

THE "ISLAMIC STATE": TRAJECTORY AND REACH A YEAR AFTER ITS SELF-PROCLAMATION AS A "CALIPHATE"

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Abstract

On 29 June 2014, the ISIS/ISIL or Daesh announced the change of its name to just "Islamic State" (IS), proclaimed itself a "Caliphate" and named its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as "Caliph Ibrahim". About a year later, this article intends to evaluate the trajectory and reach of this territorial jihadist entity. It starts by contextualizing the self-proclamation in terms of ideology and objectives and then it describes how the IS has sought to consolidate itself as a *de facto* "State" and the tragic effects of its policy of terror. The last part examines the international expansion of the IS, analysing its reach in attracting "foreign fighters", the new *wilayats* created outside Syria and Iraq, the newly affiliated local groups, and the activities of the IS in cyberspace.

Keywords:

Islamic State, ISIS, Terrorism, Jihadism, International Security

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THE "ISLAMIC STATE": TRAJECTORY AND REACH A YEAR AFTER ITS SELF-PROCLAMATION AS A "CALIPHATE"

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Introduction

The origin of the self-proclaimed "Islamic State" dates back to existing jihadist groups in the 1990s, namely the *Bayat al Imam* and the *Jama'at al-Tawid wa-al-Jihad*, both led by the Jordanian Abu Musab al-Zarqawi¹ who, following the invasion of Iraq in 2003, began to target both the "expulsion of foreign invaders" and to instigate a sectarian civil war by attacking Shiite and Kurdish communities that started to be predominant in Iraq in the post-Saddam Hussein era. Around the same time and with similar motivations, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi², born in 1971 in Samarra in the so-called "Sunni triangle" north of Baghdad, helped establish another group, the *Jamaat Ahl Jaysh al-Sunnah wal Jamaa*. In 2004, while Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was captured in Fallujah by the US military and detained in Camp Bucca where he mingled with many other jihadists, al-Zarqawi expressed fidelity to the "Emir" Osama bin Laden and his group joined the al-Qaeda (AQ), adopting the name *Tanzim al-Qaeda wal Jihad fi Balad al-Rafidain* or, briefly, "al-Qaeda in Iraq" (AQI).

In June 2006, Zarqawi was killed by the Americans and the AQI came to be led by Ayyub al-Masri, former member of the *Zawahiri's Islamic Jihad Group* in Egypt. Meanwhile, in October of that year, some jihadist factions grouped in the *Mujahideen Shura Council* created the "Islamic State in Iraq" (ISI), and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was made responsible for the overall supervision of the *Shariah* Committee, while the group's leadership was given to another al-Baghdadi, Abu Umar. The ISI was conceived as an independent group and not as a subsidiary of AQ, which was not even consulted on the process (Bunzel, 2015:20), with the ISI continuing the sectarian attacks in order to achieve the goal of having a "pure" Islamic State. In 2010, after the death of al-Masri and Umar al-Baghdadi by American bombing, Bakr al-Baghdadi took the leadership of a very fragile ISI (Fishman, 2011) and, like his predecessor, the title of "Commander of the Faithful", claiming to be a descendant of the tribe.

From 2011 onwards, a new combination of factors favoured the prominence of ISI and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi:

- i) the American withdrawal from Iraq, leaving a fragile country led by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki (May 2006-September 2014), who pursued a pro-Shiite agenda and alienated the Sunni minority, which allowed the ISI to strengthen among Sunni

¹ Or Ahmad Fadeel al Nazal Al Khalayeh.

² Or Ibrahim Awwad Ibrahim Ali al-Badri or Ibrahim al-Badri al-Qurashi al-Sammarai.



tribes, former insurgents and also former members of the Baath Party and Iraqi military and security structures seeking to regain the power they had enjoyed during the era of Saddam;

- ii) Osama bin Laden's death in May 2011, which meant not only the elimination of the main reference of the jihadist movement but also the weakening of the AQ, leading to greater autonomy of its affiliate groups and to the rise of local and independent regional groups (Tomé, 2012);
- iii) the "Arab Spring" in North Africa and the Middle East, unleashing huge turbulence and conflict in most of these countries (Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen), as well as the resurgence of sectarian rivalries and the expansion of extremist movements;
- iv) and, in particular, the civil war in Syria from March 2011, as a result of a challenge to the regime of President Bashar al-Assad and involving multiple factions (Shiite militias, real democrats, the moderate and jihadists) and hundreds of groups (more than 1000 were referenced at some point), in a chaotic stage that quickly became the largest "magnet" for jihadists from around the world and for complex "power games" (ranging from Iran and Russia to Arab countries, Turkey, EU or the US ...).

In this context, the ISI

«has reconstituted [itself] as a professional military force capable of planning, training, resourcing, and executing synchronized and complex attacks in Iraq» (Lewis, 2013: 7),

announcing, in the beginning of 2012, its "unstoppable return" and launching increasingly powerful attacks with high media impact: for example, between the summers of 2012 and 2013, it launched the violent campaign "Breaking the Walls" with truck bombs, also aiming at several prisons where hundreds of jihadists escaped³. Meanwhile, in neighbouring Syria, the ISI and the AQ instigated the creation of the "al-Nusra Front" (*Jabhat Al-Nusra /JN*) led by the Syrian Abu Mohammad al-Golani (or al-Julani), a former operational in Iraq sent by Bakr al-Baghdadi to create a "front" in Syria. As the ISI was again a credible force and taking advantage from the situation in Syria, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi decided to expand the ISI to Syria, and, in April 2013, proclaimed the establishment of the "Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant" or "*ash-Sham*" (*Dawlah al-Islamiyah fil Iraq wa ash-Sham*) and the corresponding merger of JN in the new ISIL/ISIS/Daesh. Al-Golani refused this manoeuvre and Ayman al-Zawahiri, the successor to bin Laden in al-Qaeda's core leadership, instructed Bakr al-Baghdadi to limit the ISI's activities to Iraq. However, al-Baghdadi reiterated that his group would also remain in *al-sham* (al-Baghdadi, 2013). After months of theological and operational disputes, on 2 February 2014 the AQ officially announced its dissociation

³ Of the eight prisons attacked by the ISI between July 2012 and July 2013, the most high profile case was Abu Ghraib prison in July 2013, where more than 500 prisoners managed to escape, including many jihadists.



from the ISIS, referring to it as a "group" (Bunzel, 2015: 29), with the ISIS ending up getting into fratricidal conflict with AQ's branch in Syria (see Cafarella, 2014).

More than fighting Assad's regime, the ISIS then concentrated its efforts towards occupying and administering territories and localities in Syrian Sunni areas (Raqqa, Idlib, Deir ez-Zor and Aleppo), triggering, in parallel, a similar campaign in Iraq: after capturing Fallujah and Ramadi in January 2014, the ISIS expanded rapidly and conquered other bastions like al-Qaim, Tikrit and, in early June, the strategic city of Mosul. On 29 June 2014, the ISIL/ISIS/ Daesh announced the change of its name to just "Islamic State" (IS), proclaimed itself a "Caliphate" and named its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi "Caliph Ibrahim". It thus evolved from being a jihadist insurgent terrorist organization to becoming a politically organized territorial entity in Syria and Iraq.

