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THE ISLAMIC STATE OF IRAQ AND SYRIA: THE DISTOPIA OF A NEW POLITICAL ORDER IN THE MIDDLE EAST

SUPERVISOR
Prof. Pasquale Ferrara

<div align="right">

CANDIDATE
Francesca Beniamino
ID nr. 622152

</div>

CO-SUPERVISOR
Prof. Francesca Maria Corrao

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Abstract

The objective of the dissertation is the portrayal of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (commonly known with the acronym of ISIS), and its goal of instituting a new political state (the Caliphate) in the region, de facto destroying previously established borders.

The dissertation firstly focuses on the advancement of the terrorist group and its breaking on the international political scene as a new global threat. It seems the organization appeared all of a sudden only in recent years, but truth to be told it has existed since the early 1990s under various shapes. It is considered the legacy of the actions of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.

As a consequence, the analysis examinates his actions when he was leader of one of the inspiring groups for ISIS: Jama'at al-Tawhid w'al Jihad (the Party of Monotheism and Jihad). Taking into consideration his decision to adhere to radical salafism, a religious doctrine preaching the total rejection of western values and influences, which is also the position now held by the Islamic State, the essay briefly analyzes the development of Salafism in the past. He directed his cruel intentions against other Muslims, and especially Shiites. The reason, aside from considering them as disrespectful devotees, was simply one of convenience: Shiites were weak, with less capability to react, so they were a perfect aim. But al-Zarqawi was also helped by favourable political factors.

Afterwards, the dissertation describes the actions of al-Zarqawi as

emir of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), as directly appointed by Osama bin-Laden, even though the two leaders continued to be in disagreement about their strategies. At this point, however, circumstances were turning against the armed group: Sunnis started to rebel and to fight against AQI. In that period, in June 2006, al-Zarqawi was killed during a USA aerial attack, and this weakened the organization. From that moment on, an internal fight for the control of al Qaeda in Iraq started.

So focal point of the analysis becomes Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, his successor in power after al-Zarqawi's death, with which the organization regained its previous denomination of Islamic State of Iraq (or ISI). The essay take firstly into discussion his previous actions and his path to leadership. It is important to mention that he had obtained a Ph.D. in Islamic Studies at the University of Baghdad, so his religious education gave to him and to his interpretation of Islam a lot of credibility. Furthermore, it contributed to the creation of his image as a modern version of the Prophet Muhammad.

In 2005, he was captured by American forces because suspected of having links with al-Zarqawi and his terrorist group. He was confined in Camp Bucca, but in reality, that was a positive experience for him in a certain sense, because several terrorists were imprisoned in the fort: they were able to connect with each other and exchange important information. A number of new leaders of terroristic formations developed there in that precise period.

Thereupon, the dissertation continues further investigating peculiarities of the new commander and change in strategies he

brought when appointed as official leader in 2010: al-Baghdadi was aware of al Qaeda's low popularity among Sunni Iraqis, and on account of this he distanced the organization from that influence, trying to transmit a more nationalistic image of its armed group. In contrast with the habits of western politicians but also of arab dictators, the majority of which bases his political strategy on the costant diffusion of their self-images everywhere, he acted in a very reserved manner, to the point that it became difficult to see him clearly, both in pictures and in person. Because of this, he is also known with the nickname of 'the Invisible Sheik'.

al-Baghdadi saw in the Syrian conflict of that period and in the uprising against Bashar al Assad a perfect occasion to enlarge and strengthen his organization. To obtain a greater impact there, ISI organized a strategic merging with another armed organization known with the name of Jabhat al Nusra and ISI changed its name in ISIL (Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant), better known as ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and al Sham, that was the ancient name for these Arab territories). This helped making clear the intentions of Baghdadi of conquering Middle East as a whole, as al-Baghdadi announced worldwidely the restoration of the ancient Caliphate, and his proclamation as its Caliph Ibrahim.

From that moment on, it was possible to identify ISIS as a new model of terrorism, different from other armed groups in the area, and as a new model of state as well, according to the words of Loretta Napoleoni who defines it a "shell state". It could be intended as a surrogate of a concrete state, which has not faculties to concede

political rights and freedoms al-Baghdadi has promised since the beginning. t holds only basic social and economic structure but it lacks the necessary political legitimacy recognized by the international community.

The dissertation continues with a focus on the challenges IS is imposing on Middle East. First to be mentioned is the Sykes-Picot agreement which in 1916 allocated different areas of the region under Western powers' influence, in the event of the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. France would have monopoly of control over the so-called "Blue Zone", and so specifically on Cilicia, the sea-bordering part of Syria, Lebanon and a part of Galilee to the north of the homonym sea. On the other hand, Britain would have direct control on Southern Mesopotamia (corresponding to modern Iraq, and particularly to the cities of Basrah and Baghdad) and on the territory near to the Acre-Haifa bay, constituting the "Red Zone". In addition, an "A Zone" corresponding to the present territory of Syria would become an Arab state subject to French influence, while a "B Zone" equivalent to current Iraqi territory would be ruled under British influence. Finally, another zone under international authority was established in the area, consisting of Transjordan and Palestine, the West Bank area and Gaza. After having received several heavy criticisms, the Sykes-Picot agreement was finally abolished in 1920, during the San Remo Conference. Despite this, ISIS continued to focus its efforts on the attempt to discard the Sykes-Picot order. It is perceived as a sort of "original sin" since it has provoked

misunderstandings about the real ethnic and cultural composition of the region, and tensions in the whole Middle-East. So, it is trying to delete these boundaries that have tied together the area since the end of the First World War, under the firm belief that any circumstance ever verified in Middle East in the postwar period has been influenced by artificial borders and colonial arrogance. ISIS believes Western powers considered their interests and aspirations more important than those of the Arabs, and so they are determined to change this pattern.

The terrorist group of ISIS is not the first radical phenomenon matured in this area, so the dissertation concentrates then on previous episodes of terrorist attacks in the Muslim area, under the aegis of jihad. The jihadist movement appeared for the first time on the scene in the 1970s, under the belief of the Muslim community as a whole that must be reunited. As a method to obtain so, they related on international terrorism against Western nations. However, the term *jihad* has older origins. In the Qur'an, it is intended as "*fighting in the path of God*". In this sense, it defined the opposition of whoever lined up against Muslims and the precise duty of the community as a whole to defend itself, when it becomes necessary.

The word is very often mistaken having the meaning of "holy war". In reality, it can be literally translated as "struggle". According to traditional Islamic teachings, sometimes *jihad* as war can be justified, if it will later lead to a situation of more justice and well-being. Instead, if such action can be recognized as unjust and belonging only to a small group of people acting individually, these are classified as war, but not as *jihad* since these happen outside Islamic law.

In this matter, it would be impossible not to mention the long history and strong influence of al-Qaeda in the region. Its belief system started to quickly spread in all the Middle East, taking roots especially among fundamentalist elements of the society. This dogma commenced to arouse concern in the Gulf States, and particularly in Saudi Arabia, already considered as the symbol of corrupted regimes. Osama bin-Laden became al-Qaeda's leader, sustaining his perception of Americans as *infideles*, and as the only enemy of Islam. His main goal remained that of hit Western countries, and especially USA, and their citizens in the calmness of their nations. Against this incumbent threat, Western powers organized a worldwide counter reaction, especially after 9/11 events in the USA.

Inevitably, paths of the two armed groups have crossed, even if their relations highlights underlying rivalries among them. They differ in their approach to the international scene (since ISIS presents itself as a concrete political actor, while al-Qaeda had always been an organization expanding in several countries, but without claims to create a new state) as well as backgrounds of their leaders. Both groups could be considered extremist but they did disagree in the approach and the use of violence. Divergence displayed also in the ideologies: bin-Laden was more focused on defeating the Western enemy, but e never showed willingness to create a caliphate, and never considered other Muslims as a threat, pushing for a change only in cases of corrupted regimes. He always acknowledged solidarity between Muslims was crucial, for reaching a united Islamic community. On the other hand, al-Zarqawi strongly believed that

Islamic groups as well should be purified, even with violent means. Even after the death of both previous emirs, new leaders mainteined rivalry and differences between the two organization. In the end, this led al-Qaeda to permanently disaffiliate with ISIS,but ISIS continued to gain territories and proselytes.

Without any doubt, favourable conditions for the development of ISIS phenomenon have been created by the current moment of destabilization of the entire Middle East area. The region appears as divided and fragmented as never, with diverse outburst of crisis threatening the political order. Even Islam is divided internally, not only between Sunnis and Shia but also among Sunnis themselves. Minorities are now subjected to heavy persecutions. This situation is surely the result of many causes and mistakes binding together, from regional and international actors. In this confusion, ISIS is presenting itself as a trustworthy political entity, able to end years of conflicts and disorders: where there is a lack of central authority, minority groups have more possibilities to gain influence. To demonstrate this assertion, the essay takes closely into consideration the case studies of Iraq and Syria, analysing the succession of events in the two countries. Middle East is likely to be reshaped by the disentangling of Syrian and Iraqi crises, since a change in their political orders would affect that of the region in its entirety.

Starting from Syria, civil war there is highly sectarian and religious divisions reflect also political identities. It is possible indeed to say that such a conflict seems to be driven more by a desire for regional

dominance. As a matter of fact, the conflict account for several regional players and it has been considered a new example of "proxy war". As all regional players have used Syrian battlefield in an attempt to reach their own interests, at the expense of the country, in the same way a regional effort is the only hope to end the conflict. Otherwise, upheavels and chaos are likely to extend to the entire area. And that circumstance is precisely the vacuum of sovereignity ISIS takes advantage of to integrate itself in the regional context.

For what regards Iraq, withdrawal of American troops in 2011 provoked an escalation of violences to which the government was unable to answer, lacking external support. This opened the way for ISIS progress, with further bombing attacks and many cities occupied. Such events undermined also the security of borders between Iraq and Syria, favoring the transfer of terrorists and military equipments across the two countries. Thereafter, the merging of civil wars going on in both countries into an only armed conflict, and declarations of willingness to constitute again the old caliphate (after which, ISIS changed its name in IS to underline its global claims), made external intervention necessary. Despite his initial purpose of being only partially involved, USA President Obama announced further engagement of American army in the conflict, as a step of a larger counter-terrorism action.

Most recent attemps at resolving the situation in this area are constituted by the Vienna Process, a series of international negotiations held in Austria in October 2015, and the Geneva peace talks, currently going on at the time of writing (January 2016). Main

objectives of these talks are to reach a ceasefire in the country in the short term period, and then the beginning of a political transition period, leading to democratic elections and a new constitution.

It is difficult to say whether these negotiations would be helpful or not, however the dissertation states a strong need to consider also the possibility of negotiating with terrorists, at least to stop bloodshed of innocent people.

When compared to other terroristic groups, IS appears very successful in the imposition of its rule in Middle East, and in the presumption of constituting a political state out of nowhere. On the other hand, it has had little influence on the world and other countries have refused to recognize it as a state. Urgency in defeating it depends on the unbelievably cruel practices utilised to impose its advance, so this led to the constitution of an international coalition. However, reactions and emulation desires throughout the world should not be undervalued: jihadist terrorism exercises a strong attractiveness on people.

The dissertation underlines that the series of successes accomplished by the Islamic State can be attributed to the ensemble of its efficient peculiarities.

One of the strenght points of IS is the accessibility of its message to all Muslims. The group is not only elite-oriented, instead it aimed to group all those people disappointed by the state of events, and willing to find a solution for social problems such as the corruption and the inequality present in most Islamic states, not to mention those

exasperated by authoritarian rules. Moreover, this openess regarded not only people living in traditional Muslim countries, but the world in its entirety. In fact, IS has diffused several videos calling to military action also Muslims living in foreign countries. Important messages are directly released in English and French, apart from Arabic, while being translated also in other languages later. And such calls have not remained unanswered: statistics have demonstrated that 32 % circa of fighters in Iraq and Syria came from Europe. Motivations to join can be diverse, but a great help has been given by the high level of propaganda and online presence of IS. It took also the forms of brutal videos and photos of tortures and executions, going viral across Internet. This manipulation tactic can be considered as an evolution of al-Qaeda's method, able to diffuse more rapidly and efficaciously terror around the world.

But the videos do not involve only cruel scenes. Many of them picture everyday life under IS rule. The group wants indeed to demonstrate it can give to people a better life, so they showed new roads and buildings to replace those destructed by bombings, the distribution of food and primary resources, even the access to electricity. This approach combines a state of constant threat with the illusion of security and a stable order.

These videos demonstrates, on the other hand, that IS has perfectly understood how to radicalize in the territory. Given that it want to implement a new political state, the group knows the need of having a clear structure at the basis. It has divided its area of influence in provinces, each ruled by a local leader and a government, which are

also backed by some administrative components. Once controlling an area, IS has also the habit to modified every official object (such as police cars or uniforms, ambulances and so on) with its black flag, to constantly remember its presence to citizens.

Moreover, the essay casts light on the fact that IS appears to be the richest terroristic group in history. It is internally financed, since it is based on the appropriation of banks and their funds in conquered territories, on the collecting of taxes imposed on citizens under their rule, and also on the earnings deriving from natural resources present in the region. It has also not to be forgotten that many profits are collected thanks to ransoms payed by other countries for the freedom of hostages. In addition, they receive also international donations in the form of money and resources, from people that might not be able to leave their country to join the fight, but are more than willing to help IS progresses.

Even if the caliphate would not have a stable future, IS has created now a new model of terrorist action that can inspire other armed groups, encouraging them to act similarly, especially considering the overall Western incapacity to stop this phenomenon. Apart from the political establishment, the main tactic on which actions of IS are based is the instillation of fear in every human, without distinction, and tiredness and sense of impotence in front of the amount of cruelty they are not afraid to use. Terrorism is one of their most efficient strategy, and when it is perpetrated in Western countries not only undermines in concrete the security of states but it has also an heavy effect on the perception of people. They feel not safe even if far from

the real war scenario, and so they ask for protection and stronger security measures. People are terrified by the idea of what IS militants are able to do and the awareness that it could happen (as it already has) also in the core of Western world.

