



Department of Political Sciences

Chair of Global Justice

**The Islamic State:
Analysis of a New and Unprecedented Form of Terrorism**

SUPERVISOR

Prof. Marcello di Paola

CANDIDATE

Giulio Fabris

Student number 626512

CO-SUPERVISOR

Prof. Alessandro Orsini

ACADEMIC YEAR

2015/2016

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My long and fascinating course of studies has always been marked by good fortune: throughout all my academic path, I had the honor to meet marvelous teachers, experts and fellow students who made this journey unique. I take this opportunity to briefly express my profound gratitude to them.

Firstly, I would like to thank my supervisor Marcello Di Paola for keeping his door always open whenever I ran into a trouble spot or had a question about my research. His patience, support and advices have been the pillars of this work. Together with him, I am very grateful to all the outstanding academic, professional and human mentors that I met in Padova, Nairobi, The Hague, Rome, Tel Aviv and New York for their immeasurable contribution to my personal growth.

Secondly, I would also like to acknowledge the special contribution of F. I owe you one!

My sincere thanks also goes my family: to my parents, to my brother and to my sisters for supporting me spiritually throughout writing this thesis and my life in general. Without you, I would never have been where I am.

Last but not the least, I am very much obliged to all my fellow pirates around the world for constantly giving me the good vibes I need to be the person I am. I can never thank you enough.

It is not enough to be just lucky. You also need to be lucky enough to realize it.

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INTRODUCTION

After the infamous 9/11 terrorist attack, our society has witnessed a crumble of certainties and values which radically changed our way of life. Economy and finance, security and privacy issues and international relations had radically changed. Most of these changes have been originated by new expressions of terrorism, in most of the cases by jihadist organizations which caused inconceivable migrants and refugees flows which are affecting the whole planet. This process is, in its turn, largely rooted in the breaking up of wide areas of the Arab world that led to disintegration of entire nations and communities.

The solution for such a recent and complex problem requires, first of all, an in-depth knowledge of the problem itself, in all its aspects. The applicability of this approach, with particular regards to Islamic terrorism, proves to be extremely complex, mainly because of the difficulty to understand the convoluted mosaic of contrasting cultures and traditions which this specific matter presents.

History does not always follow a predictable path and in most of the cases it is possible to logically order events and circumstances apparently random only with the wisdom of hindsight. This consideration proves to be suitable especially when referring to the so-called “Arab Spring”, whose beginning itself is hard to collocate. January 4th, 2011, can be considered a significant and important date in this regard: in that day Mohamed Bouazizi, a Tunisian salesman, burned himself in Tunis to protest against the oppression of the government. The consequent popular uprisings expanded not only throughout the country but well beyond the Tunisian borders, reaching large part of Arab countries at the end of January. By November, four Middle East long-lasting dictatorships felt down already.

Today’s scenario is striking: almost every Arab country, either monarchy or republic, has been affected by the phenomenon of the “Arab Spring”. In particular, states which have experienced the most radical upheavals, namely Iraq, Syria and Libya, had been a product of the Western powers drawing board after World War I. Countries deriving by the defeated Ottoman Empire became the war booty of France

and the United Kingdom, which determined new territorial boundaries without taking into consideration national homogeneity and specific tribal divisions. For example, Iraq originated from the unification of three Ottoman provinces: Sunni, Shia and Kurdish found themselves to live under the same flag from one day to another. Also Italy, which took part to the imperialistic divisions some years later, united three regions of North Africa to create the Libyan colony.

With the end of the dictatorial regimes, which somehow kept together religious, ethnic and cultural differences, the old and complex social organizational system of these areas, composed by countless clans and tribes, re-emerged. The chaotic and confused situation represented the perfect fertile ground for new and varied form of terrorism, which have been able to firmly establish and develop. It is not a coincidence that already in 2002 Muammar Ghaddafi declared in an interview that the actor who would have benefit the most from U.S. intervention in Iraq in such a complex environment would have been Osama Bin Laden and his organization.

For this reason, in a context of great confusion, any strategy must necessarily derive from the deep analysis and knowledge of the issue. The objective of this work is, therefore, to provide an accurate portrait of the causes that led to the establishment and development of the Islamic State, currently the most powerful terrorist actor in the planet. A deep analysis of the organization will be provided, with particular consideration of its more peculiar aspects. More importantly, the aim of this work is to establish if this unprecedented form of terror organization can be considered a new phenomenon or if it possible to include it in any previous theoretical definition of modern terrorism.

It will be pointed out that, even if to certain extent the “Caliphate” presents features known by precedent form of terrorism, this hybrid organization combines state and non-state features with guerrilla and terrorist techniques, which makes it a different and unique case study.

The rapidity which is marking the development of the geo-political conditions in the Middle East contributes to sharpen the difficulties for a comprehensive definition of the phenomenon. Especially in Iraq, Libya and Syria (also due to the international coalition’s pressure), large areas earlier under IS control are being liberated. In the attempt to overcome these complications and to have an exhaustive overview of the

phenomenon, my effort was aimed at consulting the most influential and recent authors on the issue, both from the Arab and the Western world. At the same time, the research tried to extract exclusively objective approaches, avoiding personal and subjective points of view which are often misleading, especially in ongoing historical-political events.

The Islamic State phenomenon, however, remains in continuous evolution, increasing the risk that only in few weeks or days the military-political situation could drastically change from the moment in which it was taken into consideration during the writing of this elaborate. For some reasons, nonetheless, the reality of the Islamic State will remain a unique event worthy of attention, which indelibly marked our historical era and which will most likely go beyond its ultimate dissolution. After all, as Majd Ibrahim, (young Syrian student who fled to Europe) declared in *New York Times report*, "The Islamic State is not a mere terrorist organization, but above all an idea".

The first chapter of this work will analyze the Islamic State from a historical perspective and will point out the reasons and conditions in which the Caliphate could develop and affirm itself as a powerful actor not only in the Middle East but in a global perspective. The chapter is divided in two in order to clarify the circumstances in which the expansion of the Islamic State could flourish: the first part evaluates internal factors inherent to Middle East and especially Iraq and Syria, while the second deals with external factors, meaning the interference of foreign actors in the interested area (mainly the US intervention in Iraq in 2003), giving a portrait of the extremely complex mosaic from which ideology of the Caliphate originates. Indeed, it is of the utmost importance to understand the cultures and creeds behind the Islamic State, since those are not only the basis on which it has been created, but also the pillars that made it so successful in the long-term. Its power of influence on many Muslims from all over the world finds its roots in the persuasive, authoritative and dominant doctrines of the most extreme form of Jihadist-Salafism, which allows the religious and political authorities to impose an extremely narrow and unilateral vision of Islam that does not accept any other interpretation of the faith and declares itself as the only possible truth. The severe and rigorous application of *Shari'a* (the Quranic law), coupled with a fanatic and

universal certainty of being the only true Muslim believer, is the reason why IS is fighting a global war not only against the “Western Crusaders” but also against the infidels Muslims who do not share the same vision. The ideology is for these reasons a milestone in the success and expansion of the Islamic State, which finds its origins in Al Zaraqawi and the Islamic State of Iraq (Al Qaeda’s branch in that area) in 2006.

The second chapter will investigate the peculiar aspects, techniques and characteristics which have made the organization so successful and powerful. The Islamic States mixed a unique combination of features which permitted to affirm itself as an important player in the global scenario. More specifically, the chapter will focus first of all on the strong ideology, which has to be considered a priority in order to understand the phenomenon. It is its apocalyptic and prophetic power, in fact, that makes the Islamic State very attractive and authoritative in a small part of Muslim world. Imposing its strict and narrow interpretation of Islam has proved to be an effective method not only to physically dominate wide areas in the Middle East, but also to exercise influence on believers all around the world.

Additionally, the second chapter will analyze the governance that the Islamic State carries out in its territories and abroad. It will be interpreted in a broader sense, encompassing the internal governance of the areas under IS control and the external policies and methods through which it relates to supporters and affiliates. In particular, the work will investigate on the declared provinces, on which the group exercises a direct control, and the phenomenon of foreign fighters, namely individuals who decide to travel to Syria and Iraq to join the *jihad*. The phenomenon of the “lone wolves” will also be taken into consideration, meaning independent actors who carry out terrorist attacks worldwide on behalf of the Islamic State, not necessarily with training on the field or instruction from above. This is to be considered one of the key points of IS global success and resonance: the unpredictability of the attacks, which are often not coordinated or ordered by the central command but carried out by single and independent individuals on their own, represent an unstoppable and lethal technique that is changing our conception of security. The recent and terrible terrorist acts perpetrated in France, Belgium, USA, Germany, Iraq and all over the world represent a new form of terrorism, which can be accomplished by any individual above any suspects or innocents in every type of

situation. The Islamic State, claiming those attacks, has the possibility to respond with cruelty and brutality to any progress on the ground achieved by foreign forces. Finally, the second chapter will focus on the use of internet, digital communication and social media, which are central to IS success. Recruitment of affiliates, brainwashing and visibility are achieved through online communication and distribution of information. Modern appealing and attractive media techniques are the cornerstones of IS in the successful recruiting campaign of foreign fighters from the Western world, who travel to Syria and Iraq to be active participants of the global jihad. Outstanding online and offline brainwashing communication is also a method that IS exploit to show its power and victorious operations, even if most of the time do not correspond to reality.

The last chapter will consider if the Islamic State is to be considered a new form of terrorism or it can fall in existing categories given by scholars. Initially it will be pointed out Rapoport's four waves' theory, according to which modern terrorism can be divided into different time periods that can be categorized into specific phases precipitated by events. The "waves" are respectively Anarchist (1880s-1920s), Anti-colonial (1920s-1950s), New Left (1950s-1980s) and Religious (1980s-present). The last one will be analyzed deeply for its distinctive characteristics that made it survive longer and for its strong influence current terrorism. It will be compared especially with Al Qaeda, which can be considered the most successful and powerful terrorist actor before the rise of the Islamic State.

Moreover, the work will focus on new interpretation and theories of terrorism, especially the theory of the existence of a Fifth Wave illustrated by Robert Kaplan. The features of this theory will later be compared with current Jihadist groups' and with the Islamic State's characteristics, in an investigation that will try to state if those similarities can apply.

To conclude, the last part of the chapter will describe in depth the aspects that make the Islamic State an uncommon and new case of terrorist actor, which overcame even the most recent definition of terrorism. Even if it presents some features known by precedent studies, the hybrid organization does not fall in any definition given before and it is, therefore, to be considered a unique and completely new form of terrorism.

CHAPTER 1: IS HISTORICAL ROOTS

1.1 INTERNAL AGENTS

The historical roots of IS can be traced back to the 1990s but they resemble much deeper divisions within the Arab world, starting from the differences between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims and the Sykes-Picot Agreement that permanently changed Southwestern Asia in 1916. As we will see in this and the second part of this chapter, the factors that contributed to the creation and spread of ISIS are multiple and varied. In this first part of Chapter I we will analyze the factors that can be considered internal to the Middle East, although this is only a label we must apply since problems and development examined cross borders and are influenced by several events. All in all, this first part 'internal agents' is going to investigate the issues related to the Middle East and the Arab Muslim world that influenced IS.