About a year later, this article aims to evaluate the trajectory and reach of the self-proclaimed "Islamic State Caliphate". Much more than making a mere quantitative balance, it crosses information, description and analysis, relying on data as much updated as possible and essentially using open sources. For greater objectivity and a better understanding of the IS purposes, the article cites several messages of the IS itself: after all,

«If one wants to get to know the programme of the [Islamic] State, its politics, and its legal opinions, one ought to consult its leaders, its statements, its public addresses, its own sources» (Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, spokesman for the IS, 21 May 2012, cit. in Bunzel, 2015: 4).

It starts by contextualizing the self-proclamation of the "Caliphate" in terms of ideology and objectives of the IS. Then it describes how the IS has sought to consolidate itself as a *de facto* "State", including its forms of "governance", territorial administration and financing, as well as the sources of its military arsenal, the growing number of militants and "foreign fighters" and the tragic effects of its persistent policy of terror. After making a brief reference to international efforts to contain and combat the IS, the last part is mainly dedicated to the international expansion of the IS, ranging from the new *wilayats* outside Syria and Iraq to its affiliated local groups, as well as referring to IS attacks and activities in cyberspace, thus illustrating the current situation of this jihadist terrorist threat about a year after its self-proclamation as a "Caliphate".

Proclamation of the "Caliphate" – ideology and objectives

Like al-Qaeda (AQ), the ISIS/DAESH/ Islamic State is based on the Salafist-jihadist ideology (*al-salafiyya al-jihadiyya*), a puritanical branch of the Wahhabi Sunni Islam that wants the Islamic community (*Umma*) to return to "pure" ancestral practices, making a clear separation between the "true believers" and the "unbelievers" considered to be "apostates" or "infidels". Refusing theological diversity, the Salafist-jihadists also base their views on the *Takfir* doctrine, which sanctions violence against



other Muslims accused of apostasy, unbelief or unfaithfulness (*kafir*)⁴ (Hafez, 2010; Bunzel, 2014). Viewing themselves as the defenders of the original Islam that the Prophet Muhammad and his companions preached, and considering that Islam is under attack by the "infidels", the Salafi-jihadists claim that the use of violence or "holy war" (*jihad*) is the only way to fight the enemies and defend the true Islam. The ultimate goal of the also called "jihadism" is thus the creation of a "pure" Islamic Community in the form of "Emirate" or even "Caliphate", according to its unique interpretation of the Prophet Muhammad's tradition (*sunna*) and Islamic law (*sharia*), with "believers" taking part in the *jihad*, while the "apostates" and "infidels" must be simply exterminated (Brachman, 2009; Duarte, 2012; Rabbani, 2014; Bunzel 2015). As clearly stated by a jihadist prelate:

«We don't make a distinction between civilians and non-civilians, innocents and non-innocents. Only between Muslims and unbelievers. And the life of an unbeliever has no value. It has no sanctity ... We assume that the objective is to kill as many people to cause terror ... The Divine Text is clear on the need to cause "maximum possible damage." The operational must therefore make sure that he kills as many people as he can kill. Otherwise, he will burn in hell (...) The secularists say that the "Islam is the religion of Love." It is true. But Islam is also a religion of War. Of peace, but also of terrorism. Muhammad said: "I am the Prophet of mercy." But He also said: "I am the Prophet of the massacre." The word terrorism is not new among Muslims. Muhammad said even more: "I am the Prophet who laughs when I'm killing my enemy." It is therefore not just a matter of killing. It is laughing when killing». (Omar Bakri Mohammed, 2004: 28-31):

However, ideologically, the IS adopts an even more exclusive view than AQ and other jihadist groups, being less tolerant of those considered to be "deviant Islamic sects", particularly Shi'ism:

«Following takfiri doctrine, the Islamic State is committed to purifying the world by killing vast numbers of people ... Muslim "apostates" are the most common victims» (Wood, 2015).

In February 2004, in a letter sent from Iraq to the leadership of AQ, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi harshly attacked Shiism both politically and ideologically, considering the Shiites

⁴ The vast majority of leaders, organizations and religious authorities of Islam reject this concept of *takfir*, considering it a doctrinal deviation (*bid'at*) or heresy. Some recent Edicts (*fatwa*) also condemn and repudiate the "Takfir doctrine".



«the proximate, dangerous enemy of the Sunnis...The danger from the Shi'a...is greater and their damage worse and more destructive to the [Islamic] nation than the Americans... targeting and hitting [the Shi'a] in [their] religious, political, and military depth will provoke them to show the Sunnis their rabies and bare the teeth of the hidden rancour working in their breasts. If we succeed in dragging them into the arena of sectarian war, it will become possible to awaken the inattentive Sunnis as they feel imminent danger and annihilating death at the hands of these Sabeans [i.e., Shi'a].» (al-Zarqawi, 2004).

This vision would become one of the pillars of the ideology of the IS and hence, from its antecedents in Iraq, IS pursues a strategy aimed at instigating and instrumentalising a sectarian "holy war" within Islam, primarily between Sunnis and Shiites. In fact, even before the creation of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), al-Qaeda's ambitions and strategy in Iraq exceeded those of the central structure, directly attacking Shiite and Kurd Muslims with such a level of violence that central AQ warned its Iraqi branch of the risk of losing popular support in the country as well as that of the global Islamic community⁵.

On the other hand, organically, the IS claims, as it has always done, that it is not just a jihadist organization (*tanzim*) but literally what its name implies: a real "State" (*dawla*). In 2006, an official document of the newly created "Islamic State in Iraq" (ISI) claimed that:

«This state of Islam has arisen anew to strike down its roots in the region, as was the religion's past one of strength and glory» (cit. in Bunzel, 2014: 2). In the words of Graeme Wood (2015), «bin Laden viewed his terrorism as a prologue to a caliphate he did not expect to see in his lifetime. His organization was flexible, operating as a geographically diffuse network of autonomous cells. The Islamic State, by contrast, requires territory to remain legitimate and a top-down structure to rule it».

And a "State" with expansionist ambitions: on 8 April 2013, the renamed ISIL or ISIS demanded the establishment of an "Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant" or "ash-Sham", a region that includes Syria but also Jordan, Israel, Palestine and Lebanon, and, in a broader sense, covers territories in Egypt, Turkey and Cyprus. This announcement came two days after the leader of AQ-core, Ayman al-Zawahiri, called for the unification of the jihad in Syria, but between *Jabhat Al-Nusra* (JN) and other jihadist groups, and not through the expansion of the ISI to Syria and even less through the merger of JN with the new ISIS. Although the leader of the JN, al-Golani, rejected that manoeuvre and openly declared obedience to "Emir" al-Zawahiri, and the leader of the AQ-c instructed Bakr al-Baghdadi to dissolve the ISIS and limit the activities of his

⁵ Letter from Ayman al-Zawahiri, then number two of al-Qaeda, to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, leader of AQI, dated 9 July 2005.



group to Iraq, leaving Syria for the JN, ISIS reaffirmed the new designation and forced its expansion to Syria.

