

## The Islamic State – Jihad 2.0

On September 11, 2001, the Western world faced a new threat: global Islamic extremism employing the sophisticated tools of terrorism. The ‘war on Islamic terror’ initiated at that time remains unresolved, and in the foreseeable future the chances of its completion seem unlikely. Over the past few years it is Al-Qaeda that has been perceived as the worst possible ‘incarnation of evil’ in the context of Sunni fundamentalism. No one knew then that a structure far more radical and absolute might appear, compared to which Al-Qaeda seems more predictable in its actions. A group, known until recently as the ‘Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant’ (ISIL), and now renamed the ‘Islamic State’ (ad-Dawla al-Islami’ya), has been in existence for a year and a half (founded in the spring of 2013). In that short time it has already not only changed the patterns of Western thinking about the threat from Sunni Islamic fundamentalism, but also negated a large part of geopolitical axiom in the Middle East.

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### What is the Islamic State?

The genesis of today's Islamic State goes right back to the first years of the American Iraqi Freedom operation and the resistance numerous Islamist terrorist groups led against American forces in Iraq, among them ‘Monotheism and Jihad’ (Jama’at al- Tawhid wal-Jihad), founded by Abu Musab az-Zarqawi. In 2004, it formally established close cooperation with Al-Qaeda and vowed fidelity (bay’ah) to Osama bin Laden. The success story of this organization (which from 2006 functioned under the name ‘the Islamic State of Iraq’, ISI) was interrupted only in 2008, due to the strengthening of the American forces in Iraq (the so-called ‘surge’). A year later (2009) it seemed that ISI finally passed into history.

The administration of President Barack Obama acknowledged that the situation in Iraq had stabilized, and announced the imminent withdrawal of the U.S. forces. The U.S. triumph turned out to be premature; as already in 2010 ISI's activity began to grow again. When in December 2011 the last American soldiers were leaving Iraq, the new terrorist offensive of ISI was already in operation. The scale of violence in the country, measured by the number of assassinations and terrorist attacks, and the number of victims, again approached the same level as the period from 2004-2007.

The year 2011 brought not only a radical change in the strategic situation in Iraq, caused by the completion of the U.S. military presence and the growing activism of the ISI. It is also the time of the outbreak of the Arab Spring in many countries of the Middle East and North Africa. Bloody events in Syria especially proved to be crucial for the fate of the ISI, where at the turn of 2011-2012 they took action against the regime of Bashar al-Assad. When in 2012 government forces in Syria had weakened and the secular Free Syrian Army (FSA) began to gain an advantage in the conflict, the ISI modified its strategy. It announced the fight to establish an Islamic caliphate in the Levant, and in spring 2013 it adopted a new name, becoming the 'Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)'. This led to a sharp conflict with the leadership of Al-Qaeda, even though the leader of ISIL, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, consistently emphasized that his group was never formally part of Al-Qaeda; therefore, he did not have to obey its commands. In the autumn of 2013 the first clashes occurred between ISIL and al-Nusrah Front, an official branch of the Al-Qaeda in the Levant region. Soon ISIL began to achieve brilliant military victories in Syria, winning successive regions of the country and establishing its own rule by means of brutal methods. Its operations were designed to target both the FSA and the Islamist competition. Jihadists from ISIL also continued a campaign of terror in Iraq, preparing the ground for a massive offensive which in spring and summer 2014 led to the seizure of a quarter of the territory of the country, including Mosul - the second largest Iraqi city. The culmination of this victorious march of the Islamists has become the establishment of the Caliphate with al-Baghdadi as 'caliph Ibrahim' at the helm. At the same time, ISIL transformed its name into the Islamic State (IS).

### The phenomenon of the Islamic State

The phenomenon of IS, its military successes in Syria and Iraq, and rapidly growing popularity among radicalized Muslims around the world, has resulted in the coexistence of

several factors. First, this organization has a strict hierarchical and centralized structure, with clearly separated levels of management (command), each of which has precisely defined powers and responsibilities - both substantive and territorial. In this respect, militarily organized and well-functioning IS differs radically from al-Qaeda - the structure of a typically network character, operating on the principle of a loose federation of groups and organizations bonded by common goals, objectives, and more or less unanimous know-how, but every day working on their own bill.

Second, the Islamic State and all of its earlier organizational incarnations do not attach too much importance to philosophical and theological issues. While Al-Qaeda has developed over the past two decades an extensive and complicated ideological system, based on its own vision of Islam and carefully selected policies, the IS bases its activities on a simple interpretation of 'clean' Koranic standards. In this sense, the Caliphate is operating today just as the Afghan Taliban in the first period of their rule in Afghanistan. The Islamic State, although it has announced the restoration of the Caliphate (which is, after all, also a centre of religious authority), clearly does not have a strong intellectual and theological background. Instead of focusing, just like leaders of Al-Qaeda do, on debating over religious doubts and dilemmas, IS executives prefer concrete, realistic action. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, by reviving the Caliphate and announcing himself its sovereign, has achieved what Al-Qaeda had sought to do, and what it was planning to do some time in the future when political and religious conditions would allow. The establishment of the Caliphate, however, gave IS an immediate propagandist, spiritual-religious and psychological advantage over unduly 'high-brow' Al-Qaeda. Moreover, the organization, founded by bin Laden, has for years focused more on the search for a way for a spectacular attack on the West (similar to the attacks of 9/11), preferably on its territory rather than building and strengthening its position in the Islam world. Neither bin Laden nor Ayman az-Zawahiri (who from the beginning has been Al-Qaeda's chief ideologist) took into account that the restoration of the Caliphate, being a symbolic reference to the earliest days of the existence of Islam (i.e. the time of its unity and great victories), might guarantee immediate success in the battle for the hearts and minds of radical Muslims around the world.