The first section makes a point of showing what were the conceived borders throughout the 20th century, what the Sykes-Picot agreement achieved and how it was detrimental to the Arab world. The second section gives a picture of how IS came about in Iraq, with al-Zarqawi and sectarian divisions. The third and final part shows the roots on IS in Syria, how it was 'implanted' in the country and how it spread out like metastasis.

1.1.1 The Sykes-Picot Agreement: lines in the sand that are no more

This paragraph's intent is to introduce the Sykes-Picot Agreement in order to understand the recent history and struggles of the Middle East and its developments. Although the boundaries drawn in 1916 have now been in part erased, they marked the region profoundly.

The infamous Sykes-Picot Agreement, or Asiam Minor Agreement, was secretly stipulated in 1916 between Great Britain and France to decide their spheres of influence in Southwest Asia after defeating the Ottoman Empire in World War I. The understanding was that the Triple Entente would have partook in the defeat of the Ottoman Empire, but the Russian Empire assented the agreement.

According to the agreements Britain was in charge of controlling the areas of Southern Iraq, the coastal strip between the Mediterranean and Jordan plus the ports of Haifa and Acre, while France obtained control of Southeast Turkey, Northern Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. Ideally, Russia was to obtain Armenia, Istanbul and the Turkish Straits. The three great powers were allowed to decide the borders within their zones. After the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in 1918 the Arab provinces outside the Arab peninsula were effectively under the British or the French for the following two or three decades as per negotiations of the diplomats Sykes and Picot.

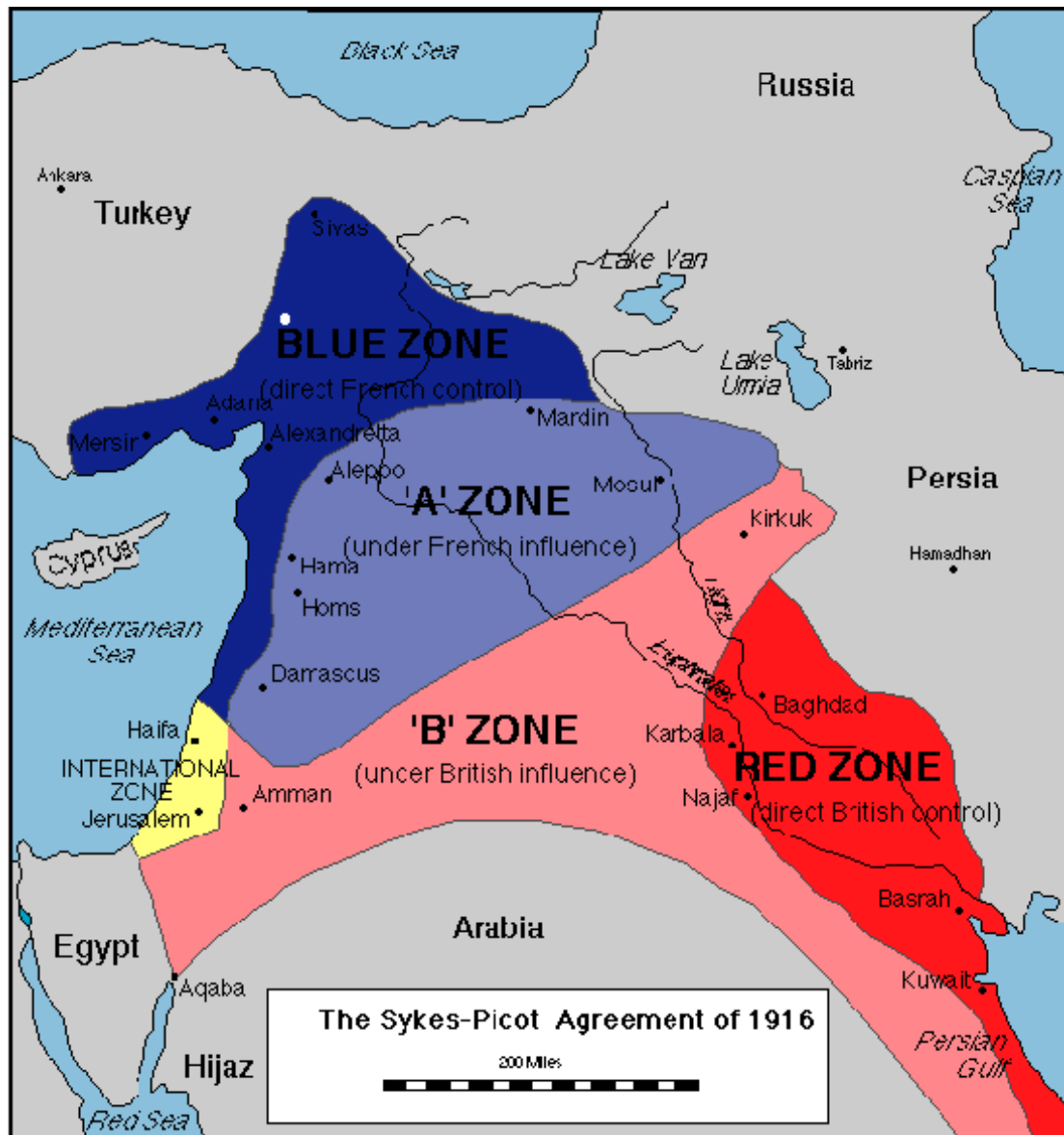


Image via jewishvirtuallibrary.com

After the Russian Revolution the Bolsheviks published the secret agreement, which is largely viewed as a turning point in Western-Arab relations, as it negates the promises made by Colonel T. E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia) when Arabs supported the British against the Ottomans. The deal was exposed after the negotiations ended by the newspapers *Izvestia*, *the Guardian* and *Pravda* in November 1917 and it is still source of concerns in debates over present-day conflicts in the region – to the extent of IS claiming to aim at reversing its effects. Since the Islamic State’s spread in and gained control of large areas of the region, the agreement has to some extent ceased to exist (Ignatius, 2015).

1.1.2 The roots of the Islamic State: Iraq

Al-Qaeda in Iraq: Abu Musab al-Zarqawi

The roots of the Islamic State are to be found in the jihadi groups that arose in and around al-Qaeda's aegis, particularly the Iraqi groups with links to Bin Laden's organization such as al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), and the origin of the methods and rationale of the group largely revolves around one forebear, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. In 2003 no one could have imagined that the ideology of a Jordan national that once worked in a video store could bring about such a disrupting force in the Middle East – taking a third of Syria and Iraq, reshaping the political geography and relations of the region (The New York Review of Books, 2015). For how he structured his battle and what he preached, Zarqawi is the Salafist, contemporary manifestation of what once was a romantic hero – to the point he himself emulated ancient Crusade-conquering fighter Nur al-din Zengi.

Al-Zarqawi had been imprisoned in Jordan in his youth and radicalised there when mentored by Salafist jihadi Islamic writer Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi (Micallef, 2015). A Sunni Muslim, he became a Salafist and in the 80s joined the Taliban against the USSR in Afghanistan, where he also met Osama Bin Laden (Micallef, 2015). After being imprisoned again in Jordan after his return in the 1990s he was freed through an amnesty in 1999 and fled to Iraq, where he founded a jihadi group with some distant connections to al-Qaeda. Located in northern Iraq where it also had training camps, the group (like many other terrorist groups) was able to flourish thanks to the no-fly zone imposed by the US, UK and France (Micallef, 2015). He was convinced that the United States would launch an attack against Iraq and began building his base there in 2002. By 2003, when troops arrived, Zarqawi was willing to collaborate with Saddam's former allies in the Iraqi intelligence network (McCants, 2015). Soon after the invasion Zarqawi and his organization put their plan into motion by attacking three targets – the UN headquarters in Baghdad, the Shi'a Imam Ali Mosque and the Jordanian Embassy in Baghdad. These attacks not only proved that a dirty war was incoming, but also compromised any hope for reconciliation, making Iraq a "no-go zone for the international organizations that might have lightened the burden of U.S. occupation; Iraq's links would be severed with its

mainstream Sunni patron, Jordan; and Iraq would be cleaved apart by a vicious sectarian war between Sunni and Shiite Muslims, whose coexistence had been a feature of modern Iraqi life” (McCants, 2015).

The hatred and resentment towards Shi’a Muslims is of great importance to understand Zarqawi’s actions and methods. When the Iraq War began, Zarqawi organized cells in Baghdad that would target foreign forces and Shi’a, who he regarded as enemies, something his former mentor Maqdisi lamented about him. In 2005 he also was criticised among the Muslim community for his attacks in Jordan that killed Palestinians (McCants, 2015).

The Jordan national started talking about a Caliphate already in 2004, the same year during which he succeeded in getting his jihadi group to join al-Qaeda, becoming its Iraqi counterpart regardless of the remarkable differences in strategy between him and Bin Laden. While Bin Laden focus was to weaken the infidels from the West through unity between Sunni and Shia Muslims, Zarqawi found Shi’a and moderate Sunni to be a worse threat to Islam than Western infidels (McCants, 2015). He later opposed the Shi’a government elected in 2005 and the whole notion of democracy, as it was against the core principles of Islam (McCants, 2015). Al-Qaeda officials became concerned, demanding him to stop showing beheadings in video and posting them online. Then al-Qaeda Second in Command Ayman al-Zawahiri worried that while Zarqawi’s narrative and actions could attract young men to the struggle, they would also appal moderate Muslims, therefore he wrote a letter where he urged him to refrain from using violence against Shia civilians in Iraq, or al-Qaeda would have lost support. The Iraqi War had to be seen as central to global jihad and was not supposed to stop with US withdrawal, therefore Zawahiri demanded to stop attacks outside the country. The democratic appeal to Iraqis had to be acknowledged, at the same time al-Qaeda political actions had to be equal to its military actions starting from the media, where an important part of the struggle was seen to be taking place. Zarqawi ignored the letter, escalating violence towards Shiites; meanwhile his followers proceeded in building what would later become IS. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi was killed in June 2006 by a taskforce of occupational forces. The US later circulated the images of his dead body, a move that only succeeded in

galvanising people and give him the image of a jihadi martyr (McCants, 2015). For this reason the US government refrained from releasing pictures of Osama Bin Laden's dead body (McCants, 2015). His followers went on to declare the Islamic State of Iraq in October 2006 without gaining, or even asking for, consent from al-Qaeda.

Zarqawi's legacy can be resumed in his "strategy of insurgency" that created anarchy in Iraq using the coalition weakness in long-term insurgencies, the disunity between Sunni and Shi'a and his eventual inability to involve Sunni tribes to participate in jihadism. Sunni tribes had fundamentally different concerns from al-Qaeda and did not appreciate the extremist views of Zarqawi and his people, eventually rebelling in the Anbar Awakening (McCants, 2015). Nonetheless his strategy of insurgency kept on, with his followers targeting Shiites and leaving a trail of bodies often ignored by US officials.

Before his death, al-Zarqawi had become involved in the initial stages of the creation of IS but died before the Mujahedeen Shura Council started it putting at its head Abu Omar al-Baghdadi. After the death of Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, the current "caliph" of the Islamic State Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi took power (McCants, 2015). Sunni rage was kept alive in prisons such as Camp Bucca, where detainees came in contact with former members of Saddam's party and developed relations that would later give birth to IS. Those in Bucca also connected Syria to Iraq, as they fled the camp to Damascus and benefitted from the strained relationship between Assad and Baghdad's government.