Moreover, since its inception, the ISI aimed at the eventual restoration of the "Caliphate", a mythical monarchic-theocratic form of government that represents the unity and the leadership of the "Islamic world", a coveted global empire ruled according to Islamic law or *Sharia* directed by a single leader, the caliph, the Prophet Muhammad's successor. Therefore, several references and maps of the ISI, ISIS and, of course, the IS suggest an ambition that includes dominating all the territories of ancient historical Caliphates, ranging from the Iberian Peninsula (Al-Andalus) to Southeast Asia. In other words, the self-proclamation as "Caliphate" embodies a «*fundamentally political rather than religious project - even though the IS insists the two are inseparable*» (Rabbani, 2014:2)

This self-proclamation came on 29 June 2014, in a document entitled "This is the Promise of Allah" produced in several languages and posted on the Internet, where the ISIL/ISIS/Daesh announced the restoration of the "Caliphate", simply called "Islamic State" (IS) and appointed its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as "Caliph", hereinafter called "Caliph Ibrahim":

«Here the flag of the Islamic State, the flag of tawhīd (monotheism), rises and flutters. Its shade covers land from Aleppo to Diyala.... The kuffār (infidels) are disgraced. Ahlus-Sunnah (the Sunnis) are masters and are esteemed. The people of bid'ah (heresy) are humiliated. The hudūd (Sharia penalties) are implemented – the hudūd of Allah – all of them. The frontlines are defended.... It is a dream that lives in the depths of every Muslim believer. It is a hope that flutters in the heart of every mujāhid muwahhid (monotheist). It is the khilāfah (caliphate). It is the khilāfah – the abandoned obligation of the era (...) Therefore, the shūrā (consultation) council of the Islamic State studied this matter after the Islamic State – by Allah's grace – gained the essentials necessary for khilāfah, which the Muslims are sinful for if they do not try to establish. In light of the fact that the Islamic State has no shar'ī (legal) constraint or excuse that can justify delaying or neglecting the establishment of the khilāfah such that it would not be sinful, the Islamic State – represented by ahlul-halli-wal-'aqd (its people of authority), consisting of its senior figures, leaders, and the shūrā council – resolved to announce the establishment of the Islamic khilāfah, the appointment of a khalīfah for the Muslims, and the pledge of allegiance to the shaykh (sheikh), the mujāhid, the scholar who practices what he preaches, the worshipper, the leader, the warrior, the reviver, descendent from the family of the Prophet, the slave of Allah, Ibrāhīm Ibn 'Awwād Ibn Ibrāhīm Ibn 'Alī Ibn Muhammad al-Badrī al-Hāshimī al-Husaynī al-Qurashī by lineage, as-Sāmurrā'ī by birth and upbringing, al-Baghdādī by residence and scholarship. And he has accepted the bay'ah (pledge of allegiance). Thus, he is the imam and khalīfah for the Muslims everywhere. Accordingly, the



"Iraq and Shām" in the name of the Islamic State is henceforth removed from all official deliberations and communications, and the official name is the Islamic State from the date of this declaration» (IS, 2014).

By proclaiming itself "Caliphate", the IS also claims that all Muslims - individuals, states and organizations - should pay obedience and be faithful (*bay'ah*) to "Caliph Ibrahim":

«We clarify to the Muslims that with this declaration of Khilafah, it is incumbent upon all Muslims to pledge allegiance to the Khalifah Ibrāhīm and support him (may Allah preserve him). The legality of all emirates, groups, states, and organizations, becomes null by the expansion of the Khilafah's authority » (ibid.).

Bay'at is a kind of obedience commitment given to a leader of an Islamist group; for a jihad, it is as if that commitment was with the Prophet Muhammad himself, and cannot be broken under penalty of apostasy (*takfir*). Immediately following that announcement, on 1 July 2014, in his sermon at the Grand Mosque of Mosul, the very "Caliph Ibrahim" declared

«I have been appointed to rule over you ... And obey me so long as I obey God touching you. If I disobey Him, no obedience is owed from me to you» (al-Baghdadi, 2014).

Unsurprisingly, the alleged obligation of *all Muslims* to pay allegiance to "Caliph Ibrahim" and the corresponding nullification of all other States and organizations before the global authority of the Islamic State is repudiated by all Islamic States and numerous Islamic religious leaders, including the Grand Muftis of Saudi Arabia and Egypt, Abdulaziz al al-Sheikh and Shawqi Allam, respectively, or the International Union of Muslim Scholars. Although for different reasons, this rejection is also made by various jihadist organizations: even before the announcement of the "Caliphate", central *al-Qaeda* (AQ-C or AQSL), presumably from Pakistan, and also the Islamic Front and *Jabhat al-Nusra*, both in Syria, had publicly rejected the ISIS; after the self-proclamation of the IS "Caliphate", the AQ-C officially rebutted *bay'at* to "Caliph Ibrahim" again and started to promote its own proto-Caliph, Mullah Muhammad Omar, the Taliban leader of the "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan" since 1996; meanwhile, seven other jihadist groups repudiated the authority of the IS - Caucasus Emirate in Russia, the General Military Council for Iraqi Revolutionaries in Iraq, *Katibat al-Imam Bukhari* in Syria, Al-Qaeda Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in Algeria, Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in the Philippines, Harakat Ansar Iran (HAI) in Iran, and Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula in Yemen – while the Taliban in Afghanistan have, to date, remained neutral to the IS (IntelCenter, 2015; Azamy and Weir, 2015).



A de facto State and terror

The ISIS/IS has demonstrated its capacity to impose itself on government forces and opposition groups (Lister, 2014: 2). As it expanded, it sought to portray the image of being an effective administering organization in the areas where "state authority" was missing or fragile. At the end of June 2014, the renamed Islamic State controlled a vast area that ranged from Aleppo in Syria to the Diyala province in Iraq, and a population of nearly 6 million people. As such, its strategy has been to consolidate characteristics inherent to the condition of "State" - namely, territorial control (especially locations, routes and infrastructure) and political, economic and judicial administration.

Administratively, the IS operates in different *wilayats* or provinces, each with its operating structure. Although some IS *wilayats* have been proclaimed in the territories of other countries, as we shall see, most still lie in Iraq and in Syria: in mid-2015, there are twenty IS *wilayats*, twelve of which located in Iraq (Anbar, Baghdad, Diyala, Euphrates/Furat - the latter covering territories both in Iraq and in Syria - Fallujah, Kirkuk, Jnoub, Ninewa, Salah al-Din, Shamal Baghdad, al-Jazeera, and Tigris/Diglah) and eight in Syria (al-Barakha/Hasakah, Damascus, Euphrates/Furat, Halab/Aleppo, Homs, al-Khair / Dayr az Zawr, Raqqa, and Hamah).