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Introduction

The objective of the present dissertation is the portrayal of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (commonly known with the acronym of ISIS), and its goal of instituting a new political state in the region (the Caliphate), de facto destroying previously established borders.

In the first chapter, the dissertation will focus on the advancement of the terrorist group and its breaking on the international political scene as a new global threat. As a consequence, it will examinate the actions of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, at the time leader of what is now considered one of inspiring groups for ISIS: Jama'at al-Tawhid w'al Jihad (the Party of Monotheism and Jihad). Taking into consideration his decision to adhere to radical salafism, a religious doctrine opposing Western values, this essay will briefly analyze the development of Salafism in the past.

Then it will shift to the actions of al-Zarqawi as emir of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), as directly appointed by Osama bin-Laden. Afterwards, analysis will take as its focal point the figure of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, his successor in power after al-Zarqawi's death. At first, the essay will take into discussion his previous actions and his path to leadership. Thereupon, it will continue further investigating peculiarities of the new commander and change in strategies he brought. On top of those, there is the worldwide announcement of the restoration of the ancient Caliphate, and the proclamation of al-Baghdadi as its Caliph Ibrahim.

The first chapter ends with the identification of ISIS as a new model of

terrorism, different from other armed groups in the area, and as a new model of state as well, according to the words of Loretta Napoleoni who defines it a "shell state".

Main focus of the second chapter are the challenges ISIS is imposing on Middle East. First of all, analysis will concentrate on the Sykes-Picot agreement which in 1916 allocated different areas of the region under Western powers' influence, in the event of the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. The territory was divided into three zones: the "A Zone" corresponding to the present territory of Syria would become an Arab state subject to French influence, while the "B Zone" equivalent to current Iraqi territory would be ruled under British influence. The third one under international authority was established in the area consisting of Transjordan and Palestine, the West Bank area and Gaza. The essay will go deeper in the examination of the talks for the reaching of such agreement and of each side involved. Moreover, it will take into consideration consequent reactions at the international level. However, after few years, the Sykes-Picot agreement was abolished in 1920, during the San Remo Conference. Afterwards, analysis will focus on the resentment of ISIS towards these external-made borders and the attempt to discard the Sykes-Picot order. It has been perceived as a sort of "original sin" since it has provoked misunderstandings about the real ethnic and cultural composition of the region, and tensions in the whole Middle-East.

The dissertation will then concentrate on previous episodes of terrorist attacks in the Muslim area, under the aegis of jihad. It would be

impossible not to mention the long history and strong influence of al-Qaeda in the region. Its belief system started to quickly spread in all the Middle East, taking roots especially among fundamentalist elements of the society. This dogma commenced to arouse concern in the Gulf States, and particularly in Saudi Arabia, already considered as the symbol of corrupted regimes. But bin-Laden's main goal remained that of hit Western countries, and especially USA, and their citizens in the calmness of their nations. Against this incumbent threat, Western powers organized a worldwide counter reaction, especially after 9/11 events in the USA.

Finally, the second chapter will shift its focus further analysing relations between al-Qaeda and ISIS, underlying rivalries among them. It will highlight differences in their approach to the international scene, as well as those regarding leaders' background. Moreover, both groups could be considered extremist but they did disagree in the approach and the use of violence, and divergence displayed also in the ideologies.

In the end, this led al-Qaeda to permanently disaffiliate with ISIS.

The third and last chapter will analyze the current moment of destabilization of the entire Middle East area, which created favourable conditions for the development of ISIS phenomenon. The region appears as divided and fragmented as never, with diverse outburst of crisis threatening the political order. Even Islam is divided internally, not only between Sunnis and Shia but also among Sunnis themselves.

ISIS is presenting itself as a trustworthy political entity, able to end years of conflicts and confusion. To demonstrate this affirmation, the essay will take into consideration the case studies of Iraq and Syria, analysing the succession of events in the two countries. ISIS was able to install itself in the vacuum left from the absence of sovereignty. At that point, attention will be driven from the merging of civil wars going on in both countries into a unique armed conflict, to which international powers have attempted to answer through peace talks, as it will be more widely illustrated in the final section of the third chapter.

1. **The paradigm of the Islamic State, from Abu Musab al Zarqawi to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi: the dream of the restoration of the ancient Caliphate**

After the end of the First World War, for the first time ever a non-state actor is trying to re-draw the borders established by the former colonial countries in the Middle East. This seems to be the main political objective of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, commonly known with the acronym of ISIS.

1.1 Frequent changing of names as the symbol for a change in the organization

Since its initial development, the organization has changed name very often, each new denomination being the symbol of an important change within it. Indeed, it was originally part of the Abu Mussab al Zarqawi's armed group (al Tawhid al Jihad), then it became ISI (the Islamic State in Iraq) and rightly after it merged with al Qaeda in this country. This transition reflected the willingness and the effort of the organization to focus firstly on the conquest of Iraq, since they considered it as the starting point to build a new Caliphate. Not long ago, in 2013, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi (after having taken the leadership of the group in 2010) decided to change the name in Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, known with the acronym of ISIL or also as ISIS (with the "s" deriving from the words *al Sham*, the old Arab

denomination for Damascus and the surrounding territories). This marked the effective setting up of a transnational effort to reach the final and ambitious scope: the reconstruction of the ancient Caliphate. As a matter of fact, it is considered by the armed group and its militants as the ideal society to live in and as the perfect political expression of Allah's will.

However, in Syria and in Iraq, at the present moment, the organization is referred to simply as *al Dawlat*, that means the State.

All of these names listed above and their explanations are used as well by the western media and politicians to identify this organization, but they are highly careful in not mentioning the word "state" when talking about ISIS. In fact, this would mean to give a sort of legitimazion as a political entity to a terroristic organization. In their opinions, this must be avoided in any way.[1]

Recently, the French minister of Foreign Affairs Laurent Fabius has strongly demanded to not use anymore the word State or the acronym ISIS, in an attempt of deligitimazing the political ambitions of militants. Instead, he suggested to identify the organization with the term "DAESH", standing for Dawlat al-Islāmiyya fī al-Irāq wa s-Shām that is basically the full Arabic name for ISIS. The approval of other political leaders and the increasing use of this acronym has meant a further invalidation, at least on the ideological level, for the group that ISIS' militants highly fear. As a consequence, they have reportedly

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1 NAPOLEONI, L. "*ISIS. Lo stato del terrore. Chi sono e cosa vogliono le milizie islamiche che minacciano il mondo.*" Edited by Feltrinelli. 2014.

threatened to physically punish any person caught using the word.[2]

1.2   The leader of the Islamic State and his relation with radical salafism

It is worth mentioning the fact that this armed group seemed to break into the international political scene in a very unexpected way only in most recent years, but truth to be told is that it has existed since the early 1990s under various shapes. It is considered the legacy of the actions of Abu Musab al Zarqawi.

Abu Musab al Zarqawi was born in 1967 in Jordan, and as a bad temper guy he got arrested very soon, in his early twenties: once in jail, he decided to adhere to radical salafism, a doctrine that preach the total rejection of western values and influences. It is indeed the position now held by the Islamic State.

At its origins (that can be found in the second half of XIX century) salafism was not an anti-western belief. On the contrary, it was mainly the respect and the admiration towards western modernity to give birth to the movement. Arab countries started to compare their socio-economic and political conditions with those of Europe, and the results were unsatisfying. The Ottoman Empire, at the time, was going through a deep crisis and this encouraged a process of modernization,

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2   https://www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/2014/10/09/words-matter-isis-war-use-daesh/V85GYEuasEEJgrUun0dMUP/story.html

but most important the spreading of the will to modernize. This period is well-known as *al Nahda*, that means literally the "renaissance". Since the Empire was slowly disintegrating, Arabs aimed for the creation of new Islamic and modern states, on the example of western culture. To reach this purpose, salafism urged all Muslim to go back to the origins of Islam, those times in which religion has been at the highest level of its pureness. In this way, it could be possible to create again an Arab identity, giving to all Arabs the necessary strength to obtain the independence, after many years of subjugation.

Unfortunately, in the last years of XIX century, Europe started to colonize the Arab world in lieu of helping it modernize, and Arabs experienced the process as a betrayal. This surely contributed to the transformation of salafism in a conservative and xenophobic movement, now mainly anti-West. The central idea remains indeed the purification of Islam, but now it has to be purified from the contamination and the corruption produced by Western colonization. Instead of the Ottoman Empire, Europeans are regarded as responsible for the downfall of Arab world. Refusal of every Western-like element derived from this.[3]

Indeed, Salafism is the pure religion in itself, without any addition or alteration, and the Salafis are now the people truly devoted to Islam, as at the beginning this was the definition of the first and best three generations of Muslims. They adhere strictly to the *Quran* and the *Sunnah* as understood and practiced collectively. It is important to

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3   HOURANI, A. *A History of the Arab People*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2003.

underline that it is not intended as a political party, but it is rather a way of understanding Islam, in order to act perfectly in accordance with its beliefs. Salafism encourages the return to the original and pure significance of *Quran* and *Sunnah*, namely what Allah himself has said, and to clean up them from any alteration or additional narration, with the purpose of reconstructing the pureness of the initial message. They also exhort all Muslims to purify their lives from any act of infidelity and any form of polytheism, and to comply with the teachings and the ethics of their religion, so to obtain Allah's favour. Their final purpose has to be that of proposing realistic solutions to contemporary problems in accordance with the Islamic religion: they will create in this way an Islamic way of life and an Islamic society ruled by Allah's will. It is mainly in these assertions that the metamorphosis from a religion to a political order can be found.[4] It is important to mention alsoWahnabism, that is even a more strict, Saudi form of Salafism.

Salafism is based on one core principle: *Tawhid*. It is the belief in the uniqueness of Allah and his message. A true Muslim has to believe in his existence, has to worship Him and to grant full obiedience only to Him. *Tawhid* means also the absolute obiedience to Prophet Muhammad, since he is the only one to which the Revelation has been given and he cannot be replaced by anyone else. Moreover, that Revelation is composed by two complementary parts, namely the Koran and the Sunnah. To distnce themselves from these principles

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4   http://qss.org/articles/salafi/text.html

would mean not to be a good Muslim, and it is regarded as an act of arrogance.[5]

1.3 The concept of *Tahwid* and its evolution

The concept of *Tawhid* has been interpreted in several different ways and used as a basis of religious wisdom and as the organizing principle of the society. During XIII century, Ibn Taymiyyah (a Hanbali jurist) moved the attention to the socio-moral side of the issue, affirming that Allah should be considered the unique creator and ruler of the world, while humans should have the only task of respecting His will. This can be the only expression of true faith.

Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (an Arabian reformer) denounced damaging behaviours of bad Muslims, such as sectarianism, polytheism and use of other religious sources rather than the *Quran* or the *Sunnah*. *Tahwid* could be the remedy to these intemperances, promoting Islamic unity as the basis for the state, calling the example of modern Saudi Arabia in XVIII century.

Thereafter, one important contribution was given by Muhammad Abduh in XIX century. He formulated a sort of synthesis between the concept of *Tahwid*, human freedom and obiedience to Allah. In doing so, he affirmed two core principles: the need to avoid strict adherence

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5 *Ibidem*

to traditional dogmas in favor of a more independent reasoning, and the necessity to pursue practical goals instead of only contemplating divine nature. This belief system was favoured at the time also by what was happening in the society. As mentioned before, traditional ideologies such as Nasserism and nationalism have failed to help maintain independence and to build an Islamic unity. [6]

In this scenario, Sayyed Qutb (an Islamic theorist and the leader of the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1950s and in the 1960s) gave another new formulation of the concept of *Tahwid* (which Abu Musab al Zarqawi will recall later). According to him Allah is the only source of power, that should not be compromised by anyone. Consequently, intended as such, Islamic religion assumes a political connotation, and the Caliphate is the only successfull expression of it, as a form of government. Qutb promoted a complete fraction with Western politics and an exhortation to distance Islam from any external influence.[7]

1.4 Abu Musab al Zarqawi: how he became the leader of the Islamic State

Going back to the actions of Abu Musab al Zarqawi, when he was released from jail, he moved to Afghanistan in order to embrace the mujaheddin cause, but in 1989 it was already too late to fight against Soviets, so he came back to Jordan.

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6   http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e2356
7   http://qss.org/articles/salafi/text.html

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Ten years later, he returned to Afghanistan and met for the first time Osama bin Laden, in the city of Kandahar: he was asked to join the terroristic organization of Al Qaeda but he refused. He was convinced that fighting against the United States of America was useless, since they constituted a really far enemy. His main purpose was that of opposing what he considered his closest opponent, the Jordan government, and of implementing an authentic Islamic state in the region. So, at the beginning, he implemented a training camp for suicide bombers in Herat, in the neighborhood of the Iranian borders.

This marked the beginning of first kamikaze attacks in the area: in August 2003, a bomb truck exploded near the United Nations' Headquarter in Baghdad, killing the Head of the Delegations and other members.

After few days, a car loaded with explosive crashed into the Imam Ali's Mosque, in Najaf (considered the holiest place of Shia worship in Iraq) and killed 125 Shiites people. Among them, also the ayatollah Muhammad Baqer al Hakim - spiritual leader of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) – was killed. He had just came back from Iran, in the aftermath of Saddam Hussein's fall, and he was ready to lead the party to the political triumph.

This caused shocked reactions especially among Shiites because it was easier and more logical for everybody to think that the attacks would be directed against American soldiers located in the territory. In reality, as we know, this was more bin Laden's target: he directed all his hatred against the American enemy. He as well considered Shiites

as heretics and infideles, but was not interested in getting rid of them.