1.1.3 Political relations in the region: hotbed for terrorists

In 2014 the Islamic State seized Mosul and suddenly became the new, frightening, terrorist organization to fight against. The seizure of Mosul was not a random act but the result of a relentless campaign of killings and terror practices by IS members throughout the regions. United States' forces had adopted the "80-percent solution" in the first stages of the Iraq war, entrusting Kurds and Shiites with building the 'new Iraq' with or without Sunni cooperation (Ignatius, 2015) – effectively detrimental in state-building. After Iraqis saw the corruption and sectarianism of Nuri al-Maliki's first government, they voted in 2010 for a more inclusive coalition headed by the pro-American Ayad Allawi. In a mind-boggling turn of events, the United States (and Iran) managed to maintain Maliki's power position – leading Iraqi politicians to lose faith in the Obama administration and empowering flourishing groups such as the Islamic State. Thanks to the sectarianism of Maliki's government overlooking Sunni requests for security and integration, after 2010 the Islamic State was able to engage in a revenge campaign against those Sunni tribal leaders that took part in the Anbar Awakening and supported Coalition troops against terrorism in the province. Between 2009 and 2013 IS killed 1345 Iraqis that partook in the Awakening (Whiteside, 2014). This campaign of slaughter was no secret to Iraq or the rest of the world, as IS thoroughly documented shootings and killings with videos that were posted online in what can only be described as a 'playlist of horror' they called "The Clanging of the Swords" (Jihadology.net, 2014). Maliki's government did not interfere with IS' revenge spree that all in all, weakened Sunni resistance, filled a vacuum left by the moderate opposition and led to the seizure of Mosul in 2014.

The following paragraph will explain how IS is also rooted in Syria and the events that led to its expansion.

1.1.4 The roots of the Islamic State: Syria

The timeline of events that led to the Islamic State’s expansion in Iraq is somewhat linear, but the same cannot be said for Syria. The United States’ feeble policy (or non-policy) is a decidedly factor in the sequence of happenings that empowered IS. With the escalation of government sponsor horror after the Arab Spring, Syria soon became the arena for proxy wars for many regional powers such as Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia (Ignatius, 2015). Turkey disregarded the high number of foreign fighters looking to join IS and Jabhat al-Nusra crossing its southern border. Iran led Hezbollah into Syria to back al-Assad while Saudia Arabia and Qatar funded Sunni militias to confront Shiites – supporting extremism in practice. Russia too stood silently by Assad while he bombed civilians and used chemical weapons, and later also took the support to Assad to new levels by bombing Syria itself with the excuse of fighting extremist groups that were evidently gaining too much territory against Assad. This perpetuates sectarian divisions in the region and does little to tackle the spread of IS, on the contrary, it furthers the ‘us against them’ narrative used by the terrorist organization.

Syria conflict map - 3 January 2016
Most active frontlines

@deSyracuse
www.agathocledesyracuse.com

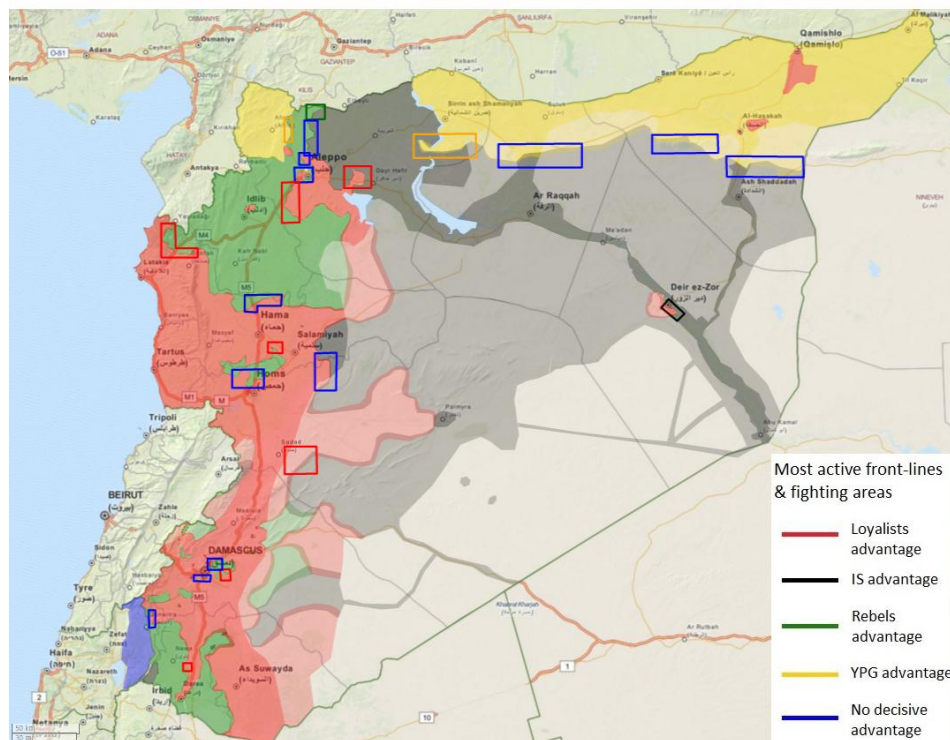


Image via geotrickster.com

But all this starts with the reaction to the Arab Spring movement. The first wails of resistance began in Damascus, when people began protesting authoritarian methods by state forces. At the start of 2011, the government was seeking reform and handled the first protests in Damascus wisely (Ignatius, 2015). But when people in Daraa started protesting, the local governor pushed back and slaughtered civilians, beginning the highly unorganized and deeply manipulated Syrian revolution (Ignatius, 2015).

The revolution is under every aspect to be considered as bottom-up, but also without clear organization and leaders. Mosques organized their own militias for their own territory, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood was too weak to build a strong opposition since Bashar al-Assad's father, Hafez, devastated them in 1982. The moderate opposition was also too weak and unable to provide support to a country that had suppressed sectarian divisions, but did not heal the wounds in its society. This inevitably led to a Sunni-zation of the opposition, which in turn radicalized even further, especially under Salafist influence. Weapons were also not up to the task of facing Assad's army and the Free Syrian Army was simply not organized enough. In 2013 the CIA began a covert programme to train Free Syrian Army rebels in tandem with Jordan intelligence services and it succeeded in developing the beginning of a front in the south, but it also constrained the opposition from overcoming Assad before a successor was found. In the north it had less success, as skills and command presence were not in place to create a strong and effective opposition to the government and stop the spread of jihadism. The US program proved to be a failure and was later terminated by president Obama while Jabhat al Nusra attacked the few US-trained fighters, showing poor intelligence analysis and poor planning behind the operation. American inaction was undeniably determining in the failure of the revolts against Assad, opening up the opposition to terrorist forces.

Foreign fighters began partaking in the rebellion with Nusra, donating money, strength and arms to the struggle. In the meantime, IS was taking over more and more cities, reaching Mosul in 2014, and that gave Assad the opportunity of becoming 'the lesser of two evils' to the international opinion.

The Islamic State built its headquarters in Raqqa, Syria, where it also found supply lines and developed the logistics for the operations in Iraq. IS fighters entered Iraq

thanks to Syria ignoring them, spreading further in the region, destabilizing it and effectively founding a new state that subverted the lines in the sand traced by Sykes-Picot. The Assad government did not bomb the area as it did with other rebel zones, and it does show al-Assad's true intentions: once there was another, greater enemy, the West would have worked towards a survival of the Syrian regime to stop it. This allowed even more access to foreign powers to conduct their proxy wars on Syrian ground.

All in all, the United States launched a war that changed the course of history in 2003, and so far, for the worst. Not only Iraq was left on its own means and sectarian divides, the movements of the Arab Spring found little support for change in Syria, where an autocrat is still acting like a tyrant and the whole region is unrecognizable due to a new, stronger terrorist force.

1.2 EXTERNAL AGENTS

The history of the Islamic State further shows how Western interventions in the Middle East aiming at regime change leave power vacuums that are filled by extremists. To avoid so, foreign forces have to build strong local forces that persistently suppress warlords and terrorist groups. But when foreign forces withdraw support to local forces, they invite chaos and civil war, as it happened in 2011 when American troops left Iraq.

Discussing IS requires an understanding of the Iraq War, or 'Operation Iraqi Freedom'. Several critics of US foreign policy and historians have pointed the finger at the destabilization of the region post-Saddam Hussein as one of the principal causes that originated the terrorist group. Even former British Prime Minister Tony Blair also recognized that the origins of IS were partly to be found in his and Bush's mistakes in the Iraq War. Critics of the war argued that Iraq should have not been a top priority in the war on terrorism or in US policy towards the Middle East, with the potential of destabilizing the region to its core. George H. Bush's former National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft (2002) wrote in a *Wall Street Journal* editorial that the effect of such military action could destabilize Arab regimes and even increase the number of terrorists. Nonetheless, Chatam Houe's fellow Hayder al-Khoei argued in the *Guardian* in 2016 that Iraq was already "destined for chaos" before the arrival of foreign troops in 2003 as "Saddam's endless wars with Iraq's neighbours and his genocidal campaigns against his own people are bizarrely seen by many in the west as part of an era of 'stability' and 'security' for Iraqis. Stability imposed with chemical weapons and security achieved with mass graves. We would need to stretch the definition of those words beyond reason and meaning before we could ever apply them to pre-2003 Iraq" (al-Khoei, 2016).

But, what was Operation Iraqi Freedom? How did it come about? To what extent did it influence the rise of IS? These are three questions guiding this historical chapter on the external forces that originated ISIS – or at least lend a hand in doing so.

1.2.1 The happenings of the Iraq War: summary

The following section is a summary of the events of the Second Gulf War, or Iraq War. It will provide a general understanding of the events that played part in the origins of IS.

To the dismay of many, including former UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, since the first Gulf War the United States and the United Kingdom had engaged in the enforcement of no-fly zones that were not explicitly authorized by the UN through low level-type of attacks on Iraqi air force (Pilger, 2003). In July 2002 paramilitary operations were launched in Northern Iraq. Covert CIA operatives Special Activities Division and the Army's 10th Special Forces Group prepared the arrival of US forces and organized the Kurdish Peshmerga (Tucker and Faddis, 2008). These operations resulted in capturing Sargat's chemical weapons facility (the only of its type to be discovered in Iraq) and the defeat the al-Qaeda-affiliated groups Ansar al-Islam in Iraqi Kurdistan, which led the forces to regain control of the territory (Tucker and Faddis, 2008). The SAD teams also conducted operations behind enemy lines that resulted in hinder Saddam's power to command and control his forces (Woodward, 2004).