Immediately after "Caliph" Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who is the supreme political, religious and military authority, the territories of the IS in Syria and Iraq are under the authority of two respective "governors" involved in the military strategy and governance of those areas in coordination with local councils (IEP-GTI Report 2014: 52). The IS political structure includes four main "councils" - *sharia*, *shura*, military and security - replicated in the chain of command down to local level by the various *wilayats* in Syria and Iraq. In its simple but effective bureaucratic organization, the IS established religious committees, a religious police, educational committees, *Sharia* courts and recruiting offices, public relations or tribal issues offices, as well as "advisers" and "coordinators" for finance, propaganda, receiving "foreign fighters", shelters, and dealing with women's, orphans' or prisoner issues, imposing its form of "governance" (Caris and Reynolds, 2014). In parallel, the IS expanded other requirements in the areas under its control that resemble a *de facto* state: security and military services, management of medical services and of "Islamic education", collection of fees and taxes, issuance of identification documents, printing of its own currency, control of services and resources (mail, transport, telephones, Internet, garbage collection, water, electricity, fuel and energy supply) and, from here, regulation of the economy and society.

The total number of IS members, activists and fighters is imprecise and difficult to calculate, varying greatly depending on the source and also on whether it refers only to militants in Iraq and Syria or whether it also includes individuals and groups operating in other countries and regions. On the other hand, in addition to Syrian, Iraqi and foreigner volunteers and jihadists, the Islamic State is known to force people from other conquered rebel groups or confined areas under its rule to fight on its behalf - so, even restricting to the territory controlled by the IS in Syria and Iraq, it is complex to distinguish between its militant members and those who exercise certain functions because they are forced to it or fear reprisals. Still, it seems clear that the number of IS members and fighters has increased continuously over the past years; it grew suddenly since the proclamation of the "Caliphate"; and it is now well above other



jihadist groups, including al-Qaeda. When the US withdrew from Iraq in 2011, the ISI had few hundreds of members; in early 2015, the IS had between 17,000 and 31,500 combatants - well above, therefore, the 1000-3000 that central AQ had at its peak in the late 1990s (Gerges, 2015). In June 2014, the number of ISIS militants in Syria and Iraq was estimated at between 5,000 and 10,000; in the following month, numbers increased thanks to the 1000-2000 militants from other jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq (such as *Jaish al-Sahabah in the Levant* and the *Faction of Katibat al-Imam Bukhari* in Syria or *Ansar al-Islam* in Iraq) who joined its ranks; in September, the CIA estimated the existence of between 20,000 and 31,500 IS fighters in Syria and Iraq; in late 2014, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights estimated over 80,000 (50,000 in Syria and 30,000 in Iraq) IS militants, while the office of Kurdish President Massoud Barzani rose the total number of IS members to 200,000, a number that included combatants and support staff, police forces, local militias, border guards, and paramilitary personnel associated with the various groups of security guards and recruits. Crossing several sources, the current estimated number of IS fighters varies between 35,000 and 100,000, while the AQ and its affiliates is believed to have between 5,000 and 20,000 members.

To finance its activities, the IS has the millions of euros and dollars found and stolen in the banks and administration offices of the towns it conquered and the proceeds from the sale of oil from the dozen wells and refineries it controls. According to the *Global Terrorism Index Report 2014* (IEP, 2014: 52), the IS

«controls a dozen oil fields and refineries in Iraq and Syria, generating revenues of between one to three million U.S. dollars per day... As well as oil, it is believed that the ISIL has access to 40 per cent of Iraq's wheat growing land», a situation that led K. Johnson (2014) state that «the Islamic State is the Newest Petrostate».

Other important IS funding sources include "donations" from individual, tribal and jihadist organizations, "tax" and "religious taxes" collection from those under its control, theft and extortion, kidnapping and ransom payments and arms, drug, historical artefacts and human organs trafficking. With this wide range of funding sources, the IS yield is estimated at about 3 to 5 million USD a day in 2014, and its total financial resources is estimated to stand at between 1.3 and 2 billion USD (Barret, 2014 : 45). That is, the IS has become *«the richest terrorist group in the world»* (Lister, 2014: 2), described by the former US Secretary of Defence Chuck Hagel as

«sophisticated and well-funded as any group that we have seen. They're just beyond the terrorist group ... they are tremendously well-funded» (cit. in Keatinge, 2014).

As for the powerful weapons at its disposal,



«the Islamic State, like many irregular forces before it, has opened spigots from varied and far-ranging sources of supply, in this case on a grand scale»,

including weapons previously used in the Libya, Sudan and the Balkan wars and others produced by the US, Russia, China, Iran, and Europe (Western and Eastern). The IS's military arsenal mainly includes weapons and ammunition captured from Iraqi and Syrian forces, armaments and equipment purchased, exchanged or captured from groups opposing Bashar al-Assad in Syria. On the other hand, in addition to small arms, machine guns, explosives, and grenades, the Islamic State's arsenal includes unusual war weapons held by terrorist groups, from tanks and armoured vehicles to howitzers, drones and guided anti-tank missiles (Conflict Armament Research, cit. in Chivers, 2015).

The Islamic State's attempt to affirm and consolidate itself as a "State" has been implemented through violence and extraordinary brutality by armed militants operating simultaneously as a terrorist group, army, police, guerrilla, militia, and criminal gang. According to the Global Terrorism Index Report 2014 from the IEP, in the year of ISI's expansion to Syria in 2013, the number of terrorist attacks worldwide rose 61% over the previous year, causing nearly 18,000 dead, with Syria and Iraq among the countries with the highest number of victims of terrorism and with 66% of the global total of deaths being the responsibility of only four groups, including ISIS (the others being al Qaeda, the Taliban and the Boko Haram). In Iraq alone, in 2013 there were 6362 deaths caused by terrorist attacks (an increase of 162% compared to 2012), of which 77% were ISIS' responsibility (IEP-GTI Report 2014: 52).

In line with its predecessors, the IS continues extermination practices not only against Christians and Jews, but especially against Muslim communities, namely Shiites, Kurds, Alawites and Yazidis, in what Amnesty International describes as "ethnic cleansing" and the UN calls "crimes against humanity". Hence, the expansion of the IS has contributed significantly to the barbarism and the humanitarian tragedy in Iraq and Syria, which occupy the first and second places, respectively, in the ranking of the most dangerous countries in terms of terrorist activity, according to the *Country Threat Index* of IntelCenter. In 2014 alone, the IS killed 2317 people; also according to the *Most Deadly Terrorist/Rebel Groups* of IntelCenter and adding to that number the deaths caused by other groups that meanwhile joined the IS until mid-2015, the total number of dead of the "IS Network" in 2014 exceeded 5000. Accordingly, this same source shows in its *Group Threat Index* - which examines the volume of terrorist alerts, the traffic of messages, videos and photos, attacks and victims of several dozen terrorist organizations - that the IS became the most dangerous and lethal terrorist group in the world (IntelCenter, 2015).