On the other hand, Abu Musab al Zarqawi since the beginning directed his cruel intentions against other Muslims, and especially Shiites. The reason, aside from considering them as disrespectful Muslims, was simply one of convenience: Shiites were weak, with less capability to react, so they were a perfect aim. This was favored also by the fact that his main strategy became that of suicidal missions. Zarqawi was also helped by favourable political circumstances. After the breakdown of Saddam Hussein's government, Sunnis politicians who had held the power for many years in Iraq started to be substituted by other Shiites politicians. This sparked a wave of deep resentment among Sunnis, of which the future leader of the Islamic State profited.

From the end of August 2003, after the USA-led invasion of Iraq, until December 2004, he set up and guided what can be now classified as the ancestor of ISIS: Jama'at al-Tawhid w'al Jihad (the Party of Monotheism and Jihad). In this way, he was able to obtain the endorsement of Osama bin Laden, even though the two leaders continued to be in disagreement about their strategies. In particular, bin Laden was opposing to create a sort of alliance between the Sunni and Shia deployments, because he was not really convinced that they could set up a unified nationalistic resistence. However, he was proved wrong when the revolt led by Moqtada al Sadr obtained great support by Sunnis fighter. At this point, Al Qaeda's leader was obliged to admit he had mistaken his evaluations, and to sustain Zarqawi's strategies.

By that time, he was very influential within the international "jihadi" movement. As a consequence, bin Laden welcomed the group into his organization, re-naming it as al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). Abu Mussab al Zarqawi naturally became its *emir* in the region.

During this period, he was able to attract enough resources and disciples to contrast both US forces and the Shia resistence, leading Iraq on the brink of civil war. Aware of his power, he aspired to upgrade it to spiritual leadership as well. He diffused new and remarkably harsh interpretations of Sharia, such as for example full veil for women, beheadings for criminals, and so on. Anyone who resides on the territory should adhere to this radical belief system, upon the pain of death. This made it barely distinguishable from the taliban form of government.

1.5 The end for AQI?

At this point, however, circumstances were turning against the armed group: Sunnis started to rebel and to fight against AQI. In that period, in June 2006, Zarqawi was killed during a USA aerial attack, just in time to avoid the burst of the sectarian war in Iraq and this weakened the organization. From that moment on, an internal fight for the control of al Qaeda in Iraq started.

The US army supported financially an uprising, known with the name

of the *Awakening*, guided by Iraqi Sunnis. These have lined up in the past against American soldiers, so they now believed their new approach would make them obtain immunity from prosecutions for previous actions, and also guarantee them participation in the re-construction of the polical life of the country. At the same time, American forces implemented a remarkable increase of military pressure (the so-called *Surge*), blasting the weakening of all jihadist groups in Iraq. They were not interested in mending the fracture between Shia and Sunni factions. Their strategy consisted primarily in the lessening of violence, in order to permit to US troops to leave the area.[8]

The Surge action was directed to the reconquering of Baghdad and other areas in the south surrounding it. US soldiers were supported by the *Awakening* Sunni movement and by Iraqis security forces, and during an entire year of activies they were able to hit several vital units of AQI, so that when the mission was declared completed (in 2011), it was regarded as a great success.[9]

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi had by then taken the leadership of what remained of AQI, that regained its previous name (Islamic State of Iraq, or ISI).

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8 http://qz.com/248787/a-short-political-history-of-the-barbaric-terrorists-who-call-themselves-the-islamic-state/
9 NAPOLEONI, L. "*ISIS. Lo stato del terrore. Chi sono e cosa vogliono le milizie islamiche che minacciano il mondo.*" Edited by Feltrinelli. 2014.

1.6 Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and his way to the leadership

Baghdadi, whose real name is Ibrahim Awwad Ibrahim Ali al-Badri, was born in 1971 in the city of Samarra, in Iraq. According to a biography written by his fellow supporters, that has spread as the only official source on his life, he came from a strongly religious and devoted family. They lived in the district of Al-Jibriya, an area that has been massively affected by bombings after the US-led invasion of 2003. Some of Baghadi's uncles are reported to be imams or professors, but two in particular worked for the security forces of Saddam Hussein. This meant that, even if they were not particularly rich or influential, they inspired a certain degree of subjection in the neighborhood.

The future leader of Islamic State was before a cleric in a mosque in his hometown, then he operated as imam in the Great Mosque in Baghdad. As for his academic preparation, he studied deeply the *Quran* and the *Hadith*, and took also courses in Islamic sciences. Moreover, he obtained a Ph.D. in Islamic Studies at the University of Baghdad. His religious education gave to him and to his interpretation of Islam a lot of credibility. Furthermore, it contributed to the creation of his image as a modern version of the Prophet Muhammad.

It is not clear how he came to this extremely radical and hard-line interpretation of Islam. He allegedly was involved in the creation of the terrorist group Jamaat Jaish Ahl al-Sunnah wal Jamaa. Some

versions portray him as a militant already under the regime of Saddam Hussein. Soon after, he entered the emerging AQI under the leadership of Zarqawi, and then he became the "emir" of Rawa, a little town in the proximity of the Syrian border, in which he presided his own justice court for the respect of *sharia* principles. Thanks to it, he gained the reputation of harsh brutality he still maintains.

In 2005, he was captured by American forces because suspected of having links with Zarqawi and his terrorist group, but he had not been really caught performing such activities. He was confined in Camp Bucca, but the amount of time he spent there is still unclear. He wisely mainteined a low profile, being able to mislead US army about his real capacities and functions as a leader. In reality, Camp Bucca was a positive experience for him in a certain sense, because several terrorists were imprisoned in the fort. Even if they were under American control, they were able to connect with each other and exchange important information, as well as making links that would be useful in their future. A number of new leaders of terroristic formations developed there in that precise period.

According to Sajad Jiyad (an Iraqi analyst from the Iraqi Institute for economic reform), the detention at Camp Bucca was a turning point for Baghdadi and his career as a terrorist: it is indeed debatable that he was already "*an active militant prior to the US invasion*".[10] When he was released, supposedly in 2006, he joined AQI or what remained of

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10 http://www.newsweek.com/2014/12/19/who-isis-leader-abu-bakr-al-baghdadi-290081.html

it after the death of Abu Musab al Zarqawi and the consequent rearrangement. Only in 2010 he was appointed as the new leader of the organization.

1.7 A new phase for the Islamic State in Iraq

As already mentioned, the group regained its previous name (ISI) and entered a new phase. Baghdadi was aware of al Qaeda's low popularity among Sunni Iraqis, and on account of this he wanted to distance the organization from that influence, trying to transmit a more nationalistic image of its armed group. Taking into account that the Shia government led by Prime Minister al Maliki was very unpopular, due to several abuses on the population, he started to attack Shiites symbols, fostering the sectarian conflict.

In order to reach his goal, he abandoned al Qaeda's flag to choose a new one, and searched for new funding sources as well.

He let be known that he pursued other ambitions and established a diversified agenda for the Islamic State.

Baghdadi shared the same belief stated by his predecessor: that without a solid territorial settlement, it would have been impossible to aim at the conquest of Middle East as a whole and at the consequent restoration of the old Caliphate. In any case, to do so, it was necessary to engage in a traditional war, progressively occupying cities when reached and immediately imposing *shaaria* on their inhabitants.

The closest objective was surely the corrupted Shia élitè controlling Syria and Iraq.

Other than the military strategy, Baghdadi shares with his forerunner also the behaviour as the leader of the organization. In fact, he focused mainly on coordinating the daily operations rather than appearing in propagandist videos or releasing political declarations. This was openly in contrast with the habits of western politicians but also of arab dictators, the majority of which bases his political strategy on the costant diffusion of his image everywhere.

He decided to act in a very reserved manner, to the point that it was difficult to see him clearly, both in pictures and in person. He tends to cover his face even when meeting his most trusted collaborators, thus he is also known with the nickname of 'the Invisible Sheik'.

1.8 The enlargement to Syria and the dream of the reconstruction of the Caliphate

Since the area of influence of the Islamic State in Iraq was limited in size, Baghdadi saw in the Syrian conflict of that period and in the uprising against Bashar al Assad a perfect occasion to enlarge and strengthen his organization. He decided so also because Assad and his supporters belonged to the Alawi party, that is a Shia minority. In 2011, he sent a small contingent of militants in the region, with the task of ascertaining possible consequences, capable of affecting them, such as the military training and experience they could acquire there,

but also opportunities to obtain new financial resources for the restart of the armed group. This time, it will operate not anymore as a common jihadist organization, but as an influent new political actor, with an established area of leverage in the territory.

To obtain a greater impact there, ISI organized a strategic merging with another armed organization known with the name of Jabhat al Nusra (already mentioned above). This provoked negative reactions, such as internal fights for the power and the secession of several commanders of Nusra. In fact, they were largely disappointed by this move, since the two groups had different ideological positions. Nusra was more focused on the overthrowing of the Assad's regime, while ISI wanted mostly to enlarge its area of influence with increasing territorial conquests. Even the people had the same feeling, picturing the second group as another foreign invasor.

The world according to ISIS (image from: http://www.ijreview.com/2014/09/173496-world-according-isis-terrorist-armys-dreams-islamic-caliphate-revealed-one-map/)

However, after the merging, ISI changed its name in ISIL (Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant), better known as ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and al Sham, that was the ancient name for these Arab territories). This helped making clear the intentions of Baghdadi of conquering Middle East as a whole, or it is better to say the entire Dar al Islam, as it was stated in a map published by the group. This involved also some European countries, with two crucial targets such as Madrid and Rome by 2020.

The plan in Syria seemed to be failing when Assad's troops regained their forces and started to push back, retaking the city of Homs. Their hopes were destroyed when ISIS continued to absorb strategic territories both in Iraq and Syria, since finally conquering the city of Mosul in June 2014. It was a turning point. ISIS was sure by then to control a large portion of both countries and, most importantly, a large amount of territories on the border between them. That was the first step in the establishment of a transnational area.

At this point, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi proclaimed himself the Caliph of the new Caliphate the group was restoring, with the name of Ibrahim. It is precisely in this occasion that he appeared for the first time in public, speaking in the Great Mosque of Mosul as the official leader of the armed organization and newly named Caliph, to reaffirm his violent ambitions towards the West. His declaration was immediately translated in several languages and posted on Twitter, underlying the huge media potential understood by ISIS and so capitalised.

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi during his speech in the Great Mosque of Mossul.

The message was meant to reach every single Muslim in the world, but also *infideles*, to diffuse the threat that anyone refusing to comply could choose only to convert or as an alternative to die. It unveiled the already clear separation between Salafist and Islamist groups, and additionally it confirmed the ultimate detachment of ISIS from Al Qaeda influence.

At the same time, ISIS received support from different deployments such as a number of rebels of the Free Syrian Army, popular support in Jordan due to the repression realized by the State, and by the terroristic organization *Boko Haram* operating mainly in African territories. Therefore it was not a big surprise that ISIS, from this point on, started to massively expand before the international community could even be aware of it.[11]

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11 http://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-isis-chronicles-history-10895

Soon after his statement, Baghdadi focused mainly on strengthening his position in Syria, solidifying some fortresses there. Ranks of his army continued to increase, thanks to an efficient propaganda campaign but also to the fact that he welcomed anyone who wanted to join the group, differently from other armed organizations that used to reject new recruits, fearing the possibility of under-covered opponent agents. This helped to increase ISIS' popularity, especially among Muslims living in the Western world, and even more between young Muslim people born in Western countries, defined as second-generation immigrants. They often do not feel as fitting in the society in which they are living, and they search for an environment in which they can find their place.

Likewise, in the home land, Islamic State's fame derived also from the remarkable military successes obtained, exercising its appeal on frustrated people wanting to obtain their vengeance on brutal dictators and to stop an unending period of conflicts, bombings and deaths.

On the contrary, Baghdadi attracted them with the fascinating promise of new political rights and freedoms, once the Caliphate has been established.

Nevertheless ISIS has not the faculties to concede such rights, since it can be defined only as a surrogate of a concrete state. In fact, it holds only basic social and economic structure but it lacks the necessary political legitimacy. To define it, the author Loretta Napoleoni uses the expression "*shell state*".[12]

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12 NAPOLEONI, L. "*ISIS. Lo stato del terrore. Chi sono e cosa vogliono le milizie islamiche che minacciano il mondo.*" Edited by Feltrinelli. 2014. Pag. 36

1.9 What is a *shell state*?

This type of state can be dated back to the Cold War period. In fact, sponsors at the time used to finance non-state actors, delegating the concrete use of weapons to them. In the same way, at the present, Baghdadi is exploiting economic resources coming from the richest states in the Middle East to give an initial economic basis to his future empire. What is different now, however, is the multipolar society in which we live, originating a remarkable increase in the number of sponsors willing to sustain on-going conflicts.

With the enlargement of involved states and different objectives to be reached, it is more difficult to find a solution in order to resolve in a peaceful way these conflicts. The diplomatic arena is bigger and more confusing, since a lot of actors with conflicting strategies and alliances are engaged. As a consequence, the Islamic State has been able to take advantage of this situation, and this explains its success in the region while the Western world is still uncapable to react jointly.

This area of the world was in a sort of permanent anarchy: after several conflicts, the political authority was destroyed, leaving an empty space that armed organizations filled. The society is in a constant condition of war, but differently from others, ISIS has an organizational structure both in the military and in the administrative fields, that gives more control to it, and also resembles more a state in the collective unconscious.

Aware of the possibility of a non-intervention at the international level, and expecting a long lasting conflict in Syria, Baghdadi has obtained undisturbed the total control of a large territorial portion and also of many economic sectors.