On March 17th, 2003 then US President George W. Bush demanded for Saddam Hussein and his two sons Uday and Qusay to surrender power in Iraq and leave the country in 48 hours or face war (White House Office of The Press Secretary, 2003). On March 20th, 2003 at 5:34AM (Baghdad time) the United States began bombing Iraq along with a coalition made of the United Kingdom, Poland, Australian, Spain, Italy and Denmark without explicit UN authorization (Fitzgerald). The invasion was swift but not as easy as expected, as Iraqi forces were expecting an attack and slowed down the advance (but did not stop it). Through land, air and water attacks the coalition moved through Iraq and gained control of its major cities. The invasion was completed on April 15th, 2003 and coalition forces proceeded to capture government officials. In December 2003 Saddam Hussein was also captured. After the occupation came the invasion, during which terrorist groups began to increase small scale attacks (Fitzgerald). From 2004 the dramatic insurgency of terrorist attacks by 'Anti-Iraq' (terrorist) forces with al-Zarqawi at their helm heavily impacted

and divided coalition forces and civilian, leading to serious episodes such as the “Blackwater incident”, in which four private security forces from the private contractor Blackwater were killed and their bodies paraded around – causing the outbreak of the first and second battles of Fallujah (Fitzgerald). Another episode that put US forces against civilians and is deemed the turning point of the war was the revelations of prisoners abuse in the Abu Ghraib prison, damaging the moral justification for the occupation for many, especially Iraqi citizens (Ricks, 2006). In 2005 the first Iraqi government after the demise of Saddam’s regime was elected and later the Iraqi constitution was ratified, causing a widespread of insurgent attacks in the country (Fitzgerald). In 2006 the bombing of Shi'a al-Askari mosque by al-Qaeda contributed to sectarian violence and developed in a situation of civil war. The same year US force also captured and killed Abu Musah al-Zarqawi, the head of al-Qaeda in Iraq, and paraded his body for the population to see, ostracizing the population further. The same year Saddam Hussein was tried and executed by the Iraqi government in December. In 2007 an increase in US forces in Iraq and the ‘Anbar Awakening’ led to a decrease in attacks. The Anbar Awakening took place in the Anbar province of Iraq (one of Sunni majority) and was an alliance US forces made with Sunni Muslim tribes that had initially accepted al-Qaeda in their territory but were later roused to action against it as they did not share their radicalism. The alliance led to effectively ousted the terrorist group from the province, but later the Iraqi government did not meet the conditions agreed by the group and the US, effectively hindering newly reformed relations (Ignatius, 2015). The unfortunate epilogue of the Awakening was the reluctance by the government to act upon his and US promises towards Anbar inhabitants, effectively leaving them without jobs and exposed to the Islamic State’s call (Micallef, 2015). In 2008 the Iraqi government voted to end the occupation by foreign forces since the new Iraqi army had become able to defend itself. The transition began in 2009 and soon withdrawal of forces started (Fitzgerald), ending in 2011. In 2010 coalition forces and Iraqi officials killed Abu Omar al-Baghdadi and Abu Ayyub al-Masri, the former the leader of the newly-born ISIS and the latter the leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq.

1.2.2 The role of agenda setting in triggering the Iraq War

In the aftermath of the September 11th attacks in New York City and Washington DC in 2001 George W. Bush addressed a joint session of the US Congress announcing his War of Terror and his Bush Doctrine, a doctrine consisting of preliminary, or pre-emptive military actions against terrorists. In the meantime, strong allegations were made about a relationship between Al-Qaeda and the then Iraqi Government, whose president was Saddam Hussein Abd al-Majid al-Tikriti - Saddam Hussein. Some of Bush's advisers favoured immediate action against Iraq, while others were adamant about building a coalition and obtaining authorization by the UN. Bush eventually opted for the latter but reserved the right to invade Iraq without it (PBS.org).

In October 2002 the "Joint Resolution to Authorize the Use of United States Armed Forces Against Iraq" was passed by US Congress to authorize the President to use of "any means necessary" against Iraq. At the time, most of the American public still favored a diplomatic solution, but in the following months the government engaged in an aggressive public relations campaign that marketed and effectively sold the danger of Saddam to US citizens.

After a long debate that split the UN Security Council in two sides, one agreeing with military action (United States and United Kingdom) and the other favoring continued diplomacy and weapons inspections, Resolution 1441 was adopted in November 2002. The Resolution authorized new weapons inspections and warned of "serious consequences" in case Iraq did not comply (United Nations' Security Council, 2002). Importantly, the idea of "serious consequences" was not phrased to provide "hidden triggers" for invasion (United Nations' Security Council, 2002). In February 2003 then US Secretary of State Colin Powell presented his concerns about Iraqi weapons capacity and ties between al-Qaeda and the Iraqi government. The presentation was largely based off the claims of Rafid Ahmed Alwan al-Janabi, an Iraqi refugee living in Germany, who later on recanted the information and admitted it was false (Chulov and Pidd, 2011).

Iraq: a fixture in US foreign policy's agenda

A focusing event is a particular happening that does not necessarily need to be world-shattering (even though 9/11 was extremely powerful), but has to be significant and of value for a government or governments to take it into account and invest it with importance in order to justify a pattern in policymaking (Kingdon, 1984). Focusing events are described by Kingdon (1984) as a subset of “policy windows”. Policy communities develop ideas throughout years, if not decades, but these will generally remain dormant for years until a crisis (focusing event) occurs. A focusing event is not enough to generate policy, there are indicators of struggle that precede it and provide ground for advocates to analyse the development of a situation and propose solutions: in the case of the 9/11 attacks and the danger of al-Qaeda two examples could be the bombings on the US embassy in Kenya in 1998 and the killing of the Afghan politician and Osama Bin Laden’s foe Ahmad Shah Massoud, also known as the Lion of Panjshir, on September 9th, 2001. A government cannot think up options on the stand when a crisis hits, but it is going to use strategies developed over time by these policy communities. The social beliefs and constructs within a nation also reinforce or disable to activation of policies by policy elites during policy windows. The aim of this paragraph is to point out how the war Iraq, a focal point of our wider discussion about IS, had been ‘in the making’ for decades before 9/11 and it does not necessarily stem from those attacks – although they became the focusing event for the Bush’s government to use in the political discourse and actions.

Taking place in the post-9/11 world, the prelude to Iraq War and the following military actions have long been associated with the War on Terror and terrorism as the main threat to international security, with George W. Bush even describing it as “the central front in the war on terror” (Bush, 2005). In hindsight it differed greatly from the purpose of the war in Afghanistan or from the direct attacks on Al-Qaeda. In an interview with Time magazine, the former Pentagon’s top operations officer Marine Lieutenant G. Newbold openly admitted of regretting not challenging the notion that invading Iraq was the only solution to stop al-Qaeda (Newbold, 2006). Then why was Iraq such an important focus for the War on Terror when in fact the

threat of terrorism was only peripheral to it? Because it had long been the focus of US foreign policy concerns. In 1998 then commander of CENTCOM Anthony Zinni declared that in the Gulf region (significantly smaller than the whole Middle East) Iraq was an important threat to US interests due to its military capacity, the pursuit of weapons of mass destruction by the government, the denial of human rights to all Iraqi citizens, the non-compliance to UN Security Council resolutions and no-fly ones (Pipes and Clawson, 1998). Former Bush administration Treasury Secretary O’Neill also stated that Iraq was a concern before 9/11 and an attack had been hypothesized even during the Clinton administration (CNN, 2004).

All in all, the roots of the Iraq war are to be found in the 1990s – at least according to writer James Mann (CNN, 2004). During the two terms of Bill Clinton’s presidency a dedicated group of mostly Republicans politicians-turned-activists emerged in foreign policy circles in Washington, promoting the issue and later taking part in George W. Bush’s presidency. The trend originated with the early draft of the 1992 Defence Policy Guidance (DPG) was not a work by the “architect of the Iraq War”, the Undersecretary of Defence during George H. Bush’s administration Paul Wolfowitz, but by Zalmay Khalilzad, aide to the Undersecretary and later US ambassador to Afghanistan. Khalilzad’s work was highly appreciated by then Secretary of Defense Richard (Dick) Cheney, who became Vice President during George W. Bush’s presidency and was famously aggressively bold in his rhetoric and foreign policy thinking throughout his career in politics (Mazarr, 2007). The preoccupation for the instability of Saddam’s regime showed during the first Gulf War led many foreign policy analysts in Washington believe he was not to be trusted, especially regarding WMDs. Even in 1991 president George H. Bush had authorized the CIA to spend over a hundred million dollars to remove Saddam from Power (Mayer, 2004: 61). Thanks to these developments during the 1990s and the dedication of activists keeping abreast with the situation, Bush and Cheney were able to confront the issue of Saddam and Iraq with plenty of information during the campaign and after the election – especially on what had failed to work, such as sanctions and no-fly zones (Mazarr, 2007). Before 9/11 weapons of mass destruction were the main concern for the President and Vice President, who both made clear in

a number of interviews that under no circumstances was Saddam to be allowed ownership of those and military action to ensure so was a possibility (Mazarr, 2007). After the election in 2000, Bush specifically asked outgoing Secretary of Defense William Cohen to brief him on the topic of Iraq. This is highlighted by Woodward (2004: 9) because these type of briefings are generally a “round-the-world tour” rather than a discussion on a specific country.

Between January and September 2001 options of action in Iraq were examined at all levels, although there was little consensus on what the United States were to do exactly that resulted in inaction until September 11th, 2001. The attacks in New York and Washington brought renewed attention to the issue, becoming the focusing event that opened one of the most important policy windows in modern history for advocates. Although the link between al-Qaeda and Iraq were later discredited (Pincus and Smith, 2007), George W. Bush decided then to focus the US response on terrorists but also “those who harbour them” (Woodward, 2002: 30) and on September 12th, 2001 former senior NSC staffer Richard Clarke (2004) described discussions who gave support to terrorism, with suspicions of Iraq being a culprit. The first approach eventually focused on Afghanistan but the highest levels of the government were still concerned on whether Saddam was at fault in the situations (32). National Security Advisor Condoleeza Rice also admitted “there wasn’t a flash moment. There’s no decision meeting. But Iraq had been on the radar screen that it was a danger and that it was something you were going to have to deal with eventually” (Diamond et al. 2002). The only issue was timing.

In 2002 Tony Blair’s British cabinet was also discussing Iraq and US policy towards it. Slowly but steadily, military action had started to become the only option available in the eyes of policymakers, although there was greater consciousness of its political price (Manning, 2002). Bush was adamant about removing Saddam from power and justified his will with the danger of WMDs and terrorism. By September 2002 President Bush was looking to obtain congressional authorization to use force: “the NSC had no patience with the UN route, and no enthusiasm for publishing material on the Iraqi regime’s record. There was little discussion in Washington of the aftermath after military action” (Mazarr, 2007: 8). In October 2002 the resolution to use military force passed congressional approval and in the following months the

administration grew tired of UN inspections that were not working, therefore the first strikes started at the end of March 2003.

The anti-Saddam policy community and advocates that worked tirelessly in Washington over 1990s assumed positions of power in George W. Bush's cabinet and were able to express and carry out their policy ideas thanks to both the power they gained and the focusing event they found themselves in. This does not diminish the importance of 9/11 the *casus belli* originating the Iraq war, but it shows the ideological importance of certain policymakers and how important this was in deciding whether to go to war or not. The commitment to remove Saddam from power played an very important part in the convincement to go to war in Iraq in the aftermath 9/11 and in the decisions taken in the following years especially thanks to the decisiveness of the policy community advocating for the end of his regime – even when not all peaceful options were exhausted, as the Chilcot enquiry in the UK exposed in 2016.