Al-Qaeda has already felt the effects of this erroneous calculation. The organization has begun to lose influence to the Islamic State and popularity among Islamic extremists. In Syria hundreds of militants from the al-Nusra Front have transferred to the structures of

IS, and the vast majority of especially western 'jihad volunteers' have chosen Caliph Ibrahim over az-Zawahiri. This may mean that Al-Qaeda, so far the undisputed leader and symbol of the jihadist movement, is beginning to lose its privileged position among Islamic fanatics.

Another important factor contributing to the recent success of the Islamic State is its ability to use modern tools of mass communication, especially online media and social networking sites. The flood of propaganda and information by IS on the Internet exceeds by far the scale of previous activities of al-Qaeda and its allies in this regard. IS activity in the virtual world is designed to both promote their own case (e.g. in order to recruit new people to the Jihad), as well as simply impact its audience psychologically ('terror media'). This is done, for example, by uploading shocking videos and pictures of mass executions or killings of western citizens carried out in a barbaric way.

IS's absolute financial self-sufficiency is not without significance for its position and strength. The organization is now without a doubt the richest terrorist group in the world, with assets estimated at 1-2 billion dollars. In the city of Mosul alone in June 2014 Islamists were able to rob the local banks of approximately 400 million dollars in cash. Black market exploitation of oil fields in eastern Syria brings IS an income estimated at approximately 20 million dollars a day. Added to this are enormous profits from criminal activity - racketeering, kidnapping for ransom, smuggling, etc. There are already legends circulating in the region about the wealth of the Caliphate and its leaders. The financial independence of the Islamic State, which translates into political independence, also distinguishes it from Al-Qaeda, which finances its operations mainly from donations. The model preferred by Al-Qaeda provides not only much smaller amounts, but also creates the risk of a situation in which 'sponsors' may affect the strategy and direction of the activities of the group.

## Conclusions and recommendations

1. The threat from the Islamic State is a completely new quality in the long war against Islamism. The mistake Western politicians keep making is that they compare the IS to Al-Qaeda. They are completely different organizations, which, despite resorting to similar values and ideological slogans, operate on completely different platforms. Al-Qaeda represents a dangerous and brutal, but nonetheless predictable, strain of religious radicalism. IS and the Caliphate, however, elude any rational attempts at classification and analysis, combining primitive ideology, organizational ability and effective enjoyment of the benefits of modern civilization. The Islamic State appears to be a new generation of degenerate Islamism – Jihad 2.0.

2. The Islamic State, because of its economic, financial and political independence, is completely beyond the control of any centres of influence in the Arab/Muslim world. Both Saudis and Qataris have painfully discovered this recently; traditionally they have been trying to hold in their hands the reins of directing (even indirectly) the structures of global jihad. Therefore, the Caliphate established by al-Baghdadi is uncontrollable from outside, and as such is a mortal threat to the Arab and Muslim regimes in the region; the Royal House of Saud especially, which officially considers itself as the Guardian of the Holy Places of Islam. Caliph Ibrahim has already publicly announced that his next target will be the 'liberation' of Mecca and Medina.

3. There is a concern that the Islamic State and the Caliphate may be a long-term feature in the strategic reality of the Middle East. Due to the complicated system of geopolitics of the region, there does not seem to be any force present which would be capable of quickly and decisively eliminating the threat of IS. This cannot be done by either Iraq or Syria. Nor can it be done by any of the regional powers (Iran, Turkey, Israel, Saudi Arabia) involved in mutual rivalries and conflicting interests.

4. The responsibility for deterring and defeating the Islamic State lies with NATO and the European Union. This is especially true considering that among those who have volunteered to fight for the Caliphate there are thousands of citizens of Western countries (mainly European). The fight against IS in Syria and Iraq cannot, therefore, be regarded only as an action in defence of the geopolitical status quo in the Middle East, but also as a pre-emptive anti-terrorist action, ensuring the safety of the Western countries.

5. The 'coalition of the willing' formed by NATO members should immediately take decisive military action to prevent further strengthening of IS. Any military operation against IS, however, must also be accompanied by a comprehensive political strategy, assuming, among other factors, an attempt to normalize relations with the authorities in Damascus and recognise Tehran as an important player in the fight against the Islamic State. As part of this strategy the West should also verify its present approach of unconditional support for all the political movements in the Middle East fighting for 'democracy and human rights.' Several years of experience, including the Arab Spring, have clearly shown that the majority of these movements are in fact more or less extremist.

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