Among them, the privatization of the terroristic business has been a key element in the breakout of ISIS. Exploiting the proliferation of countless sponsor groups and consequent small armed groups, the Islamic state has annihilated each opponent, due to their weakness, and obtained the main authority on strategic regions, with important economic resources. Nevertheless, one of the wisest move of ISIS has been the attempt to ally with local leaders and common people living in those territories. In this way, Baghdadi has presented himself as the leader of a modern state, in which they could be citizens, and not simply a defeated community. He was able to legitimize politically his regime, but also to enlarge numerically his army in terms of militancy. This is the principal originality in his way of acting: making local peoples able to participate in the management of resources and in the organization of the state is what distinguish ISIS from previous regimes discriminating local tribes. It is the main cause behind the large support and consensus praising Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

Moreover, having a strong economic basis would mean to be indipendent from any kind of financier and also to have enough resources to pay for the loyalty of his combatants. The Islamic state's leader is well aware of the fact that corruption has ruined many armed organizations and Arab states in the past, so he wanted to avoid this

scenario.

On the other hand, the Caliphate-to-be is not a classical model of *shell state*. In fact, a typical *shell state* is usally only a mere envelope, because it is lacking a proper political structure, and so it is easy to build and to control. The economic sphere is its main focus, and the war is its only source of nourishment.

ISIS, instead, has began to build a political structure, after having obtained sufficient economic resources. In addition, his adherents are strongly motivated in an ideological sense. They fight for a superior purpose, such as the creation of a modern Caliphate, meaning for them the possibility to live in an ideal Muslim state.

This is also an important difference from other armed organizations, for example the disciples of Zarqawi. Their main aspiration was that of being suicide bombers, while ISIS' members want to experience life in the Caliphate while they are still alive.[13]

1.10 ISIS as a new model of terrorism

ISIS, in a very brutal and violent manner, has collected several successes that since this moment seemed impossible for any other armed organization, including the amount of conquered territories in the Middle East.

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13 NAPOLEONI, L. "*ISIS. Lo stato del terrore. Chi sono e cosa vogliono le milizie islamiche che minacciano il mondo.*" Edited by Feltrinelli. 2014.

Its characteristics reflect a new type of terrorism recently developed: it has at his disposal a peculiar organization and a modern army composed of the best-trained people. It is able to manage an unprecedent amount of economic earnings, coming mainly from the resources present on the area it is controlling, such as oilfields and powerhouses. In addition, the organization collect taxes on the selling of weapons and military equipments, especially through the illicit channels of trafficking.

Other distinctive features of ISIS are the militaristic competence and the attention to social policies, that can reach, thanks also to the attentive manipolation of media, a large portion of people giving to the organization the legitimization it is searching for. This helps in the process of the creation and recognition of the state.

Summing up all these improvements, it is possible to see a pattern of evolution from an old type of terrorism: ISIS has been able to do so due to its capability to excellently adapt to the surrounding political environment. At the present moment, the world is becoming more multipolarized and made of changeable alliances, so ISIS, and other armed groups as well, can more easily find loans for their terroristic purposes. It is precisely because of this that ISIS has been able to take advantage of the Syrian war, a modern type of proxy conflict likely to break the balance of power in Middle East. The ISIS' leadership has made the most of the presence of rich sponsors in the territory: they used the money to enforce their influence in some economically strategic regions, as nobody ever in the past was able to do.

ISIS promoted itself as the new and most efficient political power of the region practically thanks to the donations of States like Kuwait, Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

Moreover, ISIS distinguishes itself from other organizations for its high mastery of new technologies and social networks, through which it diffuses the videos of its violence and power; and also for the deep understanding of the islamic migrants' conditions in the current scenario. Following this path, it is highly possible that an armed organization would reach for the first time ever in modern history what has always been the final scope of traditional terrorism, that is the building of a proper state on the ashes of pre-existent nations.

In this way, ISIS is likely to become an authentic model for a new type of terrorism.

2. The changing landscapes before and after the advent of ISIS

As already mentioned in the previous chapter, the armed organization known as Islamic State is enlarging its influence in the Middle East, subverting the equilibrium there. Such equilibrium had been established in 1916 with the Sykes-Picot Agreement.

The Sykes-Picot Agreement was a secret treaty between the governments of France and Great Britain, also established with the silent assent of Russia. It was concluded in order to allocate the different areas of influence if and when the Ottoman Empire would be defeated.

2.1   The rise and development of the Ottoman Empire

First of all, it is worth mentioning that the Ottoman Empire was founded in 1299 by Osman I. He was the head of the Ottoman Dinasty, trying to extend his influence outside the borders of Turkey.

After his death, the realm began to considerably expand also into the Eastern Mediterranean and the Balkans under the rule of his son, Orhan. The main objective was the conquering of Constantinople, in order to stop the extension of Byzantine dominion.

However, this project was stopped in 1402 by the Turco-Mongol leader Timur, in the pursuing of his dream of reconstructing the Gengis Khan empire. Timur invaded Anatolia and was able to defeat

Ottoman forces during the battle of Ankara.

The Ottoman Empire experienced then a period of confusion and disorders, leading to a civil war that was ended thanks to the intervention of Mehmed I, known as the *Conqueror*. He restored the organization of the state and was finally able to conquer Constantinople, in 1453. The city became the capital of the Empire under the name of Instanbul, marking on the other hand the end of the Byzantine Empire. From this moment on, through XV and XVI centuries, the Ottoman Empire entered a flourishing period, both in the political and in the economic fields.

Between 1516 and 1517, sultan Selim I expanded further the borders of the Empire, imposing its rule also in Syria and Egypt.This provoked the end of the Mamluk state. In addition, Selim I received the keys of the Ka'bah in Mecca: the event was so meaningful because it symbolized that the sultan had by then the control over holy places as well. For this reason, he took the title of Caliph and the two terms (sultan and caliph) started to be used as synonims since then.

Following these events, the Ottomans were able to exercise their supremacy in all the Near East, and it was clear that the empire was becoming the natural legacy of the ancient Caliphate. Looking at the political features, it must be noted that the hierarchy and the government organisation derived from the Seljuq and Mamluk precedent dominions. For what regards institutions proper of the Ottoman empire, it is worth mentioning the castes of a ruling élite and of a military élite (composed by slaves from the Balkan regions), a

centralised administration managed by the Grand Vizier and the establishment of a provincial administration. In addition, Ottomans instituted the legal indipendence of religious communities, and that would mean the disuse of the concept of political and religious power as one power.[14]

Maintaining these characteristics, the empire reached its very apex between 1520 and 1566, under the rule of sultan Suleiman I, also known as the *Magnificent*. He was able to conquer Hungary and other Central European territories, and in addition he gained control on Mesopotamia and the naval access to the Persian Gulf. Doing so, the Ottomans became an active part of Europe and its political sphere. The Empire, in that moment, was indeed at its greatest extent.

Afterwards, the starting of a period of decline was registered, especially with some episode of collapse in the structure of the power. This was due to the excessive expansion of the duties of the Grand Vizier, causing the separation of the central power from the sultanate. In these circumstances, there must be placed also the battle of Lepanto, in 1571, during which the Ottoman fleet was defeated and completely destroyed by an European alliance of Catholic maritime states, led by Spain. Consecutively, the aristocracy and the Grand Vizierate started to lose their authority on the military élite. From this moment on, the Ottoman Empire would withdraw from many of its territories in the Balkan region, as a result of the preponderance of Europe. Moreover, each advancement would be reached in order to

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14 ENDRESS, G. *Islam. An historical introduction*. Edinburgh University Press (2002).

equalize the European progresses especially in economy, but in culture as well. Unfortunately this new path was not enough to stop the collapse of the empire.

At the beginning of the XIX century, the Islamic world as a whole registered a set of changes for what regarded borders and political structures. The symbolic date of start is the invasion of Egypt at the hands of Napoleon, between 1798 and 1801. Even though the downfall of the empire was already in place, new collisions with European forces provoked the rise of nationalist movements and the consequent will to establish indipendent governments. On the other hand, confrontation on cultural and technological levels as well stressed the degree of secularisation and superiority of Europe, producing several criticisms of traditional Islamic features.

Thereafter, a significant remodeling started during the *Tanzimat* period (1839-1876). It consisted of a series of liberalizing reforms, aimed to unite all different peoples in the empire and to concede them equality before the law: specifically, a modern army based on conscription, a reform of the banking system, and most important the secularization of law were approved. However, it was difficult to apply these in all cities since several people were more tied to the tradition. These changes were meant to modernize the empire and to make it more resistant against attacks from the outside.

At a first glimpse, they had reached their goal, or at least this was the general impression: in fact, during the Crimean War against Russia

(1853-1856), the Ottoman Empire was regarded as a Western power such as France and Great Britain. Ottomans had succeeded in their ambition of being considered on equal terms with Western countries, and would not envisage themselves as subordinates in relation to Europe. The situation remained the same until 1869, that is considered a turning point in this matter. First of all, European people were starting to picture Europe as the pivot of modernization, unavoidably leaving aside Islamic countries and the world as a whole. At the same time, European countries in that moment understood the real dimension of their influence (both on the political and colonial level) on the Empire.[15]

Besides, *Tanzimat* reforms attempted to stop the rise of internal nationalist movements and to speed up the development in order to reach the same level as Europe, but they failed.[16]

Only at the end of the XIX century, nationalist protesters focused their efforts against European values instead of their own.

In the mean time, a change in government had been recorded since the begininning of the First Constitutional Era: this was the name given to a period of constitutional monarchy in the empire, established after the publication of the Basic Law by the Young Ottomans in 1876. However, it ended after two years, due to the reintroduction of the constitution and of absolute monarchy by sultan Abdulhamid II. The Second Constitutional Era started in 1908. The Young Turk

15 SCHULZE, R. "*A Modern History of the Islamic World*". New York University Press, July 2002.
16 Academic lecture by professor Francesca Maria Corrao, at LUISS Guido Carli University, during the course "*Mediterranean Studies*".

Revolution was indeed able to restore the old constitution, spreading hope for the long-waited modernization of government's institutions. Viceversa, such wishes would be reversed as that date marked also the starting point of the definitive dissolution of the Ottoman power.

It is worth mentioning the fact that, in these years, the Islamic world was affected by international events as much as all other countries: confusion in the political environment was due to the pre-war period. As a consequence, the relative degree of peace in which Islamic countries were living since when these had been colonised was at risk. In addition, continuous constitutional demands displayed that Islamic political culture was perfectly in line with the rest of the world: the desire for a nation state in which citizens can have the same rights and be equal was largely shared at the time.

In the events of the First World War, the equilibrium of the Ottoman Empire was seriously damaged, and both economic and political structures showed signs of faltering.[17]

2.2 The Sykes-Picot agreement and how ISIS is threatening it

The agreement, also known as the "Asia Minor Agreement", took its name from the two principal negotiators, Sir Mark Sykes who represented Britain, and François-George Picot, a diplomat representing the French government. It was signed on May 9, 1916 and it was at first a secret document, but it became official through an

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17 SCHULZE, R. "*A Modern History of the Islamic World*". New York University Press, 2002.

exchange of notes between April 26 and May 23 of the same year, when the First World War was still going on.

As pictured in the following map, France would have monopoly of control over the so-called "Blue Zone", and so specifically on Cilicia, the sea-bordering part of Syria, Lebanon and a part of Galilee to the north of the homonym sea. On the other hand, Britain would have direct control on Southern Mesopotamia (corresponding to modern Iraq, and particularly to the cities of Basrah and Baghdad) and on the territory near to the Acre-Haifa bay, constituting the "Red Zone".

Different areas of influence after the Sykes-Picot agreement. (image from: **http://thesyriantimes.com/2014/07/01/sykes-picot-agreement-9-may-1916/**)

The "A Zone" corresponding to the present territory of Syria would become an Arab state subject to French influence, while the "B Zone"

equivalent to current Iraqi territory would be ruled under British influence. Finally, another zone under international authority was established in the area, consisting of Transjordan and Palestine, the West Bank area and Gaza.[18]

2.3   How international actors coped with the new asset

At the following 1919 Paris Peace Conference[19], the city of Mosul was also included in the portion under the influence of Britain. It is possible to locate in this period of time the starting point of the *Mosul question*.[20] Even after the signing of the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923[21], that confirmed the right to Mosul was in the hands of Britain, Turkey contested that this right has been taken in an illegal way, through the military occupation of the city. To end the dispute, the League of Nations decided to send a commission in oder to investigate on the facts: it was finally affirmed that Mosul was rightfully under the influence of British government. Furthermore, it has to be taken into account the fact that great interest in this city derived mainly from the strategic oil resources under its territory.

However, after having received several heavy criticisms, the Sykes-Picot agreement was in the end abolished in 1920, during the San

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18 http://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Sykes-Picot_Agreement
19 SABATUCCI, G. E VIDOTTO, V. *Storia Contemporanea: il Novecento*. Ed. Laterza, 2008.
20 AYDIN, A. D. *The Mosul Question (1918-1926): a Breaking Point in the History of the Middle East*. 2011, VDM (Verlag Dr. Muller).
21 http://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Treaty_of_Lausanne

Remo Conference. This international conferring had the objective of clarifying the amount of lands occupied by the Allied Powers. Indeed, it was attended by David Lloyd George, who was the British Prime Minister at the time, and his corresponding figures in France, namely Alexandre Millerand, and in Italy, Francesco Nitti. The fourth representative was Matsui Keishiro, the Japanese Ambassador.

Even taking into account precedent conclusions reached through the Sykes-Picot agreement, the diplomatic representatives wanted to better define the division of areas of influence in the territories of Middle East precedently ruled by the defeated Ottoman Empire. First of all, they recognized Syria and Mesopotamia as two indepent States, but to be subjected to administrative influence since when they would be able to manage themselves alone. Then, it was specified that "*the boundaries of the said States will be determined* [...] *by the Principal Allied Powers*".[22] Furthermore, the San Remo Conference is well-remembered also because it absorbed the former Balfour Declaration (1917), according to which Great Britain was entrusted with the Mandate for Palestine. This provided "*the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country*".[23]

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22 San Remo resolution, full text from: http://www.cfr.org/israel/san-remo-resolution/p15248
23 *Ibidem*

2.4 The dream of destructing external-built borders, according to ISIS

After the outburst of the Islamic State, it has been argued if external-made borders and political entities originating from the agreements mentioned above are being threatened. Such doubts increased especially when ISIS diffused on the web the video "The End of Sykes-Picot" (June 2014)[24]. It is possible to see in it a Chilean militant, whose name is reportedly Abu Saffiya, talking about the forthcoming annihilation of two – according to ISIS – fake States created in 1916, namely Syria and Iraq. He is pictured near the "Sykes-Picot border", stating that they do not recognize it and never will. On the contrary, Abu Saffiya describes it as the first of many borders they will destroy in their way to success.