1.2.3 The Iraqi War and the origins of IS

Sunni discontent of the invasion proved to be fertile ground for grievances to develop and ISIS to grow. The grievances of the group comprehend the fact that the Iraq War and occupation ousted Sunni from power, driving widespread resistance. Sunni Muslims in the region in fact argue that Bush and Blair's decision to go to war fundamentally shifted powers back into Persian hegemony, into Shia Iran (Chulov, 2015). The UK's Chilcot enquiry and Foreign Secretary Hammond (Chilcot, 2016) also highlight this by stating that the problems in Iraq stem from the dismantling of the Iraqi army and the de-Baatification of Iraqi politics. More importantly, former advisor to General David Petraus in countering Iraqi insurgents Lieutenant Colonel David Kilcullen declared that without the Iraq invasion there would be no ISIS (Dearden, 2016). As a matter of fact the US-run mass detention prison system – especially Camp Bucca - proved to be fertile ground for radicalization and organization. Furthermore, the displacement of Iraqi troops during the invasion and later occupation left hundred of thousands without a job and vulnerable to terrorist calls.

Failure in protection

The failure of the United States in protecting what could easily become recruiting grounds left cities such as Fallujah in the hands of extremists. Already with Zargawi, tribal leaders were asking for protection from stronger forces, they were scared of retaliation and civil war (Ignatius, 2015). As explained in the first part of this chapter, the 80 per-cent solution for the New Iraq demanded for Sunnis to adapt without bringing forward requests, angering the population and alienating it. The later Anbar Awakening counter-insurgency of Sunni population proved that US and local forces could work together and took down Al-Qaeda in Iraq ruthlessly – although few members remained and were imprisoned were they mingled with other Al-Qaeda leaders and former Baath Party officials. On the other hand, the promises made to Awakening partakers were not kept by Baghdad’s government and US troops were also deemed responsible since they were guarantors in the agreements.

Prison recruitment

Prisons such as Camp Bucca proved to be fertile ground for terrorist re-organization because it concentrated al-Qaeda leadership and jihadi sympathizers all in one prison, where they could get together like no other place. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi spent time in Camp Bucca. The Islamic State used these prison to build trust between foreigners and to train them – practically and ideologically: against the West and the Shiite-led government. The IS guerrilla waited in patience and between 2012 and 2013 it orchestrated prison raids culminating in the Abu Ghraib breakout to free prisoners. In liberating prisons in the areas they took over, IS leaders welcomed thousands of new fighters happy to join their ranks.

United States officials overestimated the capabilities of the Iraqi Army and misunderstood the power with which IS would take over Iraq (and Syria) and left the area on its own after recalling the troops. By the time America pushed to replace Maliki and his sectarian government from Iraq, Sunni leaders struggled to trust the foreign forces again considering the problematic past relations (Micallef, 2015).

From the United States’ standpoint, the success of any anti-IS operation requires operational planning and resources, something available in Iraqi Kurdistan, which

proved successful in pushing IS fighters away, or Baghdad, where Shiite militias guided by Iran defended the capital. Mosul, and previously Fallujah and Ramadi, can still be considered IS strongholds because empowering Sunni forces requires delving into Iraq's political problems in order to change the future of the country, but there are ideological and social forces against it that jeopardize trust and reinforce the borderline-deranged 80 per-cent solution.

CHAPTER 2: IS PECULIAR ASPECTS

2.1 IDEOLOGY

As Major General Michael K. Nagata, special commander for U.S. Central Command, confessed in late December 2014: “We do not understand the movement [i.e., the Islamic State], and until we do, we are not going to defeat it.” Of the group’s ideology he said: “We have not defeated the idea. We do not even understand the idea” (Bunzel, 2015). IS is in fact first of all an idea, which has its roots in a strong, convincing and very specific ideology, which developed from a branch of Islam in the last century.

Ignoring its religious motivations would lead to an inadequate comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon; on the contrary, ideology is to be considered of the utmost importance and as the main driver of the terrorist group’s strategy. “The Islamic State, as a political entity, is inconceivable apart from its ideology. The group’s senior leadership, by all appearances highly ideologically driven, sets the policies and direction of the group. The content of the Islamic State’s ideology thus merits serious attention” (Bunzel, 2015).

Therefore, the aim of this section is to provide an accurate portrait of Islamic State’s religious background through an analytical analysis of the branch of Islam from which it originated. Only through a profound knowledge of its culture it will be possible to explain behaviors, attitudes and practices of the self-proclaimed Caliphate.

2.1.1 Roots: *Sunni VS Shiite*

Islam has been marked by sectarianism, conflict and division from the very beginning of its history. The oldest and deepest *fitna* (dispute, disagreement, tribulation) leads us back to the ancient times of Mohammed and the tribes who lived with him. The diatribe dates back to 632 A.C., year of the death of the Prophet

and founder. After his decease, tribes had to decide who should inherit the political and religious guide of the community. The majority of his follower believed that the legitimate successor should have been Abu Bakr, close friend of Mohammed and father of his wife Aisha. According to a minority, though, the descendant should have been chosen in a person related by blood to the Prophet, in this case Ali (Mohammed's cousin and son-in-law). From him, the group obtained the name Shia, a shorter version of *Shiaat Ali* (Ali's partisans).

Abu Bakr's supporters prevailed due to their overwhelming majority and the rupture between the two groups sharpened when Hussein, Ali's son, was murdered in 680 in Kerbala (Iraq) by the Sunni Caliph in power at that time. From that moment on, Sunni monopolized political power and Shia lived undercover, while religious differences continued to exacerbate. By the end of the eighth century, they had started to develop significantly distinct doctrines of their own creed. Shia firstly reformulated the basis of Islamic law by rejecting the *hadiths* and legal opinions expressed by most of the companions of the Prophet. In their view, in fact, only a descendent of Mohammed had the legitimate right to rule. As a consequence, the Shias began to develop a Qur'anic interpretation centered on what they believed to be the correct interpretation of Islam (Emerick, 2002). Their ultimate leader is the *Ayatollah*, who is considered an infallible supreme pope-like guide and as a sign of God on the earth.

Sunnis, on the other hand, have a softer view towards the selection of the leader and base their religious practice on the *Sunna*, a collection of practices and teachings of the Prophet gathered after his death: according to them, true Muslim should strictly follow the traditions and way of life of Mohammed. This element, coupled with their bigger number which allowed them to rule throughout Islamic history, have led the Sunnis to accuse the Shias of heresy, while the Shi'ia indicted their counterpart's dogmatism as the cause of extremism and terrorism.

The two groups share the same belief that Allah is the only God and Muhammad is its Prophet. They both observe the Qur'an as the primary source of legitimacy and the importance to respect the five pillars of Islam. It has been estimated that Sunnis make up approximately 85 percent of the world' Muslim population (1.6 billion people), while Shias account for much of the rest (Emerick, 2002).

In spite of the deep and prolonged division, relationships between the two groups have been proceeding relatively smoothly. This is partly because the Shias, aware of their minority status, always kept a low profile. Recently, however, revolutions in the region have counter posed Shia governments, such as Iran or Lebanon, against Sunni Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar, who have supported their co-religionists with cash. This has strengthened Sunni assertiveness and made the Shia feel more threatened than usual (The Economist, 2013).

2.1.2 Salafism

The origins of Islamic State's ideology can be found in the branch of the Sunni school of thought called Salafism. The modern conception of this ultra-conservative doctrine, which advocates a return to the *Salaf* (the pious ancestors' way of life) emerged in the second half of the 19th century in Egypt, but its origins can be traced back well before that period. The foundation of this juridical-theological school of thought dates back to the 9th century, when its founder Ibn Hanbal stressed the importance of accepting the sacred scriptures simply as they are, without ambiguous interpretation (Basanese, 2015). After spreading in all the Muslim world, during 14th century, Salafist doctrine split in two different interpretations which persisted till today: one ascetic, which refuses any contact with modernity and seeks to avoid any contamination with the corrupted world; and one marked by an active and concrete effort to re-establish the Golden Age of the pious ancestors, which can be identified in the figure of Ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328). The Syrian religious scholar amply advocated *Jihad* (conceived as holy war) as a mean to imitate the Prophet's life and gestures. According to him, in order to be a "true Muslim" it is necessary not only to recognize the oneness of God (*Tawhid*) and Mohammed as his messenger, but to strictly emulate the Prophet and his people concrete behaviors and practices (Basanese, 2015).

The concept of *Jihad* was extensively developed by Ibn Taymiyya, who considered it even more important than the pilgrimage to Mecca; he will later become an

important source of inspiration for modern religious extremist radicals, especially for Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (McCants, 2015).

Salafists identify Islam as anything that was explicitly condoned by Muhammad and that was upheld by his first three generations of Sunni followers. This view is based on a *hadith*, in which Mohammed allegedly said that “the best of my community is my generation, then those who follow them, then those who follow them.” “By extension, anything that appeared after that—and anything Muhammad did not explicitly condone—is considered un-Islamic, an extremely broad category. Of course, secular political ideologies, nation-states, political parties, and so on are all, by this definition, un-Islamic” (Olidort, 2015).

At the centre of the Salafist theology is the concept of *Tawhid*, God’s oneness. This conception does not limit itself to simply respect monotheism, but, on the contrary, it encompasses a wide range of applications. Only what is deriving from God can be worshipped, therefore is it strictly prohibited to enforce man-made laws or venerate saints or sacred sites which are not directly related to God, for example. The opposite concept of *Tawhid* is *Shirk*, which is used by Salafists to describe the extensive spectrum of issues which are not addressed in traditional Islamic literature. Due to this doctrine, also law interpretation is based exclusively on Mohammed’s example as the unique legitimate source of reference. This approach, therefore, condemns even the Muslim tradition and practices which developed after the Prophet’s death, since they arrived after the “pious ancestors” era (Olidort, 2016).

The modern conception of Salafism, as a political movement in order to establish Islamic law in modern states, roots back to 1924, when the Ottoman Empire, the last Caliphate, was officially abolished. For the first time in history, in fact, there was no religious government or authority to lead the community; this absence reinforced Salafism narrative based on the belief that for authentic Muslim guidance one must look at the very origins of the religion (Olidort, 2015). This assumption is emphasized by the fact that after the fall of the Ottoman Empire, Western powers divided territories in the Middle East and exercised intrusive policies in Arab countries. Salafism, therefore, developed and gain momentum as a Muslim political response to Western interference.

2.1.3 Types of Salafism

According to Olidort (2016), the modern Salafist ideology which developed after the fall of the Ottoman Empire can be divided in three different categories, which do not differ in their theology or legal worldview but rather in the way they interpret the role of politics.

Purists

The Purists or Quietists' efforts are aimed exclusively at the religious aspects of Islam. Accordingly, they condemn both violent activities and political mobilization which are considered causes of corruption and distraction. They strictly separate religion from the social-political world and their ultimate goal is to purify and re-educate society according to the tradition of the Prophet and his followers. Even if often accused to support radical Islam, this Salafist purist approach is solely promoting full immersion in religious texts and focused on an ultra-orthodox and literal interpretation of sacred books (Basanese, 2015).