In fact, the IS does not recognize any Islamic interpretation and jurisdiction other than its own, imposing its brutal version of the *sharia* on all those it considers to be "apostates" and "infidels" and implementing a policy of terror which includes mass summary executions, amputations, rapes, immolations, beheadings, and crucifixions. The barbarity of the Islamic State is openly repudiated by most Islamic religious leaders, by all Islamic countries and also by the Islamic Cooperation Organization



(which brings together 57 Islamic countries), with the Secretary General of the OIC, Iyad Ammen Madani, affirming

«We need to condemn, particularly and in the strongest terms, the heinous and barbaric crime committed by the so-called IS terrorist group» (Madani, 2015).

The terror perpetrated by the IS even made the Vatican, which traditionally opposes the use of force, adopt an unprecedented position in mid-March 2015, declaring that if it is not possible to achieve a political decision without violence, *«the use of force will be necessary»* against the IS in order to *«stop this genocide»* and protect Christians and other religious groups⁶.

For the IS, however, "terror" is not only inherent in its *jihad* against all "apostates" and "infidels" but also a key driver of its expansion strategy due to the "demobilizing" effect that it seeks to have (and has) in the populations and opposition forces, in particular among the Syrian and Iraqi government contingents.

The alarm caused by the extension of the IS "Caliphate" and its corresponding social, economic, humanitarian, and political implications (see, e.g., Adams, 2014) led to a sudden change in the geopolitical chess in the region and brought about a very eclectic "anti-IS front" since the summer of 2014, including the creation of a broad international coalition led by the US and currently with about 64 participants⁷ and the hitherto unthinkable joint positions of Western countries, Arab countries (especially Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Qatar and Jordan), Iran, Turkey, the Iraqi government, the Peshmerga Kurds, several insurgent groups operating in Syria or even the very Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad ... According to the US State Department, in early June 2015 the IS controls less 25% of territory in Iraq than when the "International Coalition" began its campaign⁸. Meanwhile, following the Iraqi Government's request, NATO decided to reactivate the training and assistance mission to Iraqi government forces for more effective anti-IS fighting⁹.

⁶ Statement made by the Vatican Ambassador at the United Nations in Geneva, Archbishop Silvano Tomasi, in an interview with the American Catholic website "CruX" (see Allen, 2015). This position came the same day that the Holy See, Russia and Lebanon presented the Council of the UN Human Rights a document entitled "Supporting the Human Rights of Christians and Other Communities, particularly in the Middle East", supported by 70 signatory countries, hoping to encourage states around the world to provide humanitarian aid to Christians and other groups persecuted by the IS.

⁷ Out of the more than sixty participants of the "anti-IS international coalition," only some participate in direct military operations or provide air support and military equipment: the US, Iraq, Jordan, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, United Arab Emirates, France, the UK, Germany, Canada, Australia, Italy, Czech Republic, Albania, the Netherlands, Estonia, Hungary, Turkey, Belgium, Denmark, and Lebanon. Some "allies" have only been providing political support and "humanitarian aid" (including the Arab League and the European Union, as well as Sweden, Kuwait, Switzerland, Japan, Austria, New Zealand, South Korea, Ireland, Spain, Slovakia, Norway, Luxembourg, and Qatar), while with regard to others we only know their statement of support and commitment to this coalition, participating particularly in terms of sharing information - Andorra, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Slovenia, Finland, Georgia, Greece, Israel, Kosovo, Lithuania, Macedonia, Malta, Morocco, Mexico, Moldova, Oman, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, Singapore, Taiwan, Tunisia, and Ukraine.

⁸ Statement made by Antony Blinken, US Deputy Secretary of State, at a meeting in Paris on 2 June 2015, with representatives from 20 countries to discuss the status of the fight against the IS in Iraq (see the BBC, 2015).

⁹ The NATO Training Mission-Iraq (NTM-I) was established in 2004 to help Iraq create effective new armed forces after the overthrow of Saddam's regime, but the mission was discontinued in 2011 due to the



In addition to a significant number of IS militants, some IS leaders were also killed - including the alleged number two in the hierarchy, Abdul Rahman Mustafa Mohammed al-Qaduli¹⁰, and the so-called "Oil Emir" Abu Sayyaf . The very "Caliph" Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was seriously injured as a result of US bombing in March 2015. Some previous state support to ISIS was also stopped: currently, no government supports the IS, which put itself in an enemy position of all States in the region and the world. At the same time, the Internet and social networks industry became more vigilant and active in the control and removal of terrorist and jihadist oriented content conveyed by the IS and its supporters. Over the past year, and on several occasions, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and numerous Islamic religious authorities denounced the illegitimacy of the alleged "Caliphate" and condemned the IS narrative and acts for violating all principles of Islam.

However, despite international efforts to contain, fight and delegitimize it, the IS not only continues to control a vast territory and millions of people but also launched new offensives on key fronts. In Iraq, in May 2015 the IS took possession of Ramadi, capital of the Anbar province, advanced towards the Baiji oil refinery, the largest in the country, and attacked the nearby town of Khalidya, getting closer to Baghdad. In Syria, in the same month the IS attacked Deir ez-Zor by the Euphrates River, in the east of the country, and gained control of the city of Tadmor and the ruins of the "World Heritage" ancient Roman city of Palmyra in central Syria, and unleashed offensive operations in the north, near Aleppo, close to the border with Turkey; in the West, in the provinces of Homs and Hama and near the border with Lebanon; and in the Southwest, targeting the city of Quneitra, near the Israeli border.

The International expansion of the IS

On the other hand, the IS has expanded far beyond Syria and Iraq, conducting activities which a report of the *Institute for the Study of War* organized in three circles: an "inner ring", comprising, in addition to Iraq and Syria, Jordan, Israel, Palestine and Lebanon; the "near abroad", covering Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Libya, Turkey, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco and the Caucasus; and the "far abroad" circle, referring to the activities of the IS in Europe, North America, Asia-Pacific and also in cyberspace (Gambhir, 2015).

Through its self-proclamation as "Caliphate", the IS intensified the recruitment campaign of "foreign fighters" to go to Syria and Iraq to defend an idyllic Islamic State¹¹:

«mujahideen in Europe, Australia, and Canada...O mujahideen in Morocco and Algeria...O mujahideen in Khorasan, the Caucasus,

absence of any agreement to give legal status to the presence of NATO military operating in the country. In 2014, as a result of the IS advance, the Baghdad government requested new assistance, education and training mission to Iraqi government forces.

¹⁰ Or Abu Alaa al-Afari.

¹¹ See also *Dabiq*, issue 3 – *A call to Hijrah*.



and Iran...O mujahideen, we call you up to defend the Islamic State» (Abu Muhammad al-Adnani [al-Shami]¹²,

IS's spokesman, 22 September 2014). In parallel, the IS propaganda machine - through messages, photos and videos channelled through the Web, virtual social networks and its official journal in English *Dabiq* - glorifies its "martyrs", publishes regular reports on the "International faithful of Allah" and highlights the fighting skills of "true believers from distant lands".