Even before these facts, it was common feeling that the division made up with Sykes-Picot agreement was a sort of "original sin" since it has provoked misunderstandings about the real ethnic and cultural composition of the region, and tensions in the whole Middle-East.
Iraqi state was composed by 3 historically different entities, and Britain decided to assign political power to a Sunni minority and a Hashemite leadership of their choice, to exercise more control. On the other hand, Syria was administrated by an Alawite government (under the Ba'athist authority). In both cases, these forms of government were in this way able to manage feautures of two people that could become

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24 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MSNCPj7s6vI

problematic. However, what they had feared happened in the end in 2010, with the outburst of Arab uprising.[25]

ISIS is trying to delete those boundaries that have tied together the area since the end of the First World War, under the firm belief that any circumstance ever verified in Middle East in the postwar period has been influenced by those artificial borders and the colonial arrogance of colonial powers. The main criticism is directed against the – according to extremists – interested division, made according to European desires rather than considering populations concerned's will. Moreover, the Sunni community was divided in half through the Syrian-Iraqi border. How it was possible? ISIS believes Western powers considered their interests and aspirations more important than those of the Arabs, and so they are determined to change this pattern.

2.5   Previous episodes of terrorism in the Middle East

The terrorist group of ISIS is not the first radical phenomenon matured in this area. At the end of the Second World War, nationalist movement started to emerge in the Muslim world, promoting a new recurrence to fundamentalist ideas, as a way to restore the ancient order. Thanks to the encouragement at the political level in the countries involved, Muslim fundamentalism started its diffusion, also

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25 BOWKER, R. *Ending Sykes-Picot: the Arab World and the West after 2011*. HH Sheikh Nasser al-Mohammad al-Sabah Publication Series, n.7, September 2013. Durham University.

outside this area. One of the many facets of this phenomenon is the recourse to *jihad*.

Jihad in the Muslim world has a wide range of interpretations, in which the view of it as a violent form of opposition to any possible threat of the external context to ummah prevails.

2.6   Origins of *jihad*

The jihadist movement appeared for the first time on the scene in the 1970s, already bearing in mind the belief of the Muslim community as a whole that must be reunited. As a method to obtain so, they related on international terrorism against Western nations. Moreover, it has to be taken into account that mujahideen (the most extremist part of this group) is also the most dangerous, because it never showed any sign of willingness to negotiate with the opposing part.[26]

However, the term *jihad* has older origins. In the Qur'an, it is intended as "*fighting in the path of God*"[27]. In this sense, it defined the opposition of whoever lined up against Muslims and the precise duty of the community as a whole to defend itself, when it becomes necessary.

The word is very often mistaken having the meaning of "holy war". In reality, it can be literally translated as "struggle". According to

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26 CHALIAND, G. and BLIN, A. *The History of Terrorism: from Antiquity to Al-Qaeda*. University of California Press, 2007.

27 KNAPP, M. G. *The concept and practice of Jihad in Islam*. Published by Strategic Studies Institute, 2003. Pag. 83.

traditional Islamic teachings, sometimes *jihad* as war can be justified, if it will later lead to a situation of more justice and well-being. Instead, if such action can be recognized as unjust and belonging only to a small group of people acting individually, these are classified as war, but not as *jihad* since these happen outside Islamic law.

The two branches of Islam (Sunnis and Shi'tes) are concordant o the fact that *jihad* is admitted when it comes to the defense of Islamic territory from an external threat. However, they disagree on who, in terms of authority, hs the right to call upon Muslims when it is time to use this weapon. For the Sunnis, the legitimacy belongs to the caliphs while for the Shi'tes, it is in the hands of Imams, even though this possibility has been taken away by the opposing Sunni majority. On the other side, both parts have corresponding ideas on the final aim of *jihad*: it is only acceptable when this aim is the wish to please God, not for the mere reaching of honors or riches.

One of the causes embraced by mujahideen fighters was that against the Russian Army trying to obtain political control on Afghanistan, in 1979. They received support even from the United States of America, while financial and military resources came from all the Middle East area. At this point, the newly formed group was in need of a leader, especially in order to coordinate money and volunteers willing to combat. The choice fell upon 'Abdallah 'Azzam, a scholar of the Jeddah's Islamic University and later the educational authority at the World Islamic League. In the context of mujahideen fights, he was also the head of a clandestine organization, named "Maktab al-

Khidmat ul-Mujahideen ul-Arab" (MUKUB). His right-hand person was Osama bin-Laden, coming from a rich family close to the royal dinasty, who was an engineer but also a strongly religious man.

Together, they were able, at the time (in the events of the Soviet-Afghan conflict[28]), to set up an indipendent and organized movement of resistance in the Afghan territory, based on the sole contribution of volunteers. Later, when the Soviet troops had withdrawn from their occupation (between 1988 and 1989), external forces pressed for the dissolution of the voluntary army but 'Azzam opposed this change of direction, deciding to maintain this asset but to use it for a higher purpose: reconsituting the Muslim community.

However, since Soviet army had withdrawn from the territory, jihadists decided to move the scene of action to another area, namely Iraq. Usually, when a war finishes, there is a dispersion of forces, and of militants as well. Some of them are able to come back to their home land, but they can not reintegrate fully in the society, due to their past actions. So they take advantage of precedent forged network ties with diverse groups and nationalities, and utilize their experience in training other jihadists movements in other zones of the world.

And later Osama bin-Laden will be better known as the leader of the terrorist organization sadly famous as Al-Qaeda.[29]

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28 GOODSON, L. P. *Afghanistan's Endless War: State Failure, Regional Politics, and the Rise of the Taliban*. University of Washington Press, 2001.
29 CHALIAND, G. and BLIN, A. *The History of Terrorism: from Antiquity to Al-Qaeda*. University of California Press, 2007.

2.7   The building up of al-Qaeda

Literally, the denomination "al-Qaeda" means base. It was 'Azzam who choosed this name, referring to the group of volunteers already belonging to MUKUB and constituting a solid base indeed, useful for the actions he had in mind. In an editorial published in 1988, he stated the eight criteria that a person willing to enter the base should possess: "*one must unhesitantingly face the hardest challenges and the worst difficulties. Leaders must endure, along with their men, the blood and sweat of grueling marches. The vanguard must abstain from base, worldly pleasures, and its distinguishing characteristic must be abstinence and frugality. The vanguard must translate into reality the great dream of victory. Will and determination are necessary for the march ahead, however long it may be. Three things are essential to this march: meditation, patience, and prayer. Two rules must be followed: loyalty and devotion. All anti-Islamic plots that are being hatched throughout the world must be foiled.*"[30]

Soon after this, 'Azzam suddendly died in a car bomb attack in 1989. So it was upon bin-Laden to take his place at the head of the organization. At the same time, speculations started on the possible identity of the killers: since they were never identified, people started to believe that the new leader of the organization had conspired against the back of his spiritual guide and previous mentor to obtain preeminence.

During this period, before fully losing any possibility of action and

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30 Ibidem, pag. 315.

any significance, MUKUB was divided into two different sections: the first one was in charge of completing 'Azzam's mission, namely "*to provide support for jihads throughout the world*"[31]; while the second one handled the publishing of *al-Jihad* magazine. In spite of the fact he disagreed on what MUKUB has became in recent years, bin-Laden maintained in any case his ties with members and especially with the volunteers.

The favourable occasion in which demonstrate that MUKUB was still able to play a crucial role was the Iraqi's invasion of Kuwait in 1991 (considered the first step towards the first Gulf War)[32], during which military help was much more needed if it is taken into consideration the absence of a national army in the regime. Simultaneously, United States of America (already present in Middle East, on the side of Afghanistan, against Soviet Union) decided to send troops to align on the side of Kuwait. It was then possible to see first signs of bin-Laden's well-known hatred against USA, considering he has seen this action as an excuse for invasion, because he was convinced of America's intentions of taking away national wealth.

Moreover, it has not to be underestimated his perception of Americans only as *infideles*, dishonoring holy places. So it is possible to see, in the occurence of these events, the slow construction of the USA figure as the only enemy of Islam.

This sentiment was crucial in the codification of his target as "far enemy". Salafi-jihadist activists wished mainly to defeat authoritary

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31 Ibidem, pag. 316.
32 SCHULZE, R. "*A Modern History of the Islamic World*". New York University Press, 2002.

regimes in the Middle East, whereas bin-Laden's goal was that of hit Western countries, and especially USA, and their citizens in the calmness of their nations.

However, he was not anymore the only one thinking this way: al-Qaeda's belief system started to spread in all the Middle East, taking roots especially among fundamentalist elements of the society. This dogma commenced to arouse concern in the Gulf States, and particularly in Saudi Arabia, already considered as the symbol of corrupted regimes. In addition, it constituted a perfect target due to its partnership with USA.

In this sense, al-Qaeda can be identified as a Salafi-jihadist group according to two parameters: the first one is the priority given to the re-establishment of the purest form of Islam; while the second is the implementation of violent *jihad* as an individual religious obligation.[33]

Meanwhile, Osama bin-Laden had decided to distance himself from his native scenario, and he went in exile to Sudan. There, he found a prosperous environment for his ideas and large support. So he was able to attract more disciples and enlarge the "base" of his organization. As a consequence, Saudi government evaluated that the best plan was to deprive him from his citizenship, but the al-Qaeda's leader had no intentions to negotiate. Instead, he stated clearly that it would not be possible in any way to find a compromise until USA will leave completely the area.

Nevertheless, after seven years, bin-Laden moved again, this time to

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33 JONES, S. J. *A Persistent Threat: the Evolution of al-Qaeda and Other Salafi Jihadists*. Published by National Defense Research Institute, 2014.

Afghanistan, judging it as the only remaining place in Middle East in which Salafists can live safely.

The situation there was in the hands of the Taliban, a politico-religious movement that first saw the light in northern Pakistan, in the early 1990s.[34] The fundamentalist movement later spread to Afghanistan[35], where they instilled in the people hopes that submitting to the application of *sha'ria* (and specifically a strict interpretation of it) would improve their -at the time- disastrous conditions of life.

When bin-Laden proposed them to combine their forces in order to win the fight against USA, Taliban were more than happy to comply: at the time, they had run out of financial and technical resources. Their alliance was further strenghtened when bin-Laden became part of the Taliban'council of elders, while Mullah Omar (leader of Taliban) entered Majlis al-Shura, the consultive assembly of al-Qaeda.

Based on this newly established cooperation, the Taliban decided to open new training camps for whoever would join the cause. But, since the idea was mainly a bin-Laden's suggestion, they decided to to leave the management of those camps to al-Qaeda.

Volunteers would receive military training and also teachings on how to set up explosive devices. Among them, fanatics willing to prepare for suicide attacks were recruited constantly, while others were redirected to different missions, well-suited upon them according to their characteristics. At the end of the training (approximately one

34 PRICE, C. *Pakistan: a Plethora of Problems*. Global Security Studies, Volume 3, Issue 1. Norwich University, 2012.
35 MATINUDDIN, K. *The Taliban Phenomenon, Afghanistan 1994-1997*. Oxford University Press, 1999.

year), some adherents would relocate in the surroundings, while foreigners were suggested to go back to their land, in order to constitute sleeper cells and to provide support in case of an attack on site.

2.8   An increasing threat to Western world

Al-Qaeda then began its long history of violent attacks against American objectives in the zone, claiming the legitimacy on the base of the fatwa issued by bin-Laden in 1998. According to it, all Muslims should unite for the purpose of killing Americans, either military elements or civilians.[36]

At the same time, bin-Laden was reorganizing the internal structure of the organization. First of all, he was appointed as the official al-Qaeda's "emir". Members were divided into committees, each of which should relate to a specific area, such as financing, propaganda, etc. Despite this degree of centralization, bin-Landed wished to decentralized various elements of the organization, expanding his influence to affiliated groups in other countries. As a matter of fact, inspired by the purpose, other fundamentalist organizations began to associate with al-Qaeda, increasing forces at their disposal.

To the same extent, decentralization was also a necessity, since bin-Laden believed that having a hierarchical structure would make them more exposed. Furthermore, a distributed organization could be more

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36 Full text here: http://www.mideastweb.org/osamabinladen2.htm

efficient in completing tasks, and it would also seem intimidating. This is true only if the period taken into consideration is a short one: other experiences demonstrated that organizations with an high level of decentralization are the least able to reach their objectives in the long run.[37]

Eventually, international powers started to understand the degree of perilousness and the threat coming from this network of terror. At this point, mujahideen movement as well showed interest in the actions of al-Qaeda, offering its support in the struggle against the American enemy.

By that time, bin-Laden had gained all the respect he needed to be seen as the sole leader of the organization. However, it is safe to say that his strategy was not remarkably clear. The message he spread was one of help towards all mistreated Muslims in the world, to finally reunite them as a single community. *Jihad* was a way to achieve the restoration ot the old caliphate. In reality, he never began that strive for the reconquest of ancient borders, as ISIS is doing nowadays. Al Qaeda wanted to restore a caliphate, but one that would involve Muslim countries in the area. Their objective was never the establishment of a global dominion.

The same was happening with al-Qaeda's allies, neither mujahideen movement nor the Taliban were able to establish an indipendent state of their own, or to fully impose their ruling on Afghanistan. It was probably due, above all, to the lack of homogeneous strategies among

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37 JONES, S. J. *A Persistent Threat: the Evolution of al-Qaeda and Other Salafi Jihadists*. Published by National Defense Research Institute, 2014.

different terrorist subgroups, and the high rivalry between them.