Reformists

Unlike purist Salafism, the political or reformist approach promotes an idea of Islam which marries tradition with innovation. This approach aims at spreading the Quranic message through political parties and associations, intended as peaceful instruments to achieve power. Politics is therefore considered a modern mean to reach a conservative and traditional goal, namely the enforcement of *Shari'a*. The reformist Salafism argues that the only effective method which can bring change is to work within the political system, participating elections, forming political parties and accepting pluralism.

The most relevant Salafist political movement is the Muslim Brotherhood. Founded by Hassan al-Banna in 1928 in Egypt, the organization is the oldest and arguably the most influential of the Islamist organizations in the Arab world (Létourneau, 2016). Born as a reaction to the British colonialism and cultural hegemony in Egypt, the movement aims at building an idealized Islamic society based on *Shari'a* and Salafist principles. The Muslim Brotherhood conceived a new form of Salafist approach to politics, based on parties and associations to achieve more power and influence. Despite the occasional use of force, in 2011 the movement explicitly rejected armed

struggle as a mean to achieve power and accepted democratic system and pluralism (according to its website). Throughout its history, the Muslim Brotherhood's strategy to reach its goal have been carried out through two different methods: one top-down approach based on the presence in the political system and one bottom-up strategy based on the provision of public services such as schools, hospitals and mosques in order to reach the lowest and most numerous fringe of population.

Jihadists

Finally, the last (and most infamous) approach to Salafism is the *Jihadist* or revolutionary. Born from a break up with the Muslim Brotherhood, this perspective was inspired for the first time by Sayyid Quttb (1906-19669), who is considered the forefather of Al Qaeda's terrorism. The writings of the Egyptian philosopher and politician served as the primary source of modern jihadist movements: Ayman al-Zawahiri (Al Qaeda's current commander), for example, described Quttb as the most important influence on his life (Bozek, 2008). Similarly to the reformist Salafism, the jihadist Salafism promotes social and political actions as instruments for Islamic law's enforcement. Unlike the reformists, though, it presents a stricter and very narrow view of religion: religious norms and regulation should be applied literally and cannot be discussed or interpreted, in particular those regarding the authority and power. According to this approach, no type of collaboration or partnership with both Western society and other Muslims is permitted; *Jihad*, intended as a violent instrument to achieve power, is the primary mean which becomes at the same time an ideological and physical obligation. Jihadist Salafism opts for direct action over any other political methods and does not accept any compromise (Basanese, 2015).



As one can evince from this detailed analysis of Salafist interpretations, it is reductive to consider the divisions and tensions in the Islamic world only related to Sunni and Shia. On the contrary, it is clear that the main cause of the violence and extremism is to be considered only the Jihadist Salafism, which separates itself both from Sunni and other Salafist ideologies. "Although the Islamic State is an extension of the

global Salafi-jihadist movement, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of the Caliphate who auto-proclaimed himself caliph in the summer of 2014, and his cohorts represent another wave, a post-Al Qaeda generation, of Salafi-jihadists. At present, IS ideology has successfully tapped into a fierce clash of identities between Sunni Muslims and Shia Muslims in the Middle East and beyond” (Gerges, 2016).

Once understood the ideology, it becomes easier to understand not only Islamic State but all the Jihadist groups’ main strength: they reduce, in fact, the complexity of reality to elementary choices; they describe a world limited to Manichean choices which opposes good, pure and religious people to evil forces identified with non-Muslim or even moderated Muslim. They promote a universal interpretation of history and a sense of superiority of their members, who are seen as the chosen ones. Jihadist Salafism advocates an absolute and always-right knowledge, which must be accepted by everyone and cannot be contradicted (Basanese, 2015).

2.1.4 Wahabbism

Before taking into consideration the specific ideology of the Islamic State and the reasons why it can be considered a peculiar and new aspect in extremist ideology, it is worthy to briefly analyze the Wahabbist movement, which is certainly the most similar tendency to the Islamic State and is considered one of the main sources of militant Islam.

Founded by Saudi Sunni scholar Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1792), who was greatly influenced by already mentioned Ibn Taymiyya, this school of thought enhances the principles of *takfir* (excommunication of fellow Muslims) and *jihad*, intended as physical struggle against the infidels. Wahhab’s rigid view developed, similarly to the Muslim Brotherhood, as a reaction to the declining influence of Islam and the increasing European expansionism.

Wahabbism’s paramount principle is the oneness of Allah, which is the only one who can be worshipped and considered holy; reverence for saints, images, shrines or graves is, in fact, considered heresy; shaving, alcohol, smoking and swearing are forbidden and women are not allowed to take leadership roles (Atwan, 2015). Moreover, the Saudi discipline insists on the need of a supreme leader of all

Muslims; therefore it underlines the necessity of a Caliphate which was indicated, in the case of Wahhab, in the person of Muhammad Ibn Saud. Leader of a tribe based in Diriyah, he realized the potential of Wahhab's teachings (especially the concept of Jihad) as instrument to achieve power and was able to establish a kingdom based on Wahabbist precepts in the Arabian Peninsula, which included the two Islam holiest sites Mecca and Medina, by 1803. After the recapture by the Ottomans in 1812, who forced the Wahhabis to silence for almost a century, the current Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was eventually established in 1932 under the Saud dynasty. "The discovery and exploitation of oil were to create tensions between the Wahhabi vision and the ambitions of the king, creating a duality within the nation's identity. Wahhabism was therefore cynically transformed and harnessed as an instrument of the state and its hard line, uncompromising value system was institutionalized to uphold the king's absolute power" (Atwan, 2015).

Despite the "marriage of convenience" with the West, which has been openly ignoring human rights abuses (from November 2012 to August 2014 Saudi Arabia had publicly beheaded 113 people) (Atwan, 2015), the Saudi Kingdom is undoubtedly the leader of Sunni Islam in the Muslim community. Thanks to the huge revenues guaranteed by the abundance of oil resources, the Saud dynasty was able to finance and export Wahhabism worldwide, at the beginning as a response to Iran's attempt to spread Shi'ia radicalism after 1979 revolution.

"In order to consolidate and preserve the Saudi king's position as leader of the world's Muslim, the kingdom began aggressively exporting the official brand of Wahhabism throughout the world, including to Western Muslim communities" (Atwan, 2015). This worldwide mission brought many critics to the House of Saud, considered the main sponsor of extremist groups and jihadist fighters globally and even the main responsible of the advent of the Islamic State, according to one *Financial Times* article (Atwan, 2015). Started in the 70's, the spreading operation has financed *madrassas* (religious schools), colleges and universities which are aimed at the unification of the Muslim community under the Wahhabi principles and completely dedicated to the strict Wahhabi interpretation of Islam, including its devotion to fight "non-believers" with *Jihad*. In 2013, for example, the kingdom

launched a 35 billion program for mosques and *madrassas* across the whole South Asia (Atwan, 2015).

Saudi Arabia is not only spreading its approach to Islam through *dawaa* (non-violent proselytism actions through education and religious activities), but it has been also promoting *Jihad* directly. At the time of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, for example, the regime showed Bin Laden as an exemplary and brave model and media and mosques made an enormous effort in recruiting young volunteers. “An estimated 35,000 to 45,000 Saudis left the country to join the mujahideen in the late 1980s” (Atwan, 2015). Moreover, it is well-known that Saudi Arabia has been financing the most radical terrorist group like Al Qaeda and the Taliban, as emerged by a 2009 Hillary Clinton’s briefing published on Wiki Leaks (the biggest collection of classified and reserved information), in which she was addressing top US diplomats that the kingdom’s donors are the main source of sustenance for those terrorist organizations (Atwan, 2015). Finally, with the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011, Saudi Arabia openly encouraged *jihad* in order to put an end to Assad’s regime. Many of those fighters incited by the regime, unsurprisingly, ended up in the Islamic State ranks. Moreover, considerable individual donations have been made by Saudi individuals to IS and prince Bandar himself (former Saudi head of General Intelligence) conveyed relevant funds to the group (Atwan, 2015).



This prolongation on Wahhabism and Saudi Arabia was meant to present the deep analogies which link this doctrine to the Islamic State. In essence, Baghdadi’s Caliphate is challenging the Saudi claim to lead the Muslim world according to the “true path” of Islam as outlined by the eighteen-century scholar Wahhab (Atwan, 2015). It is no coincidence that the Islamic State, since it is inspired by the same ideology and pretends to be the only legitimate guide of the Muslim community, shares the Saudi educational methods to indoctrinate its citizens: “of the eleven editions of early works by Muslim scholars that the group uses both to market itself

as the rightful inheritors of his message and to brand its attack on the counter-ISIS coalition, six are works by Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab” (Olidort, 2016).

The competition over Wahhab’s ideological legacy reflects the will to lead the Islamic community and the Islamic State has proved to be the only noticeable rival of Saudi Arabia so far. In point of fact, stressing the royal family’s collusion with the West and moral corruption, the Islamic State has discredited the Saudis as the legitimate representative of Wahhabism and showed itself as the only pure and morally right actor of the Salafist credo. In confirmation of this, “92 percent of Saudi citizens interviewed in an online poll in July 2014 believed that IS conforms to the value of Islam and Islamic law” (Atwan, 2015).

2.1.5 Salafism of the Islamic State

As it is possible to evince from this brief analysis of this specific branch of Islamic thought, the Islamic State borrowed its ideology from the Salafi-jihadist approach of Salafism, which is in its turn a fundamentalist interpretation of Sunni Islam. “Over the past half century, the Salafi-jihadist movement has developed a repertoire of ideas, a frame of reference, theorists, thousands of followers, and “martyrs” who provide inspiration for new volunteers and who ensure the durability of the brand. IS has been able to draw from this repertoire, re-articulating old concepts and presenting them as new or revolutionary. Its rhetoric makes use of religious ideology to articulate identity politics” (Gerges, 2016).

This section will show that, even if the group shares very similar features and attitudes with other jihadist organizations, the Islamic State’s ideology represents something unprecedented. In order to better understand the issue, this part will firstly focus on the differences that the Islamic State presents with respect to Al Qaeda, which has been the most prominent exponent of the most extreme interpretation of Salafi-jihadist ideology, at least until the appearance of the Caliphate.

Comparison with Al Qaeda's ideology

The Islamic State's specific ideology developed within the context of the Iraqi insurgency of the early 2000s. As mentioned in the first chapter, this period saw the arrival in Iraq of a younger generation of jihadists influenced by the more extreme strain of Jihadist-Salafism. The most influential of these young men was the Jordanian Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, whose school of thought was based on 2 pillars: extreme anti-shiism and restoring the Caliphate (Bunzel, 2015). The former leader of AQI (Al Qaeda in Iraq) took part in anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan in late 80's, where he had the opportunity to forge his radical mentality. After setting up a training camp in Herat in 1999, he got arrested and spent some years in prison, where he attracted followers. His activities in Afghanistan represent the milestone of Islamic State's ideology: from the beginning, his group did not completely submitted to Al Qaeda due to a stricter ideology which, eventually, can be considered the main reason of the separation from Bin Laden's organization (Bunzel, 2015).

