked in with them, she learned that several of her friends were nearby when the attacks took place, and even had plans to attend the venues that night.

"The places they targeted are the places that most of the young people go when they go out at night," Poncet said.

Gathering accurate information about the occurrences was especially challenging for Poncet because the major French news website, *Le Monde*, was briefly inaccessible. As she checked multiple international news sources, she noticed that the information varied among them, as the news was still developing.

"I almost felt useless," shared Poncet. "I don't know what I could have done if I had been there, but it is still difficult to be so far away."

In the midst of the surprise from the attacks, Poncet says that she and other international students from France are grateful for the support that they have felt from the United States, especially from the Gardner-Webb community.

Meanwhile, Dr. Berry believes that it is difficult to predict what will happen next in the affair with ISIS, as the situation does not seem to be close to an end.

"Other than praying for them at this point, it is very sad to see the damage that has been done, as well as what likely will be done," he shared. "I don't know that there is a human solution that will take care of it."



A Pepsi can with Arabic letters from Berry's visit to Beirut in 2005.