In addition, Osama bin-Laden's chief objective has always been and remained the neutralization of American great power. According to him, to be truly effectual, assaults should happen on USA territory, so as to simbolically humiliate it.

And this really happened in the tragic and probably most recalled terrorist attack in recent history, the destruction of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001.

2.9   Global war to terrorism

Resonance was enormous. Simbolically, the attack inflicted to America same terror Muslims were experiencing. Moreover, events lighted the spark for people on the awareness to live in a world constantly threatened by terrorism, that could hit at any moment and really close to places they frequented regularly. This was exactly the perception bin-Laden wanted to expand all over the globe: since al-Qaeda possessed limited resources, "*they must aim for the spectacular in order to lower their opponents' morale and galvanize thei own followers*".[38] The objective was not anymore that of killing as many people as possible. It was the time to diffuse terror, attacking highly symbolic landmarks of the Western power, at unforeseen moments.

By that time, it was clear Osama bin-Laden had deeply lethal intentions against the international community, confirmed by a video

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38 CHALIAND, G. and BLIN, A. *The History of Terrorism: from Antiquity to Al-Qaeda*.
   University of California Press, 2007. Pag. 333.

diffused in 2002 in which he presented himself openly as an adamant enemy of the West. This moment marked the beginning of a global terrorist war, opposing al-Qaeda and international economic affairs.

But Western reaction revealed all weaknesses of the organization: first of all, al-Qaeda had to renounce to their advanced technological tools, such as websites and satellite phones, that could track down terrorists more easily. Surprisingly, it unveiled to be a double-edged sword: due to their irregularity, each video or audio recording that would reach global coverage caused uncontrollable worries throughout the world. Osama bin-Laden was able to maintain threat level at its highest.

Nonetheless, other weak points of the organization slowly surfaced: the number of adherents decreased when many of them were killed in military attacks or were imprisoned. Also at the practical level, they suffered for the lack of weapons and sufficient training, not to mention the fact that militants were divided according to ethnicities, and this often sparked rivalries and small fights among them. Not having a set place (namely a state of their own), in which mujahideen could find a sort of "shelter" and time to re-organize, that started to be perceived as a disadvantage. This is, for example, another contrasting point in respect to ISIS' strategy.

Luckily, international forces at the time had been able to conceive a common strategy in the fight against terrorism, especially thanks to new international laws.

Without going deeper in the issue, it is worth to mention in particular two factors that would have huge echo in the sequence of events.

The first one is the USA-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. It is to be considered in the bigger picture of "War to Terror", officially launched by George W. Bush, then President of the United States of America, in 2002. It was essentially a reaction to the severe terrorist attacks experienced by USA in 2001. But it was also justified through beliefs that al-Qaeda had weapons of mass destruction tested, and that it was closely linked to the Saddam Hussein's government, meaning Iraq was sustaining terrorism. Even if the decision was at first opposed by American citizens, the diffusion of these information provoked a change in the atmosphere, and extensive consensus in the society.

On March 20th, 2003, bombings started in Baghdad. On the following day, USA alongside troops of United Kingdom, Australia and Poland, began Iraqi invasion, from the Kuwait border. The conflict in a strict sense was very rapid, lasting only three weeks and culminating in the decisive fall of Baghdad on April 9th, although Saddam Hussein was not arrested. Overthrow of the government was welcomed with several celebrations by Iraqis: one of those, probably fixed in the common memories, is the falling of a Hussein's statue in the middle of Firdos Square, in Baghdad, symbolizing the end of his authority.

However, at that point, new violence across all country ignited, presuming the event of a civil war, as it effectively was, and of which Iraq is still paying the price today, together with the obviously subsequent confusion produced by government emptiness.[39]

The second factor is the killing of Osama bin-Laden in 2011. The

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39 MASSOULIE', F. *I conflitti del Medio Oriente*. Giunti Editore, 2006.

operation, known with the name "Neptune Spear", was carried out by US Navy Seals. He has been located in Abbottabad already in 2010 but the operation of surveillance continued for about one year. In the end, on May 2nd, 2011 American units irrupted into his shelter and finally killed bin-Laden. Confirmation of al-Qaeda, leaving aside his official identification occured immediately, came after few days, with an online statement and the promise of revenge.[40]

It was a huge landmark in the history of terrorism, symbolizing the end of an obscure period, but at the same time it did not mark the conclusive step in the war against terrorism, since many organizations remained (despite weakened) in the territory. Al-Qaeda itself started to internally reorganize, whilst new violent seeds were arising unexpectedly, as it was in the case of ISIS.

2.10   Relations between al-Qaeda and ISIS

The first, and most important difference between the two organization, is ISIS' approach to the international scene as a concrete political actor, with a state of its own able to dismantle old equilibria in the region. On the other side, al-Qaeda had always been an organization expanding in several countries, but without claims to create a new state.

Speaking about the two leaders, they were different at first in their

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40 BERGEN, P. L. *Manhunt: the Ten-Year Search for bin-Laden, from 9/11 to Abbottabad*. Published by Broadway Books, 2013.

background: al-Qaeda's leader came from a rich family, close to Saudi royal family. Al-Zarqawi instead had poorer origins and did not accomplish a university education. bin-Laden exercised great influence on his supporters while al-Zarqawi, at his beginning, had to be helped by al-Qaeda itself, giving him financial and human resources. As already mentioned, bin-Laden repeatedly proposed him to unify their objectives but ISIS' leader continued to refuse, until 2004. However, it was only a matter of convenience since the two associations continued to distrust themselves. First appearance of the denomination "al-Qaeda in Iraq" (AQI) dated back to this point, cementing the alliance between the two.

Another difference can be found in the generational divide: future ISIS' adherents were much younger than those of al-Qaeda. This was probably due to the online coverage and to the importance of propaganda through social media understood by ISIS, that helped finding members outside the borders of the region. It is almost obvious that young people willing to take part in such fightings would be more involved by a well-built video, showing signs of victory and success.

Altough both associations disregard the role of women, there are differences even in the way to see them. Although still marginalized and delegated to a mere role of supporting men, they seem to be viewed in a slightly better way through time, given the fact that women have even been used in suicide attacks. On the other hand, ISIS see females only as mere possessions so that create a system "of

organized rape and sexual assault, sexual slavery, and forced marriage", according to Human Rights Watch report of 2014.

Both groups could be considered extremist but they did disagree in the approach and the use of violence. Divergence displayed also in the ideologies since, as already said, bin-Laden was more focused on defeating the Western enemy, in particular USA. He never showed willingness to create a caliphate, and never considered other Muslims as a threat, pushing for a change only in cases of corrupted regimes and sacrilegist beliefs. Bin-Laden always acknowledged solidarity between Muslims was crucial, for reaching a united Islamic community. On the other hand, al-Zarqawi strongly believed that Islamic groups as well should be purified, even with violent means. Conflicting strategies culminated in 2005 with the sending of two letters to al-Zarqawi, one from Ayman al-Zawahiri, bin-Laden's lieutenant, and the other from Sheikh Atiyat Allah Abd al-Rahman al-Libi, who was an al-Qaeda theorist. They both urged al-Zarqawi to restrain exaggerate use of violence, since it ws counterproductive for their mission.[41]

Even after the death of both previous emirs, new leaders mainteined rivalry and differences between the two organization. Those even increased in 2013, when Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi expanded his authority and modified the name of the organization in its current denomination "Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham" (ISIL). Conflict derives also from

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41 ZELIN, A. Y. *The War between ISIS and al-Qaeda for Supremacy of the Global Jihadist Movement*. Published by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 2014.

the fact that ISIL views itself as the legitimate successor of bin-Laden's dogma while Zawahiri (now leader of al-Qaeda) disapproves ISIL's excessive violent behaviour and method of subjugating people. As a consequence, al-Qaeda decided to permanently disaffiliate with this group.[42] They were scared brutality of ISIL and its open displaying would dissuade possible future adherents.

However, this measure did not have a big impact on ISIL, given the fact that it continued to gain territories and proselytes.

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[42] WEISS, M. and HASSAN, H. *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror.* Published by Regan Arts, 2015.

3. Roots of IS in the history of Syria and Iraq and what are its perspectives for the future

The great success of IS in Middle East is impossible to understand without taking into consideration the moment of destabilization of the whole area. The promise of a new caliphate appeared as a light of hope: it is presenting itself as a trustworthy political entity, able to end years of conflicts and destruction. Moreover, favourable conditions for the development of IS' phenomenon have been created by previous wars: those are occasions of enrollment for people (especially young) disappointed by the course of events in the region. [43]

3.1 Positive perceptions of IS in a war-torn area

IS presents itself as difficult to fight against, since it has the feature of a non-State. Finding a territorial strategy to face an enemy which is not territorialised could be complicated. On the other side, it is easier for IS to attract young people who are de-territorialised themselves, fascinated by the use of violence and researching a cause in which they can invest their energy. Such people do not come only from Middle Eeast or Muslim area, but a part of them arrives also from the Western world, after having converted to Islam.

Another aspect that should not be forgotten is that of the economic consequences of belligerent events on the region: conflicts and

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43 MABON, S. and ROYLE, S. *IS, Regional Security and the End of Sykes-Picot*. Foreign Policy Centre Briefing, August 2014.

political instability increase risks for external investments, discouraging them. It is a vicious circle, because political disorders in the past already provoked economic unrest which in turn contributed to social discontent, one of the elements leding to political instability. Economic reforms and a project of economic stabilisation should be implemented not only to restart progress but to establish a political equilibrium as well.

In this matter, IS is perceived as a relief, due to its enormous economic power. Thanks to it, IS has become an authoritative interlocutor in the regional overview.[44] Then, it has expanded on territory due to the confusion created by war: sometimes, before it is possible to be aware of it, local situations have an influence on the global dimension. This is precisely the case of IS. It has demonstrated a skillful knowledge of the area and of war tecniques. This probably derived from the support coming from Sunnis and from previous army officials under Saddam Hussein.

In fact, USA in 2003 dissolved Iraqi army, the ministries of Defense and information and other institutions constituted by this regime, with the purpose of creating a new Iraqi force, that would be professional, non-political, and representative of all inhabitants. Officials would not be reintegrated or work for the new government, and they were imprisoned, but it was mainly in that prison that they where able to create links and several alliances with jihadists. So this has been regarded as a catastrophic mistake, giving involved people a reason to

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44 ARROYO, H. T.; CINGOLI, J.; GIANNOTTA, V.; NEGRI, A.; REDAELLI, R.; ROMANO, S.; ROY, O. *Il Medio Oriente che cambia. La ristrutturazione dei rapporti internazionali ed i focolai di crisi*. CIPMO and ECFR, October 2014.

further oppose US influence. As a matter of fact, there is now increasing evidence that former members of Saddam Hussein's army helped the setting up of IS, since many territorial leaders are Iraqis and previously Ba'athists.[45]

Apart from this, IS has been clever enough to take advantage also of Sunni discontent. It derives from a complex bind of strategies, economic interests, and external influences that, as previously seen, have contributed to the design of Middle East as it is today.

It is not a justification but IS is relating to a problem that was present in the territory for 40 years: Syria and Iraq are ex-states, only (virtually) present on geographical maps and nobody has been able to find a political solution to this problem. It is true however that hoping for the dissolution of regimes is not the best solution since a situation of anarchy and confusion would only favor IS' progresses.

3.2 Fragmentation of Middle East

The Middle East region nowadays appears as divided and fragmented as never, with diverse outburst of crisis threatening the political order. Even Islam is divided internally, not only between Sunnis and Shia but also among Sunnis themselves. Minorities are now subjected to heavy persecutions. This situation is surely the result of many causes and mistakes binding together, from regional and

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45 PFIFFNER, J. P. *US Blunders in Iraq: De-Baathification and Disbanding the Army.* Intelligence and National Security, vol. 25, no. 1, 76-85, February 2010.

international actors.[46]

Taking Iraq into consideration, for example, it is possible to say that after a short period of disappearence (in a metaphorical sense), new violent episodes and the polarisation among different religious communities have led to a new politcal and military crisis (in 2014). In that context, a change in government verified as well: the Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki was replaced by the moderate Shia al-Abadi, representing a group of tecnocrates which is well aware of the possibilities of Iraq and which knows well also the Western world. A decisive role will be played by the international community in the common fight against IS.

To understand the IS' phenomenon, it is useful to take into consideration the context in which it has expanded: where there is a lack of central authority, minority groups have more possibilities to gain influence. In fact, looking more closely to the States where IS has emerged first, it is possible to find examples of the fragmentation of the State. In Iraq, it depended on the USA-led invasion (in 2003), while in Syria it followed the Arab Spring episodes (in 2011). Thanks to the situation, IS was able to constitute a solid base of support composed by those people disappointed for their conditions. After some time, also international fighters arrived to join the struggle.
IS was able to install itself in the vacuum left from the absence of

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46 ARROYO, H. T.; CINGOLI, J.; GIANNOTTA, V.; NEGRI, A.; REDAELLI, R.; ROMANO, S.; ROY, O. *Il Medio Oriente che cambia. La ristrutturazione dei rapporti internazionali ed i focolai di crisi.* CIPMO and ECFR, October 2014.

sovereignty: moreover, it presented itself as a trustworthy authority obtaining alliances with several tribes in the region.

3.3 The example of Syria

It is important to consider the case of Syria, since it is a focus in the region: it has a central role and the development of its State could influence the whole area. The civil war currently going on was in origin (March 2011) a series of protests that sparked the fire. The regime has maintained the control on the central part of the country, while the opposition has in its hands peripheral parts, even though those are large areas. This depends also from the fact that opposition could not be identified as a single group, but it is composed by several fractions that only sometimes are able to collaborate. When the regime has become aware of being in an impasse, it has started considering the possibility of withdrawal in some parts and of limited concessions. It is vital also to consider the role of Kurds in the matter. They have been occupied in an effort to resist against jihadists and to remain outside the conflict. But if what previously said is likely to really happen, that would lead to the partition of Syria in different regions, which would be a glutton perspective for Kurds.