First of all, the reason which makes IS different from AQ lies in the ideological interpretation of the territorial projects. Although also Al Qaeda applied a harsh and literal reading of Islamic life in Yemen, Syria and Somalia, it did not have neither expansionist aims nor claimed to be the legitimate Caliphate. The Islamic State, by contrast, exploits religious ideology to promote its role as the only rightful leader of the Muslim community. In accordance to its interpretation, the Caliphate is the exclusive authority allowed to define what Islam truly is and its lands are the only one in which the pure original Islam is applied. "By extension, as the IS view goes, anyone residing outside of IS territory or who refuses to defend its cause is not a true Muslim. Islamic concepts are reframed to include *bay'a* (obedience, submission) to the Islamic State as a legally-binding obligation" (Olidort, 2016). While Al Qaeda did not have the claim to represent the entire Muslim community and was more inclined to gain public support before establishing its rule, the Islamic State is convinced of being the only allowed authority which everyone must recognize and submit to.

In addition, the Islamic State practices the Salafist theology with much more severity with respect to its predecessor Al Qaeda. Baghdadi's group is absolutely uncompromising on doctrinal matters, prioritizing the promotion of an unforgiving

interpretation of Salafi thought (Bunzel, 2015). This approach led also to a stricter and harsher application of the *hudud*, the Islamic punishments mentioned in the sacred scriptures. While Bin Laden often recommended his companions to be indulgent on the enforcement of those castigations in order not to alienate the local population, the Islamic State publicly severed thieves' hands, stoned adulterers to death, shot and crucified bandits. The former head of Al Qaeda also warned his men on the danger of attacking tribes that were not willing to cooperate: IS did not follow the advice and killed hundreds of tribal members when they refused to bend the knee, silencing dissent rather than conquering "hearts and minds" (McCants, 2015). These extreme behaviors are meant to show the literal application of IS's extreme and uncompromising ideology.

Another ideological characteristic which distinguishes the Islamic State from Al Qaeda is the attitude towards fellow Muslims. Forasmuch as they represented a potential source of support, AQ was more reluctant on attacking Islamic believers and focused principally on the "far enemy", namely the United States and its allies. The Islamic State, on the contrary, presents a hyper-Sunni identity driven by an intrinsic and even genocidal anti-Shia ideology (Gerges, 2016). IS totalitarian and uncompromising ideology made Muslims a primary target of *takfir* (excommunication): Shias and other Sunni groups who do not submit to IS are considered apostates on equal terms of other religions' followers. This attitude originates directly from the early leader of Al Qaeda in Iraq Al Zarqawi, who considered the Shia minority a bigger threat than USA itself due to their (perceived) hegemony plan in the Middle East. His initial strategy was, in fact, mainly based on deliberate attack to Shias in order to provoke a civil war and create the conditions for the Caliphate to rise. According to Al Zarqawi, who was literally obsessed with this conspiracy theory, "while the Crusader forces will disappear from sight tomorrow or the day after," the Shi'ia will remain "the proximate, dangerous enemy of the Sunnis...The danger from the Shi'ia...is greater and their damage worse and more destructive to the [Islamic] nation than the Americans". "If we succeed in dragging them into the arena of sectarian war, it will become possible to awaken the inattentive Sunnis as they feel imminent danger and annihilating death at the hands of Shi'ia" (Bunzel, 2015).

Another ideological feature which distinguishes the Islamic State from Al Qaeda is the extensive use of End of Times prophecies and the recourse to apocalypse. For Bin Laden's generation, the apocalypse was not a great recruiting pitch, since governments in the Middle East were more stable and sectarianism moderated. For Al Qaeda, therefore, it was more beneficial to resort to corruption and tyranny to gain support rather than to the end of the world. On the contrary, the Islamic State is admirably taking advantage from the massive turmoil which is affecting the Middle East, especially Syria. Due to the upheavals which are upsetting the region, IS can justify its religious ideology and its application on the field: battles are happening in the very places mentioned in the sacred scriptures' prophecies and Sunni and Shi'ia are at war, both appealing to their own versions of prophecies to justify their politics (McCants, 2015). References to the End of Times fill Islamic State's propaganda and are a central point in the recruiting strategy, proving once again the important role that ideology plays.

For example, in 2014 IS fighters took control of Dabiq, a small village located north of Aleppo close to the Turkish border. Although militarily unimportant (as observed by a leader in the Syrian opposition), the village was one of the main goal of the Islamic State members, who fought ferociously for its conquest. Dabiq, in fact, is mentioned in a prophecy which predicts that "the Day of Judgment" will come after the Muslim defeat Rome at Dabiq" (McCants, 2015). After taking over the village, IS members, especially foreign fighters, celebrated their ideologically important triumph as the most relevant conquest in all Syria. To make more clear the value of this apparently unimportant accomplishment, one can take into consideration the video released by the Caliphate, in which a British jihadist fighter challenged the infidel West to intervene sitting on the hilltop of Dabiq (McCants, 2015). Another IS's member quoted a prophecy which predicts that the infidels forces will gather under eighty flags. When the U.S. began to consider military action against the Islamic State in Syria, supporters joyfully counted the number of nations in the coalition and were glad since in their minds the prophecy was proving to be real (McCants, 2015).

A further example is worthy to be taken into consideration in order to understand the centrality of ideology, which provides to the Islamic State the primary justification of every action and represents the very basis of its procedures. The case

is the one of the Yazidis, a religious minority in Iraq whose territory was besieged by the Islamic State in August 2014. Before attacking them, IS asked its own scholars if they could be enslaved. The religious authority approved the proposal on the ground that Yazidis are polytheists and are not belonging to any religion mentioned in the Quran. Thus, in Islamic State's perspective, the enslavement of women and children was not only allowed but a major step in the establishment of the Islamic law. Also in this case, the awful practice of slavery was justified by prophecies: one, attributed to Prophet himself, presaged that the Final Hour would be close when "the slave girl shall give birth to her master" and another foretold that "Romans will line up against the Muslims near Dabiq and say: leave us and those who were enslaved from amongst us so we can fight them" (McCants, 2015). Deplorably, thousands of Yazidi girls and children were sold in markets and served as sexual slaves for the Islamic State's soldiers, in what they saw as the realization of destiny.

These awful practices should be seen as part of the Islamic State effort in cleansing the society of apostasy and heretics, eliminating any trace of diversity. Christian, Kurds, Shias, Yazidis and even Sunni minorities are apostates with no human rights and must be eradicated from the holy land. The establishment of the true Islam, which derives purely from the messianic and apocalyptic ideology, knows no compromise or mercy and is carried out relentlessly and ruthlessly.



As it was possible to deduct from this brief analysis, "IS possesses a totalitarian, millenarian worldview that eschews political pluralism, competition, and diversity of thought. Baghdadi and his associates criminalize and excommunicate free thought, and the idea that there should exist a legitimate other is alien to their messianic ideology. Any Muslim or co-jihadist who does not accept IS's interpretation of the Islamic doctrine is an apostate who deserves death" (Gerges, 2016).

In accordance with the official public statement by spokesman al-Adnani (2014), all jihadist groups were required to pledge alliance to Al Baghdadi and recognize him as the only theological and juridical authority. His words left no room for compromise

or dissent; every single Muslim was obliged to obey the commander and he even ordered his fighters to “split the head” and “strike the neck” of anyone who did not submit to the will of the new Caliph (Gerges, 2016). According to its ideology, as mentioned, the Caliphate represents at the same time not only the political but also the religious supreme authority. Thus, as a result of this logic, only submitting to IS Muslims can achieve salvation: nothing but pledging alliance to the Caliph and living a pure Islamic life in the Caliphate can atone for sins and save their souls.

“What the group promotes is both unprecedented and very specific – namely the combination of a Salafi apocalyptic ultraviolent caliphate-state” (Olidort, 2016). Marked by fundamentalism, dualism (absolute evaluations of good versus evil), supreme authority (identified in a sacred book or a leader), selectivity (choosing specific beliefs or practices over others), and millennialism (confidence in eschatology as God’s will), the ideology of the Islamic State represents something unprecedented which makes the organization a unique case study. The group is driven by an unconditional refusal of secular modernity that is directed not only toward people outside of the fundamentalists’ religious circle but also toward Muslims who are not viewed as “true believers” (Gerges, 2016).

The pure, apocalyptic, absolutist, exclusivist ideology translates into a concrete attempt to accomplish the group’s divine mandate. In other words, the Islamic State is trying to realize *here* and *now* the sacred project of establishing the Caliphate and return to the perfect era of the prophet Mohammed. Unlike Al Qaeda and Bin Laden, who was aware of the impossibility of the mission and wished for a gradual and almost ideological change, Islamic State’s members, motivated by this convincing ideology, are willing and happy to die in the utopian struggle for the foundation of the divine and eternal Caliphate.

2.1.6 Iconoclasm

There is a peculiar aspect strictly connected to ideology, namely iconoclasm, which, I believe, deserves special attention. This phenomenon is certainly not new but it assumed a major value in the Islamic State's strategy. The attention and commitment that the terrorist organization is putting in it is worthy of specific consideration. Therefore, this section will explain why this distinctive aspect is so important and how the group is carrying out its fulfillment.

As stated above, iconoclasm is not a trademark of the Islamic State. Fanatics date back to the 7th century, to the Age of Purity of the Prophet and his companions, when the action of destroying venerable form of art was perceived as normal. The sack of Rome by the Barbarians in the 3rd century, the destruction of non-Christian sanctuaries by fanatics at the end of the 4th century, the demolition of the Abbasid capital Baghdad in 1258 by the Mongols, the annihilation of religious symbol of the Mayas by the European colonizers and the large-scale elimination of Catholic statues by Calvinists during the iconoclastic movement of 1566 are just some examples of the long history of iconoclasm (Rutelli, 2016).

This practice of physically eliminating cultures has always represented an instrument of power and dominance: after World War II, however, it seemed that the international community as a whole had accepted the world heritage as a common good and understood the importance of its preservation, under the protection of UNESCO. The global affirmation of world heritage sites appeared to be an unequivocal acknowledgment of the importance of culture as an instrument of dialogue, respect and pluralism for the entire humanity (Rutelli, 2016).

Iconoclasm, however, has always been present in history and in most of the cases it has been related to political motivation: cultural cleansing is often paired with ethnic cleansing and territorial claims, as happened with the Holocaust for example, when Nazis destroyed countless synagogues and cemeteries during their massacre or with the Khmer Rouge, whose slaughters of innocents were accompanied by the destruction of many Buddhist sanctuaries in Cambodia in the '70s (Dirven, 2016). The physical elimination of foreign and different cultures reflects the will of control

over history and it is an expression of the attempt to impose a dominant and exclusive doctrine which is incapable to accept pluralism and diversity.

Evidence of iconoclasm can be detected in all the movements inspired by Wahabbism: Wahhabi himself and his followers cleansed the Arabian peninsula of all Jewish, Christian and Islamic elements that did not fit their strict view of Salafism. The demolition of Bamiyan Buddha in Afghanistan in 2001 by the Taliban seemed to be an exception but in 2008 al-Shabaab (Al Qaeda branch in Somalia) destroyed Sufi holy sites in Kismayo and in 2012 Al Qaeda's group in Mali eliminated more than half of all the Sufi sanctuaries in Timbuktu, making clear that iconoclasm is a central element of the modern interpretation of Wahhabist doctrine (Dirven, 2016).