The phenomenon of jihadist "foreign fighters" has long been known in places such as Afghanistan, Bosnia, Kosovo, Chechnya, Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, Mali, and Libya. But never before have so many "foreign fighters" been involved as in Syria and, more recently, in the territory controlled by the "Islamic State", leading the United Nations Security Council to adopt unanimously Resolution 2178 - at a meeting where more than 50 countries¹³ expressed

«particular concern that foreign terrorist fighters are being recruited by and are joining entities such as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)».

The resolution further calls upon all States to cooperate urgently to prevent international flows of IS fighters and other extreme groups to and from war zones (UN Security Council, 24 September 2014).

Aware of the fact that the "European jihadists" pose a serious threat to both the external and internal security of the European Union, European authorities and the governments of the 28 Member States, particularly reacting to the attacks in Paris on 7 and 8 January 2015, strengthened measures to combat terrorism, prevent movements for purposes of association with terrorist groups and detect and monitor travel to and from theatres of jihadist conflict¹⁴.

¹² Or Taha Subhi Falaha, his birth name.

¹³ Heads of State or of Government of Nigeria, Iraq, US, France, Chad, Lithuania, Rwanda, Jordan, Chile, South Korea, UK, Australia, Luxembourg, Turkey, Qatar, Bulgaria, Kenya, Macedonia, Canada, the Netherlands, Morocco, Norway, Trinidad and Tobago and Belgium. The countries represented at ministerial level were: China, Serbia, Pakistan, Algeria, Senegal, Latvia, Denmark, Albania, Estonia, Kazakhstan, Russia and New Zealand. There were also representatives of the following countries: Singapore, United Arab Emirates, India, Spain, Malaysia, Sri Lanka and Egypt, as well as the President of the European Union and the Secretary of State of the Holy See.

¹⁴ The many EU proposals include: deepen the understanding of the phenomenon; tighten the monitoring of social networks and increased cooperation with the Internet industry to remove extremist content, creating effective counter-discourses; punish and penalize those condoning terrorism and violent extremism, and those intending to join terrorist groups and plan or practice terrorism-related crimes; prevent travelling to join terrorist groups, detect and monitor travel to and from areas of jihadist conflict and halt the return of extremists and jihadist veterans, particularly by increasing control at the EU's and the Schengen area's external borders and by recording the names of air passengers; intensify the fight against multiple forms of financing terrorism; implement accompanying measures and monitoring of returnees; strengthen human and technological resources; implement earlier directives and strengthen the anti-terrorism legislative framework; send "security consultants" to European representations in sensitive areas; deepen and improve the sharing and exchange of information; strengthen cooperation between European countries and services and collaboration with strategic partners; etc. See Council of the EU - Counter-Terrorism Coordinator.



Despite international efforts, the number of foreign fighters ascribed to the IS has continued to grow significantly, and numbers are currently estimated at over 25,000 (twice as many as those who went to Afghanistan in the 1980s), representing about 70% of foreign jihadists in Syria and almost all in Iraq, from almost a hundred countries. About half of the "foreign fighters" of the IS come from North Africa and the Middle East (Barret, 2014: 16), namely Saudi Arabia (7000), Tunisia (2500-5000), Morocco (1500-3000), Jordan (1500-2000), Turkey (1000-1500), Egypt (600-750) and Iran (50-80). But the IS also has fighters coming from many other countries from all regions of the globe, including Russia (1000-1500), Indonesia (520-550), Turkmenistan (360-400), Bosnia and Herzegovina (350), China (300), Kazakhstan (300), Azerbaijan (100-300), Albania, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and the Philippines (200 each), Canada (130), USA (100-120), Australia (80-100), and India (20-25)¹⁵.

From the European Union alone, by mid-2015 over 6,000 jihadists had left to join the IS in Syria and Iraq (nearly tripling those who were in Syria in late 2013), from more than twenty countries, including France (about 1500), the United Kingdom (750), Germany (700), Belgium (400), the Netherlands (300), Denmark (250), Sweden (200), Spain (60-100), Austria (100-150) Italy (60), and Finland (50). This EU's figures also included Luxembourgers, Greeks, Slovaks, Czechs, Irish, Bulgarian, Lithuanian, and Portuguese (15-20)¹⁶.

To its supporters who cannot or are unable to travel to Syria and Iraq, the IS instructs them to organize and pledge allegiances (*bay'ah*) to "Caliph" Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi:

«If you cannot perform hijrah (immigrate to the Islamic State) for whatever extraordinary reason, then try in your location to organize bay'at (pledges of allegiance) to the Khalifah Ibrahim. Publicize them as much as possible. Gather people in the masjid, Islamic centres, and Islamic organizations, for example, and make public announcements of bay'ah. Try to record these bay'ah and then distribute them through all forms of media including the Internet. It is necessary that bay'ah becomes so common to the average Muslim that he considers those holding back as grossly abnormal...if you live in a police state that will arrest you over such bay'at, then use means of anonymity to convey your bay'ah to the world» (Dabiq, issue 2, July 27, 2014).

And the fact is that in addition to individuals around the world who have expressed allegiance to "Caliph Ibrahim," there are many other groups which, since the self-proclamation as "Caliphate", became associated with the IS. Specifically, 36 jihadist groups outside Iraq and Syria that pledged *bay'at* or expressed support for the IS have been referenced: *Mujahideen Timor* in Indonesia; *Caliphate and Jihad Movement, Jundullah, Tehrik-e-Khalifat* and *Tehrik-e-Taliban* dissidents in Pakistan; *Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan* in Pakistan and Uzbekistan; *Ansar al-Khalifah, Bangsmoro*

¹⁵ Figures estimated from crossing various sources, including research centres on terrorism and conflict and several types of media.

¹⁶ On the profile and route of the "Portuguese jihadists," of whom the majority are Portuguese descendants emigrated in other European countries like France or England see, for example, Franco and Moleiro, 2015



Islamic Freedom Fighters, Bangsmoro Justice Movement, Abu Sayaaf and Jemaah Islamiyah in the Philippines; Jund al-Khalifah, al-Huda Battalion in Maghreb of Islam and Soldiers of the Caliphate in Algeria; Al Tawhid Battalion in Afghanistan and Pakistan; Khorasan Pledge, Heroes of Islam Brigade in Khorasan and Leaders of the Mujahid in Khorasan, from Afghanistan; Ansar al-Tahweed fi Bilad al-Hind in India; al-I'tisam of the Koran and Sunnah in Sudan; Uqba bin Nafi battalion and Jund al-Khilafah in Tunisia; Jund al-Khilafah in Egypt; Mujahideen Shura Council in the Environs of Jerusalem, in the Gaza Strip and the Sinai Peninsula; Jund at-Tawheed Wal Khalifah in Bangladesh; Ansar Bait al-Maqdis in Egypt; Islamic Youth Shura Council, Islamic State Libya (Darnah), Lions of Libya, Shura Council of Shabab al-Islam Darnah and IS's "Tripoli Province" in Libya; Liwa Ahrar al-Sunna in Baalbek, Lebanon; Mujahideen of Yemen and Supporters for the Islamic State in Yemen, in Yemen; Supporters of the Islamic State in the Land of the Two Holy Mosques in Saudi Arabia; Boko Haram in Nigeria (IntelCenter, 2015).