Nevertheless, the feeling is not shared by Turkey, that is the neighboring country and did not want a Kurdish independent region to have a negative effect on its own Kurds. Bordering countries have had also a role in the Syrian civil war, but it is worth to mention Iraq in

particular.

Nouri al-Maliki, who is now vice President but at the time was the Prime Minister of the country, largely supported Syrian legitimate government, but this acknowledgement did not reflected a common position on ideology. It was mainly a decision based on personal interests. At the beginning of Syrian upheavels al-Maliki indeed considered such events as a reason of instability, so decided to line at Assad side, in order to contain disorders. He had also founded an authoritarian regime, based on the Shia majority, while Sunnis have been marginalized. For the last ten years, circumstances have been fueled by civil war as well, but now Syrians are fostering it again. However, Iraq appears less divided in its national identity. There could be a radical change in the situation but it would depend mostly on the course of events in Syria. Middle East is likely to be reshaped by the disentangling of Syrian and Iraqi crises, since a change in their political orders would affect that of the region in its entirety.[47]

The reality of Syria is more complex that what appears: it is a fragile and multi-composed country in which, apart the majority of Sunnis constituting the 60 % of the population, Christians (10 – 12 %), Alawites (6 %) and Shia minorities live together. Assad's family belongs to the Shia Alawite branch and they hold power for so long thanks to a strong alliance with Christians and other religious minorities. Anti-Assad rebels are of course of Sunni domination, even though they asked other groups to join the struggle but the call

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47 *Ibidem*

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remained unanswered. This makes the situation highly sectarian, and so more dangerous.[48] However, internal struggles are also a reflection of the regional context, especially of the rivalry among the neighboring countries of Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey, backed up by international allies as well. USA and NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) sided with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Allies, with the final objective of Assad's removal as he holds an authoritarian regime and he is also an Iranian ally: Western powers indeed want to threaten Iran's authority due to the country's nuclear stand and to its support of conservative authorities in the region.

For what regards Iraq, as already said, internal struggles and violence in it sparked again during 2012, as a result of Syrian influence. The government has taken the side of Iran in the majority of issues, and it has opposed the imposition of further sanctions on Syria. This was openly in contrast with the position of Saudi Arabia, and this comes with no surprise thinking that the conflict between Sunnis and Shia reflects that among Saudi Arabia (Sunni) and Iran (Shia).

However, it has to be taken into consideration that Syrian civil war could provoke also global consequences. For instance, it already caused divergences in the management of the issue among Western countries and Russia and China. And another element not to be undervalued is the weight of high refugees' flows that cause great concern in neighbouring countries, most of which are not prepared to

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48 CARPENTER, T. *Tangled Web: the Syrian Civil War and its Implications*. Mediterranean Quarterly, Volume 24, n. 1, pp. 1-11. Published by Duke University Press, August 2013.

welcome such amounts of people, running away from often desparate conditions.[49]

As already mentioned, civil war in Syria is highly sectarian and religious divisions reflect now those of political identities. It is possible indeed to say that such a conflict seems to be driven more by a desire for regional dominance. As a matter of fact, the conflict account for several regional players and it has been considered a new example of "proxy war".

3.4 The sequence of events leading to armed conflict

The uprising started on March 15th, 2011, in the overall context of the Arab Spring. Syrian people were asking mainly for the concession of some democratic reforms and more freedom, but little by little the protest spread to all the country, demanding the removal of Assad's government. Reaction was harsh, consisting in the opening of fire against demonstrators, that caused the killing of several of them, but also of police officers. To contrast the diffusion of revolutionary ideas, the Syrian Army started to militarly attack several cities, but this only worsened the atmosphere, and more citizens decided to join protests. Moreover, numerous soldiers decided to defect in order to side with rebels, and they decided to form the Free Syrian Army (FSA) to

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49 BARNES-DACEY, J.; BECHEV, D.; GOODARZI, J.; HASSAN, H.; al-KHOEI, H.; REIDER, D.; YILMAZ, N. *The Regional Struggle for Syria*. ECFR, July 2013. Edited by Julien Barnes-Dacey and Daniel Levy.

support the opposition and finally depose the government. To give a political support, it was also constituted the Syrian National Council, but it was internally divided along sectarian lines. These events provoked an escalation in fights and violences in the entire country, taking the form of a real armed conflict.

At this point, the international community intervened, calling for a ceasefire in April 2012 but it collapsed after a short period, since occasional fightings continued across the country.

Rebels were increasing their territorial gains and their control on significant cities. From this moment on and through all 2013, a sort of bouncing for influence on important political centres and military posts started between rebel forces and the government. But the opposition was also occupied in the contrasting of IS' advancement in the territory, since the group was taking advantage of general confusion to expand its holding on more cities. The government as well tried to contrast terrorists' progresses. So in the last two years it is possible to see a change in the focus, while fightings between rebels and Syrian central power are still going on in the background.[50]

At the international level there have been divergences on the strategy to follow in the country and on the future prospects of Bashar al-Assad, and many peace talks have concluded without then a real application. But throughout 2015 Western powers have agreed on the higher urgency to annihilate terroristic threats. In the last year, especially USA, Russia and France (also as a consequence of violent

50 MC HUGO, J. *Syria: a Recent History.* Saqi Books, March 2015.

attacks perpetrated in this country) engaged in the bombing of highly substantial targets.

At the beginning, when violence firstly displayed in 2011, neighboring countries attributed it to the Arab revolts going on in the region at the time. According to them, Assad should deal with the issue granting some reforms, not to mention the fact that his country would never be involved in such uprising. Under this firm conviction, Assad adopted repressive measure to immediately stifle disorders. So the Gulf powers have supported rebels since then, together with Western countries, and against Iranian rule which instead offered assistance to Assad's regime. These combinations risk to compromise the equilibrium on which the region is based. There are also other neighboring countries involved in the question, mainly because they want to contain menaces of same events internally, such as for example Lebanon and Iraq.

It is almost obvious that there is the need for a regional agreement. As all regional players have used Syrian battlefield in an attempt to reach their own interests, at the expense of the country, in the same way a regional effort is the only hope to end the conflict.[51] Otherwise, upheavels and chaos are likely to extend to the entire area. And that circumstance is precisely the vacuum IS takes advantage of to integrate itself in the regional context.

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51 BARNES-DACEY, J.; BECHEV, D.; GOODARZI, J.; HASSAN, H.; al-KHOEI, H.; REIDER, D.; YILMAZ, N. *The Regional Struggle for Syria*. ECFR, July 2013. Edited by Julien Barnes-Dacey and Daniel Levy.

3.5 The case of Iraq

As already said, Iraq has been very clear in supporting Assad government against rebellions. On the contrary, this did not happen when USA invaded Iraq in 2003: Syrian government favored the passing of terrorists through its borders in order to contrast the American occupation, but at the same time that worked to destabilise the country as well. Now this strategic game changed, also because Syria and Iraq are both lined against a Sunni threat. Moreover, Iraq is still paying the consequences of 2003 invasion in terms of security, so it is trying to safeguard itself, fearing that an hypothetical deposition of Assad would provoke the same sentiment in Iraq and the revitalization of terroristic elements. According to this prospective, Nouri al-Maliki voted to maintain the Arab League's membership for Syria and to end violences. He tried to contrast fears of an unstable political order and the happening of such events to his government as well. The threat is even more dangerous considering that Iraq's civil war and its consequences expanded even more internal divisions.

Roots of the current situation must be researched in the 2003 USA-led invasion and in its aftermath.[52] One of the goal at the time was the de-Ba'athification of the country: this meant that all public employees who could be related to that political party should be removed and that access to such power was interdicted for the future as well. This measure was directed to any citizen ever associated in some way with

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52 LANSFORD, T. *9/11 and the Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq: a Chronology and Reference Guide*. ABC-CLIO, 2011.

such ideology, regarding a large majority of Sunnis. It is evident then that Sunnis viewed the arrival of IS as a liberation movement after ten years of external powers' occupation and the Shia regime.

In reality, the primary objective was that of creating a legitimate power guaranteeing stability, but since Iraq was already a fragile and "artificial" country (meaning with external-made borders), this interference only worsened the situation. USA believed that they would be welcomed as freer from the authoritative rule but instead this provoked the increasing of the already diffused distrust towards American and Western powers.[53] However, these events did not end after the withdrawal of American troops in 2011, but rather this provoked an escalation of violences to which the government was unable to answer, lacking external support. This opened the way for IS' progress, with further bombing attacks and many cities occupied.

The last American troop left Iraq on December 18th, 2011. From this moment on, a series of bombing attacks started all over the country, killing several people, for which IS called the responsibility. These were targeted against the Shia central government, taking advantage of the vacuum left by USA army and also of the confusion deriving from similar events going on in the neighboring country of Syria. After a period of silence, fightings started again from 2013 onwards and resulted in an escalation of violences all over Iraq.

Such events undermined the security of borders between Iraq and Syria, favoring the transfer of terrorists and military equipments

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53 HINNEBUSCH, R. *The American Invasion of Iraq: Causes and Consequences*. Spring 2007.

across the two countries. IS' advancement was rewarded with the conquer of Mosul (which was the second most populous city) in Iraq and of Raqqah in Syria, that they declared as capital in the country. From this moment on, IS increased its territorial gains in both countries, also implementing its authoritarian rule in the areas now under its control. Several Sunni tribes, even not sharing completely the extremism and the method of the terroristic group, accepted to form alliances especially in an attempt to contrast Nuori al Maliki's regime. However, internal tensions did not lack but this did not stop the growth of IS.

Indeed, on June 23th, 2014 IS announced its main goal was the reconstitution of the ancient Caliphate, and it designated its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as the new Caliph. The move increased support for IS in affiliates in Middle East and all over the world, and it aroused worries from its detractors. The most urgent was the humanitarian emergency, for which USA, the United Kingdom and France airdropped supplies for the refugees.[54]

Since IS continued to gain power, America decided to military intervene in the region, with the support of Iraqis and Kurdish (PKK) militant groups. This intervention was able in part to decelerate IS' progress. However, to restate their supremacy, IS responded with increased violence in particularly against Western hostages, and publicized this method by taking videos of tortures and killings and posting them online.

At this point, the call for external intervention became stronger so,

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54 STERN, J. and BERGER, J. M. *ISIS: The State of Terror.* Published by Ecco, March 2015.

despite his initial purpose of being only partially involved, USA President Obama announced further engagement of American army in the conflict, as a step of a larger counter-terrorism action. A coalition was formed with the participation of UK, France, Australia, Canada, Germany, the Netherlands and (on the side of Middle East's powers) Bahrain, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar and the Emirates, with the task of striking both in Iraq and Syria.

As previous in time, these actions have been able not to completely stop but at least to slow down IS' advancement on the territory.

3.6 What makes IS a powerful enemy

The series of successes accomplished by the Islamic State can be attributed to the ensemble of its efficient peculiarities. One of the strenght points of IS is the accessibility of its message to all Muslims. The group is not only elite-oriented, instead it aimed to group all those people disappointed by the state of events, and willing to find a solution for social problems such as the corruption and the inequality present in most Islamic states, not to mention those exasperated by authoritarian rules, such as that of Assad in Syria. The idea to be diffused is that in the caliphate there is space not only for soldiers, but also for common civilians, which can find their own role in the new society, even not fighting.

Moreover, this openess regarded not only people living in traditional Muslim countries, but the world in its entirety. In fact, IS has diffused

several videos calling to military action also Muslims living in foreign countries. In addition, some important messages are directly released in English and French, apart from Arabic, while being translated also in other languages later. And the call has not remained unanswered: statistics have demonstrated that 32 % circa of fighters in Iraq and Syria came from Europe, many of which were not originally Muslims, but they decided to convert in order to join the fight. The real danger coming from these people, however, does not consist only on the military threat, but on the possibility for them to go back in their homeland, without anyone suspecting, to constitute a sleeper terroristic cell or to operate as a lone wolf in the country, preparing terroristic attacks.

Motivations to join can be diverse, but a great help has been given by the high level of propaganda and online presence of IS. The group is visibly present on Twitter, through which it diffuses its future programs and updates about military activities, while several militants run an account on Ask.fm, on which they can answer to all sorts of questions, such as for example how to reach battlefields or if they should carry a specific equipment.

Through social media they have been able also to conduct a recruitment campaign, creating direct links with future fighters already sure of their decision and training them from far or with vulnerable young people who wanted advices. The propaganda took also the forms of brutal videos and photos of tortures and executions, going viral across Internet. This manipulation tactic can be considered as an evolution of al-Qaeda's method, able to diffuse more rapidly and

efficaciously terror around the world. In contrast with this frequent exposure of methods and activities, IS' leader al-Baghdadi did not show often in public, since visibility would mean also an high degree of risk.

But the videos do not involve only cruel scenes. Many of them picture everyday life under IS' rule. The group wants indeed to demonstrate it can give to people a better life, so they showed new roads and buildings to replace those destructed by bombings, the distribution of food and primary resources, even the access to electricity. This approach combines a state of constant threat with the illusion of security and a stable order.

These videos demonstrated, on the other hand, that IS has perfectly understood how to radicalize in the territory. Given that it want to implement a new political state, the group knows the need of having a clear structure at the basis. It has divided its area of influence in provinces, each ruled by a local leader and a government, which are also backed by some administrative components. Once controlling an area, IS has also the habit to modified every official object (such as police cars or uniforms, ambulances and so on) with its black flag, to constantly remember its presence to citizens. The underlying strategy of this decentralization is to maintain the rule even in the case of al-Baghdadi's killing, that could be a cause for destabilization. In their opinion, the temporary lack of leadership should not compromise the stability of the regime.[55]

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55 STERN, J. and BERGER, J. M. *ISIS: The State of Terror.* Published by Ecco, March 2015.

Moreover, IS appears to be the richest terroristic group in history. It is internally financed, since it is based on the appropriation of banks and their funds in conquered territories, on the collecting of taxes imposed on citizens under their rule, and also on the earnings deriving from natural resources present in the region. It has also not to be forgotten that many profits are collected thanks to ransoms payed by other countries for the freedom of hostages. In addition, they receive also international donations in the form of money and resources, from people that might not be able to leave their country to join the fight, but are more than willing to help IS' progresses..

Even if there is not yet publicly accessible proof, suspects of donations coming from the wealthy Arab Gulf States are increasing. The cash flow from private donors in that area is significant.
It was frequent in the past as well the habit of such state to become sponsor of non-state actors and to finance them to manage proxy wars. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi exploited this opportunity to obtain financing in the event of Syrian civil war since Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Qatar wanted to undermine Iranian power in the country.[56]

3.7 The use of terror

It is evident that, apart from military tecniques used on the ground, one of the main strategy of IS is the use of terrorism. The goal is to

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56 NAPOLEONI, L. "*ISIS. Lo stato del terrore. Chi sono e cosa vogliono le milizie islamiche che minacciano il mondo.*" Edited by Feltrinelli. 2014.

diffuse fear not only in the areas directly involved, but all over the world. This second option is possible, as previously mentioned, by the increasing menace of foreign fighters who decide to come back home. Some of them really are horrified by what they have seen and have no intentions of replying the same activities in their homelands, but others could be dangerous, as it was unfortunately possible to see in the occasion of the attack against the *Charlie Hebdo*'s editorial office in Paris. This type of events not only undermines in concrete the security of states but it has also an heavy effect on the perception of people. They feel not safe even if far from the real war scenario, and so they ask for protection and stronger security measures. Following that attack, it is possible to predict that IS hardly will engage in a considerable terrorist attack (such as 9/11 attack) since they are difficult to coordinate and to successfully conduct. It would prefer small and random actions, which are more adapt to diffuse panick and are more diffucult to be dealt with, also in terms of giuridical measures. Moreover, this type of attack is more likely to be largely covered in media, contributing to the spread of threats among citizens. The idea of what IS' militants are able to do and the awareness that it has happened also at the core of Western world (namely France) notably increase the perception of risks. In addition, pictures have a great power and terrorists are conscious of this: as the images of 9/11 attacks have remained (and continue to) in the common mind, this is likely to happen with more cruel pictures and videos of torture but also of the attacks perpetrated in Western countries. So IS uses social media and online propaganda to further secure those in the imagery.

Another way to diffuse terror is the knowledge of methods and strategies used by IS. Its preferred way to kill prisoners is through behading, but in such a way meant to increase the pain felt by the victim. Several prisoners, on the other hand, are utilised as sex slaves and many women among them are forced to marry IS' soldiers, otherwise they would die.

But the most terrifying strategy is the indoctrination of children. In fact, as it grasps its hold on a territory, IS immediately focus on the education of young people and children. They have to learn about religion and about IS' actions, then they can enter training camps, and after they are sent to battlefied or used as suicide bombers. It is deducible that children are easier to brainwash, and once they are educated in such a way they would be faithful to such an ideology for their entire life. So IS wants to guarantee itself a certain source of fighters, also for future days. However, children soldiers are not always volunteering, but they are often kidnappened and forced to join trainings and fightings. Of course, this would carry risks of permanent trauma on these children in the future. [57]

3.8 Fighting to purify the world

Another element of IS' strategy important to understand is the belief that they are fighting the last Muslim war before the Final Day (the end of the world). After they've conquered Dabiq (a Syrian city), they

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57 STERN, J. and BERGER, J. M. *ISIS: The State of Terror*. Published by Ecco, March 2015.

revealed this would be the setting for the last battle, and that day is approaching near. After the world will be finally purified and ready to welcome a supreme version of Islam, which would be followed by all people. This expectation has to be taken into consideration, since it could explain IS' behavior. In fact, apocalyptic groups engage in actions that often lack the slightest sign of morality.[58]

3.9 The *distopia* of a new political order

When compared to other terroristic groups, IS can appear very successful in the imposition of its rule in Middle East, and in the presumption of constituting a political state out of nowhere. On the other hand, it has had little influence on the world and other countries have refused to recognize it as a state. Urgency in defeating it depends on the unbelievably cruel practices utilised to impose its advance, so this led to the constitution of an international coalition. However, reactions and emulation desires throughout the world should not be undervalued: jihadist terrorism exercises a strong attractiveness on people, so the possibility of violent attacks to happen in different areas of the world is real. IS has presented itself as a new form of terrorism, different from its antecedents, that applies more violent forms of fighting and takes advantage of the sectarian lines along which Muslim world is divided.

It is difficult to say if IS is likely to be completely destroyed at some

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58 *Ibidem*

point, but the most efficient approaches should be of retrogression and containment to limited areas. In fact, in such situations, the complete annihilation of it could lead to feeling of resentment and the research of more violent vengeances.

Another way of dealing with terroristic groups this powerful is negotiation. According to Jonathan Powell, the chief of staff of the British Prime Minister, it is not possible to rely only on military actions when facing an extremist group with such amount of support and same military possibilities. The time is crucial, since a triumphant organization collecting victories on the battlefied would hardly settle to surrender and negotiate.[59]

Even if it can create confusion in the public opinion, at some point talking to terrorists become necessary, at least in order to stop the bloodshed of innocent people. For example, Powell affirms that in the past USA decided to negotiate with the leaders of Sunni tribes supporting the actions of al-Qaeda in Iraq and this helped in the estrangement of the group from the country. However, the high degree of atrocities and violence perpetrated by IS could make this possible solution difficult to accept. Common opinion is strongly calling for actions to be taken.

At the current moment, a successful strategy could be that of weaken ability of IS to use violence against local peoples and its possibility to move weapons, militants, and money alongside borders.

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59 POWELL, J. *Terrorists at the Table: Why Negotiating is the Only Way to Peace*. Edited by St. Martins' Press, June 2015.

3.10 Global war against terrorist threats

The Western world is already engaged in a global war against terrorism, that has been identified by Pope Francis as the Third World War, even if it takes different features from previous global wars. It lacks proper battlefields and armies, it is fought mainly by mercenaries and armed groups that have no concerns in the use of violent means, such as ethnic cleansing and massacres, to advance. The most affected victims are civilians. But since no limits have been stated in the conducting of this war, a question has to be asked on the ethic and the morality of some means. Interventions should be balanced, in order to not be the violent enemy terrorists claim to be fighting. Responses have been global since the threat is directed against Western countries as well, but it is even more menacing to Sunni Islam. So as stated by King Abdullah of Jordan, it requires a common Muslim response, working together with other powers. It can not be anymore a matter of establishing democratic rules and elections from external influence, since in the past this way of acting has provoked new problems and often unintended consequences.

The origins of this situation must be researched in the globalization of the world, that made possible for peoples to be aware of their political conditions and to overrule their authoritarian regimes. But empty spaces left by these governments were filled by numerous armed groups, with the purpose not of establishing a more democratic states but of conquering territories for their own profits.

IS differed in this trend since its main objective is the re-constitution of the ancient caliphate, so it wants a national state and refuses the idea of persistent anarchy in the territory. This state must have the characteristics of territoriality, sovereignty, legitimacy and a bureaucracy system. To maintain the order in the conquered territories, in fact, IS immediately applies sha'aria law and engages in national defense, protecting the area under its jurisdiction against external threats. As already said, however, these peculiarities are not recognized at the global level since no State has identified IS as a real political State. But IS has for now focused on building consensus among people subjected to its rule, and to do so it has used vioent means of terrorism.[60]

Even if the caliphate would not have a stable future, IS has created now a new model of terrorist action that can inspire other armed groups, encouraging them to act similarly, especially considering the overall Western incapacity to stop this phenomenon.

Apart from the political establishment, the main tactic on which actions of IS are based is the instillation of fear in every human, without distinction, and tiredness and sense of impotence in front of the amount of cruelty they are not afraid to use.

3.11 The Syrian Peace Process

Most recent attemps at resolving the situation in this area are

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60 NAPOLEONI, L. "*ISIS. Lo stato del terrore. Chi sono e cosa vogliono le milizie islamiche che minacciano il mondo.*" Edited by Feltrinelli. 2014.

constituted by the Vienna Process, a series of international negotiations held in Austria in October 2015, and the Geneva peace talks, currently going on at the time of writing (January 2016).

On October 23th, 2015 the US Secretary of State John Kerry firstly met with the Russian (Sergey Lavrov), Turkish (Feridun Hadi Sinirlioglu) and Saudi Arabian (Adel bin Ahmed al-Jubeir) foreign Ministers to prepare the ground to further and broader consultations with all the parties involved in the conflict.

On October 30th, official meeting was held. Participants were the USA, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, China, Egypt, France, Germany, Jordan, Iran, Iraq, Italy, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, UK, the United Arab Emirates, with also representatives of the European Union and of the UN[61]. Two elements can be surprising: the presence of traditionally opposing countries, such as for example Iran, which indeed was initially opposed by USA and Saudi Arabia, and the absence of a Syrian representation, neither on the side of the government nor on that of the rebels.

However, talks ended with a joint statement known as the "*Final declaration on the results of the Syria talks in Vienna as agreed by participants*". As reported in the text, all States agreed on the urgent need to end the war and to defeat IS and other terrorist groups, in the respect of Syrian unity and independence, and fostering the protection of human rights for Syrian people. "*The participants invited the UN to convene representatives of the government of Syria and the Syrian*

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61 WITT, M. *Vienna Talks – Moving towards conflict resolution in Syria?*. AGEMA Report, November 2015.

opposition for a political process leading to credible, inclusive, non sectarian governance, followed by a new constitution and elections. These elections must be administered under UN supervision" but "*[...] political process will be Syrian led and Syrian owned, and the Syrian people will decide the future of Syria*".[62]

Some days after, on November 14th of the same year, another meeting was held, marking the setting up of the International Syria Support Group (ISSG), constituted by all States participating to talks. They expressed the need of a ceasefire in the country, in order to start constructing peace, and restated their commitment to permanently defeat IS, while disagreeing on the future role of Syrian political leader Bashar al-Assad.

After receiving the official endorsement of UN, the ISSG coalition announced further peace talks to be held in Geneva.

Initially, the starting date has been established on January 1st, but it was postponed to January 29th, 2016. The main participants are Staffan de Mistura (UN special envoy for Syria) who invited delegates of the Syrian government, guided by Bashar Jaafari, who is the Syrian Ambassador to the UN, and the High Negotiation Committee, representing the side of opposition, with other moderate groups. However, both delegations have refused to be in the same room at the same time, so negotiations must be conducted separately by UN representatives. The main objectives of these talks are to reach a

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62 European External Action Service (EEAS): Joint Statement. Final Declaration on the results of the Syria Talks in Vienna as agreed by participants, Brussels Oct. 30, 2015, full text here: http://eeas.europa.eu/statements-eeas/2015/151030_06.htm

ceasefire in the country in the short term period, and then the beginning of a political transition period, leading to democratic elections and a new constitution.

These talks are the ideal following of a failed round of negotiations held in 2014, known as the Geneva II Conference on Syria.[63] It constituted the first attempt to bring together representatives of Syrian government and of opposition forces to discuss the end of hostilities, though the list of participants was very wide, including UN, the European Union, the Arab League, USA, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and the United Arab Emirates. However, divergences started to immediately emerge on the matter of Assad's legitimacy and it was evident that there was margin for cooperation. So the third round of negotiations was revoked.

2016 talks are the renewed attempt to end this conflict through diplomatic means but it is difficult to predict whether these could be successful or not.

Latest news announced the UN suspension of talks, apparently due to the army recapture of the cities of Nubul and al-Zahraa, helped by Russian air strikes. Opposition representatives immediately left the negotiations, while Staffan de Mistura insisted in clarifying that this is not the end of talks or their failure, but it is only a period of suspension. The meeting will hopefully resume on February 25th, 2015.

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63 ACRPS (Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies) Policy Analysis Unit: *Geneva Conference II: Challenges Faced in Syria and the Region*. March 2014.

Conclusions

The dissertation attempted to demonstrate that what is going on in the Middle East at the moment can be related to events of the past. The advent of IS depended on the feelings of resentment and betrayal towards Western powers.

The analysis started from an accurate portrayal of the terrorist group, taking closely into consideration frequent changing of names (and what that has meant for the group) and the depiction of the two recognized leaders of the association. Knowing the path which has led these men to leadership is vital to understand their ways to manage IS. Both of them dreamed the building up of a comprehensive Muslim state, or to better say the reconstruction of the ancient caliphate, imposing their authority on States now independent. This would mean the constitution of a completely new political state, subverting equilibria in an already fragile area.

In particular, IS aims to destroy external-made borders and political entities created by the Sykes-Picot agreement. According to the organization, those artificial boundaries were not faithful to characteristics and divisions present on the territory: frontiers were created considering exclusively European interests and colonial arrogance.

The analysis, at that point, considered also previous similar episodes in the Middle East, focusing on the terrorist group known as al-Qaeda and its relation with IS after the outburst of the organization.

Furthermore, the dissertation made a connection between terroristic activities of IS and the moment of confusion and destabilization in which the whole area is. After describing all the peculiarities of the organization, favorable conditions for their infiltration in the territory are analyzed, taking closely into consideration the specific cases of Syria and Iraq. All these conditions summed up have led to armed conflict, involving international powers as well.

Finally, the analysis described the current situation of global war against terroristic threats, to resolve which Western countries engaged in a series of peace talks.

It is difficult to say whether these negotiations would be helpful or not, however the dissertation stated, in the end, a strong need to consider the possibility of negotiating with terrorists, at least to stop bloodshed of innocent people.

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