In addition, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi himself announced on 13 November 2014 the establishment of five new IS *wilayats* outside Syria and Iraq, precisely in Libya, Algeria, Yemen, Sinai (Egypt) and Saudi Arabia, as well as the intention to create more *wilayats* elsewhere in the future. The same aim was reaffirmed in the fifth edition of *Dabiq* entitled, in good propaganda fashion, "Remaining and Expanding", where the IS recognizes those *wilayats* with

«either the appointment or recognition of leadership by the Khalifah for those lands where multiple groups have given bay'at and merged, or the establishment of a direct line of communication between the Khalifah and the mujahid leadership of lands who have yet to contact the Islamic State and thus receive information and directives from the Khalifah» (Dabiq, issue 5).

Meanwhile, the IS has expanded its *wilayats* in Yemen (in clear competition with Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, both combating the Huthis Shiite militias and other rebels loyal to former President Abdullah Saleh and the forces supporting President Hadi) and also in West Africa, in the latter case through the alliance agreed in March 2015 with *Boko Haram*, which has controlled the northeast of Nigeria for years and is also active in Chad, Niger and Cameroon. Currently, there are twelve IS *wilayats* outside Syria and Iraq: *Khorasan* (Afghanistan), *al-Jazair* in Algeria, *Sinai* in Egypt, *Burgah*, *Tarablus/Tripoli* and *al-Fizan* in Libya, *al-Haramayn* in Saudi Arabia, *al-Yaman*, *Sanaa*, *Lahij* and *Shabwa* in Yemen and *Gharba Ifriqiyah* in Nigeria.

Admittedly, several jihadi groups have publicly repudiated the IS, as mentioned earlier. But the reality is that the expansion of the IS has changed the balance among jihadist groups and the volatile connections with insurgent movements in various other stages of conflict beyond Syria and Iraq, including in Libya, Lebanon, Yemen, and even in Afghanistan and Pakistan:



«The relationship between the Taliban and the Islamic State is emerging as the most influential factor in the future of violent jihadi movements in the Afghanistan and Pakistan region.... If IS were to successfully recruit influential Taliban figures, they could upset the delicate yet volatile balance of jihadi movements and insurgents within Afghanistan, causing realignments of anti-state actors across the Khorasan region» (Azamy and Weir, 2015).

At the same time, fierce opposition to the IS has increased the power and the role of "Shiite militias" in several theatres of conflict (Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Libya, and Yemen), a situation described as "particularly fragile" by a French representative (BBC, 2015). Basically, the expansion and the brutality of the IS has contributed to intensify historic rivalries and sectarian conflict between Sunni and Shiite Muslims, not only inside Syria and Iraq but also within other countries such as Lebanon - where the IS faces the well-established Shiite origin Hezbollah (Holmquist, 2015) - and between regional powers such as Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shiite Iran, as also happens in the case of Yemen¹⁷.

On the other hand, the IS calls for *jihad* in the countries where its militants are based through attacks against their enemies and other "infidels". For example, in a declaration addressed to the "soldiers of the Islamic State," the IS spokesman, Abu Mohammed al-Adnani [al-Shami], made the following appeal:

«So rise O mujahid. Rise and defend your state from your place wherever you may be...You must strike the soldiers, patrons, and troops of the tawāghīt. Strike their police, security, and intelligence members, as well as their treacherous agents. Destroy their beds. Embitter their lives for them and busy them with themselves...

If you can kill a disbelieving...including the citizens of the countries that entered into a coalition against the Islamic State, then rely upon Allah, and kill him in any manner or way however it may be. Do not ask for anyone's advice and do not seek anyone's verdict. Kill the disbeliever whether he is civilian or military, for they have the same ruling. Both of them are disbelievers. Both of them are considered to be waging war [the civilian by belonging to a state waging war against the Muslims]...If you are not able to find an

¹⁷ Following the deteriorating situation in Yemen and the advancement of Houthi Shiite militias, Saudi Arabia set up and leads a "coalition" fundamentally composed of Arab countries which, in March 2015, began to intervene militarily in Yemen in support of President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi against the Houthi Shiite rebels and other forces loyal to former President Abdullah Saleh (deposed in 2011 following the protests associated with the "Arab Spring"), which, in turn, have the support of Iran. In a typical proxy war situation. - in which regional powers promote their competing interests in a Yemen torn by conflict between two rival Islamic branches, Sunni and Shia, which intersect with tribal loyalties in support of the current President or attempting to replace the previous one, coupled with the significant presence and dispute between al Qaeda jihadists in the Arabian Peninsula and the Islamic State (both attacking the government forces of President Hadi and the Houthi Shia and pro-Saleh rebels) - Saudi Arabia has launched the risky operation "Decisive Storm" with the military contribution of the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Sudan, Egypt, and Kuwait, also counting with the support of Jordan, Morocco, Pakistan and Somalia, in addition to the alleged logistical help of the US and of some European countries to protect the population and the legitimate Government of Yemen and to safeguard international legality.



IED or a bullet, then single out the disbelieving... Smash his head with a rock, or slaughter him with a knife, or run him over with your car, or throw him down from a high place, or choke him, or poison him. Do not lack» (al-Adnani, September 22, 2014).

Two months later, the magazine *Dabiq* expressly included references to attacks by its supporters in Australia, Canada and the US, claiming that

«All these attacks were the direct result of the Shaykh [Adnani]'s call to action, and they highlight what a deadly tinderbox is fizzing just beneath the surface of every western country, waiting to explode into violent action at any moment given the right conditions. Suddenly the muhajidin of the Islamic State weren't some esoteric concept fighting in a land nobody knew or cared about, they were on the doorstep of millions of people living in some of the biggest, most modern cities in the western world» (Dabiq, issue 6).

These appeals are further enhanced by the Islamic State's threat to "export" its faithful to other areas and "inside its enemies", such as Europe, taking advantage of migratory flows from Libya...

Regardless of the propaganda content of such statements, the fact is that over the past year multiple events and attacks involving jihadists and "lone wolves" supporting the IS were referenced in dozens of countries – from Afghanistan to Germany, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Australia, Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, China, Denmark, Egypt, Spain, US, the Philippines, France, the Netherlands, Yemen, India, Indonesia, Iran, Italy, Japan, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Nigeria, Pakistan, United Kingdom, Russia, Sudan, Tunisia, Turkmenistan, Turkey and Uzbekistan ... - causing victims around the world and forcing strengthening alerts and counterterrorism efforts.

The expansion of the Islamic State is particularly visible in cyberspace. Of course, as in all other fields and religions, the Internet opens up new horizons for showing different interpretations of Islam (Giunchi, 2014). They are also well-known situations where targeted websites, especially to the Muslim communities, take on special importance in the West, as happened during the "Arab Spring" or, more recently, to combat the ideological propaganda of the IS. But the reality is that the Islamic State is proving to be extraordinarily skilled and versatile in the use of cyberspace and new media, showcasing jihadism on the web. Indeed, the IS displays an effective propaganda machine, terror, radicalization and recruitment, particularly orchestrated by *Al Hayat Media Centre* and its videos and publications (such as the aforementioned official magazine in English "*Dabiq*") but also disseminated by thousands of "fighters" and activists in Syria and Iraq, all posted on the Internet and through virtual social networks, including YouTube, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.

This is particularly relevant in "attracting" young people, including Westerners: this means that in addition to the "planted cells", terrorists from the "outside" and those



who have obtained their nationality in an opportunistic or fraudulent manner, there is now a stunning number of "express jihadists" who are more or less self-radicalized and were born and raised in "the West"; just as the propaganda, radicalization and recruitment in the mosques, in madrassas and prisons, there are now these activities on the Internet on an unparalleled scale throughout the history of the jihadist movement (Tomé, 2015: 13-14). Therefore, as Jeh Johnson, Head of US Homeland Security, states

«we're very definitely in a new environment, because of ISIL's effective use of social media, the Internet, which has the ability to reach into the homeland and possibly inspire others.... We're very definitely in a new phase in the global terrorist threat, where the so-called lone wolf could strike at any moment» (cit. in ABC News, 2015).

On the other hand, IS supporting hackers, such as the self-called "Cyber Caliphate", have intensified cyber-attacks, aiming at all types of targets, ranging from military commands to government agencies or the media: for example, more than 19,000 cyberattacks hit French websites in the week following the attacks in Paris on 7 and 8 January 2015; on the 12th of the same month, the "Cyber Caliphate" attacked Twitter and YouTube accounts of the US Central Command (CENTCOM), which heads the anti-IS international coalition operations; in February, the same group attacked the websites of the US magazine *Newsweek*; and on 8 April, again the "Cyber Caliphate" attacked the Internet pages, social networks and broadcasts of Francophone *TV5 Monde* television group, whose eleven channels not only failed to broadcast but also showed IS' videos and propaganda messages and threats for a while.

Conclusions

Once established, the IS has intensified its propaganda and its jihadist appeals, encouraging its supporters to travel to defend a mythical "Caliphate", promoting allegiance declarations and local communities to support the IS, and instigating all kinds of attacks to "apostates", "infidels" and enemies of the IS. About a year after its self-proclamation as a "Caliphate", and despite local, regional and international efforts to contain, combat and delegitimize it, the IS has consolidated characteristics as a *de facto* State, expanded beyond Syria and Iraq and became one of the most serious threats to international security, disputing with al-Qaeda the leadership of global jihadism.

Over the past year, the IS has significantly increased the number of militants and also of "foreign fighters" assigned to it, like a true "magnet" never seen before in the history of the jihadist movement. In addition to swelling the ranks of a jihadist and terrorist entity as the IS and contributing to the humanitarian tragedy and barbarity in Syria and Iraq, the threat from the "foreign fighters" phenomenon also brings about the increased risk that they return to their home countries as members of the global jihadist movement after having been indoctrinated and received operational training (from the handling of weapons and explosives to planning operations) and combat



experience, with close ties to terrorist groups and individuals. One quickly realizes the danger that this means. Certainly not all "foreign fighters" in Syria and Iraq are jihadists and not all jihadists are terrorists. Of course, some of the returnees, or those who may return, may be truly repentant or disillusioned and even play a relevant role in IS counter-propaganda. But even in these cases or of others who return with no motivation to jihadism and terrorism (with the obvious difficulty in distinguishing the different situations), there are risks associated with exposure to violence, post-traumatic disorder, depression or social misfit. And there is a risk that, even if they do not plan and carry out attacks, they may at least conduct propaganda, recruitment or terrorist funding activities as well as engage with criminal groups and in criminal and violent activities (Tomé, 2015: 13).

On the other hand, the IS not only continues to control a vast territory and millions of people but also created new *wilayats* beyond Syria and Iraq. It has gathered dozens of other jihadist groups around the world, inspired countless "lone wolves", and multiplied the number of attacks and victims, also expanding humanitarian tragedies in various other areas of conflict – therefore requiring reconfiguring counterterrorism strategies, counter-radicalization, and combating jihadism, and repositioning in various theatres of conflict. Although the scope and the power of IS affiliate groups and *wilayats* vary – finding more resistance in consolidated countries or where jihadism is dominated by AQ – its trajectory demonstrates a particular skill in taking advantage of conflict and state fragile contexts to expand, as shown in Nigeria, Egypt, Lebanon, Libya, Yemen, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. This is also why the rise of the IS has contributed to intensify historic rivalries and sectarian conflict between Sunni and Shiite Muslims in several countries (apart from Syria and Iraq, also in Algeria, Tunisia, Lebanon, Egypt, Jordan, Pakistan, and Yemen) and, collaterally, between regional powers (namely, Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shiite Iran) as well as to strengthen the power and the role of the opposing Shiite militias and to change the volatile connections of jihadist movements and insurgents in various other stages of conflict (as noted in Libya, Lebanon, Yemen and even in Afghanistan).

With the AQ, the IS has oscillated between pragmatic cooperation and fratricidal dispute. But the competition between the two entities in terms of major global "jihadist brand" – as well as regarding financing, jihadist recruits, membership of jihadist groups or the leadership of jihadism in certain places – tends to foster or aggravate violent conflicts and to instigate large-scale attacks on grounds of affirming the supremacy of its respective "omnipresence".

In parallel, the IS has shown an unusual ability to use the Internet and new media for the purposes of propaganda, radicalization, recruitment and terror, in addition to successive and powerful cyberattacks. This aspect, combined with the impressive number of militants, "foreign fighters", jihadist groups and jihadist "lone wolves" it succeeds in attracting, makes the IS a threat not only to the communities that it directly dominates and victimizes in Iraq and Syria but also to the security and stability of neighbouring countries and many others throughout the world.

In other words, the Islamic State is currently a more serious, more diffuse and more complex threat than a year ago. It truly represents the jihadist threat post Al-Qaeda, for which reason the former counterterrorism strategy may not be sufficient to combat it, as argued by Audrey Kurth Cronin (2015).



The "military victory" over the IS may even be the simplest to achieve, despite the constraints arising from the regional complex situation: after all, the IS has a territorial base where it can and must be fought and it shows a level of barbarism to which the international community, starting with Islamic countries, cannot be indifferent. Moreover, it is present in fragile and unstable states that must be stabilized quickly, and exploits conflicts that need to be urgently contained under penalty of opening the door to the expansion of the IS. However, given the position that the IS has reached, combating the Islamic State is also ideological and has now become global. The anti-IS strategy may not be uniform and requires multiple approaches, multiple instruments, and multiple fronts based on multiple vectors. And it should not be reactive because the IS has become one of the biggest disturbing phenomena to international security and stability and also an "internal" threat in many societies all over the world. On the other hand, the fight against the IS cannot neglect the fight against al-Qaeda or facilitate the strengthening of the latter or its affiliates - because the AQ is no less dangerous than the IS, has proven to be astute in its metamorphoses and has the same goal of creating its own "Caliphate".

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