The Islamic State, carrying out a systematic iconoclastic campaign in accordance to its vision of Islam, made iconoclasm a paramount feature of its organization like no other group before it. The justification of these terrible acts is based on the assumption that those forms of art did not exist at the time of the "pious ancestors" and must therefore be destroyed and removed, since they are a sign of idolatry and contradict God's oneness. Statues are being destroyed because they are *shirk*: expression of polytheism that must be eradicated. In other words, the Islamic State is trying to extirpate every form of religious expression that is not in line with its interpretation of Sunni Islam (Dirven, 2016). The theological justification of this ruthless practice is the Second Commandment of the prophet Moses, which can be found both in the Bible and in the Koran: "You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth" (Exodus 20: 4). The making of statues is forbidden because people may fall into idol worship, which happened when the Israelites made a golden calf in the Sinai desert (Exodus 32: 1-33) (Dirven, 2016).

Not only statues and artifacts, but also methodical elimination of libraries, graveyards and churches: the Islamic State is simply applying its apocalyptic and Manichean perspective to the world cultural heritage. Justified by religious prescriptions and in conformity with the purification of the society, IS demolished priceless piece of history in Mosul, Nineveh and Palmira among others, such as the grave of the prophet Jonah, the mausoleums of Seth and Jirgis, the winged bull of Nimrud and the 8th century Assyrian church in Tikrit. The annihilation of culture is

the concrete application of its purist and absolute ideology: with sticks and bulldozers, the Islamic State is trying to re-establish the perfect society of the ancestors, cleaning Islam of any foreign and corrupting element. Intransigence and obstinacy are part of the attempt to go back to an ideal past and re-create the Prophet's perfect society.

Furthermore, the effort of the Islamic State in eliminating the historical heritage can be directly correlated to the importance that the former has acquired for Western countries, which consider cultural and historical heritage a central element for the identity of a people, country or culture. To certain extents, it can be stated that historical artifacts are somehow sacred to the West: even if they do not present a religious perspective, they do have a sacred aspect, namely the presumption of representing a universal value which marks the separation between civilization and barbarism. In other words, it is taken for granted the fact that iconoclasm is a sign of barbarism, while the acknowledgment of the importance of historical artifacts is a sign of civilization (Colla, 2015). In a certain sense, Western powers have monopolized the sacredness of history; and this is particularly true in the Middle East, where Europeans took control over excavation sites and museums and forced local peasants not only to change their habits and lifestyle declaring "no-go-zones" but also to work for them under unfavorable conditions. Therefore, IS's iconoclasm is not simply an anachronistic battle against polytheists and *shrik* in general but represents, on the contrary, a deep attack to the attitude of sacred appreciation identified in the institution of the museum itself and in the Western claim of the transcendent universal value of history. This kind of battle is part of the Islamic State complete refusal of other culture and people's legitimacy to exist and serves also to sharpen the divisions between them and other civilizations (Colla, 2015). To conclude, IS iconoclasm can be seen as the rejection of Western values and colonial legacy and as the expression of the will of the Caliphate to build its own utopian and pure identity.

2.2 GOVERNANCE IN ISLAMIC STATE'S CONTROLLED AREAS

Perhaps the most important aspect to take into consideration in order to evaluate the self-proclaimed Islamic State's success in carrying out its ambitious project, extensively depicted in the previous chapter, is its capability to govern. According to many scholars (Bunzel, Zelin, Caris and Reynolds among others), IS has indeed not only "demonstrated the capacity to govern both urban and rural areas under its control" (Caris & Reynolds, 2014), but also made "its ability to rule the determinant of success" (Lister, 2014). Starting from a brief consideration of the previous conditions of the areas in which IS established control, this section will encompass multiple aspects of IS governance, namely religious-centered institutions, education and indoctrination, justice and police, public services and tribalism. Analyzing methods and strategies through which the Islamic State was able to impose its authority in large parts of Syria and Iraq will help to understand how the terrorist organization's attempt to establish a legitimate state-like government makes it a unique case study.

2.2.1 Previous conditions

The Islamic State has been proving able to establish relatively stable form of governments in large portion of territories both in Syria and Iraq, thanks to a mixed strategy of political and military actions in the areas of interest. In the understanding the group's unexpected success, one should give a good measure of the precarious situation afflicting large part of Syria and Iraq before the Islamic State's advent. The region, in fact, has been affected by severe upheavals materialized after the surge of the Arab Spring, which brought chaos, fear and disarray. According to jihadist ideologue Naji, who deeply theorized methods and strategies for the establishment of the caliphate, "by ushering in relative stability in a region brought to the brink of collapse, its population will be made to accept the imposition of even the harshest Islamist order; no matter who this someone is, provided the chaos that they manage is bad enough" (Saltman & Winter, 2014).

In addition, the Islamic State's success in governing has been partly determined by its ability to bring back a kind of normalcy to local communities afflicted by "kidnapping, highway robbery, theft, and warlordism. After ISIS took control, crime disappeared overnight and people could travel unarmed from Aleppo to Mosul. Through savagery and governance, ISIS both deterred and incentivized communities under its control" (McCants & Hassan, 2016).

Another factor that should be considered for an encompassing explanation of IS's rapidity and facility in establishing forms of governance is the distorted concept of "normal" during war time. Part of its success originates, in fact, in the changing reference points with respect to normalcy: local communities accepted and even preferred IS rule in the absence of valid authorities.

"Research in the field of behavioral economics suggests that preferences are reference-dependent—that is, people do not make decisions based solely on the desirability of the expected outcome, but on the contrast between that outcome and the baseline against which it is being compared. So, someone can rationally choose an objectively bad outcome if that outcome is less bad than the person's ex ante situation. Applying this framework to current events in Iraq and Syria can help explain how public opinion toward IS changes over time, and why civilians may sometimes prefer it to the available alternatives" (McCants & Revkin, 2015).

Testimonies from a number of Iraqi and Syrian civilians confirmed that life under the Islamic State was the less of two evils: a citizen of Mosul declared that "IS with all its brutality is more honest and merciful than the Shia government in Baghdad and its militias"; another declared that "security ensured by the Islamic State was preferable to daily bombings and assassination" and others said "there is no corruption in the society", "services are satisfactory. We almost always have water and...we have [electricity] round the clock" and "everything is better under the Islamic State" (McCants & Revkin, 2015).

The accomplishment of an efficient and well-organized governance, however, is not exclusively an outcome of the critical situation on the ground. On the contrary, the Islamic State proved to be capable to run local administration in a fast and efficient

way, providing the same services that a nation-state offers to its citizens, “but, according to the group, in a more ethical manner” (Lister, 2014). “The governing institutions over which the Islamic State presides currently represent the best approximation of institutionalized governance for the millions of people in Iraq and Syria under its rule” (McCants, Kasfir & Mampilly, 2016). Notwithstanding its terrorist organization status and the consequent categorical refusal of the international community to recognize it as a legitimate actor, the Islamic State has been the only entity capable to provide basic public services and assistance for people living under its authority. If, on the one hand, the intransigency and inflexibility which mark IS government represent a risk to alienate and antagonize local population, they led, on the other, to the immediate return of essential benefits such as security, effective courts and unified rule. The Islamic State succeeded where other rebel factions failed because it has been able to overcome uncertainty and ineffective governance with the enforcement of an exclusive and unchallenged authority, which “made clear that it is the only ruler in town” (McCants & Hassan, 2016).

2.2.2 Territorial control process

Thanks to a consolidate and standardized process, which starts well before of having full territorial control, the terrorist group imposed itself as the only credible authority in large part of Syria and Iraq. The phase before full control, defined by A. Zelin (2016) “pre-territorial control”, is made up by intelligence operations, such as the establishment of sleeper cells, the identification of both preeminent player and possible antagonists and the bribery of local clans and other rebel groups in order to make them cooperate or pledge alliance. At the same time, the Islamic State starts to operate militarily in the interested area, adopting terrorist and asymmetric strategies such as sniper assassinations, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), car bombs and suicide attacks (Zelin, 2016).

After conquering small villages or external neighborhoods in larger cities, the initial Islamic State’s strategy to gain influence and expand its control is mainly based on

dawaa (religious outreach) activities, such as distribution of pamphlets in streets and markets, forums to include locals and show their good intentions and meetings with notable local clan's representatives in order to win over their support (Zelin, 2016).

It should be pointed out that, after IS takes control of certain areas, its type of governance actually varies greatly, depending on two factors: firstly, territories in which the group exercise its ruling directly and undisturbed (such as Raqqa) are subject to deeply-rooted and sophisticated institutions, in which IS invests a lot. Contrarily, in contested areas in which the organization does not have full control and are subject to constant military disputes, the type of governance is restricted and limited to basic initiatives only.

Secondly, the level of governance depends also on the strategic importance of the designated area: in rural, desert and less populated territories, IS enforces a more provisional and less resource-intensive governance, which still ensure freedom of movement but it is limited to the administration of religious programs. In critical and indispensable areas, on the other hand, the terrorist group invests considerably to enforce vigorous institutional structures (Caris & Reynolds, 2014).

Religious-Centered Actions

As stated before, the Islamic State normally begins its territorial control process with religious initiatives, which are designed to educate people about IS core beliefs. Since they do not require major investments and are useful to get close to local population, often providing free food and drink, they represent an effortless and efficient manner to gain influence. Besides those *dawaa* activities, IS establishes *Shari'a* institutes, which serve essentially for adult religious education.

After reaching a certain level of control in a specific area, the further step that the Islamic State usually undertakes is the establishment of religious police, named *al-Hisba*. This institution, completely separated from local police forces, is exclusively committed to enforce the respect of *Shari'a* and to "promote virtue and prevent vice to dry up sources of evil, prevent the manifestation of disobedience, and urge Muslims towards well-being" (Caris & Reynolds, 2014). Part of its activities involve,

among others, the burning of alcohol, cigarettes, drugs and whatever is associated with sorcery, as well as the destruction of pagans historical artifacts.

Moreover, the institution is in charge of ensuring the observance of Islamic rules, such as praying on time and attending all the five prayers (Zelin, 2016). For example, since June 2014, IS moral police has announced the execution of twenty-seven allegedly gay men, throwing them off the roofs of high-rise buildings (Olidort, 2016).

This aspect of IS governance is particularly interesting for several reasons. First of all, the establishment of such an institution is notably risky for the organization, since it represents a direct intrusion in civilians' lives and therefore it can subject of critics or cause of discontent. For this reason it can be considered one of the most ambitious facet of IS state-building process.

Secondly, the creation of a specific institution with the sole purpose of "moral" control shows the religious commitment that marks the Islamic State's struggle in concretely applying its ideology. The organization, in order to maintain its religious legitimacy and remain coherent with its principles, decided to create and bare the (considerable) costs of a specialized entity instead of empower just one police force.

Lastly, the large number of *al-Hisba* infrastructures and, in general, the considerable amount of religious offices and institutions (43 separate departments in Aleppo province alone in 2014, according to IS reports) demonstrates the pivotal role that the enforcement of the "true and pure" Islamic law plays in IS state-building struggle. These concrete efforts are also a proof that the Islamic State is convinced to carry out a long-term project, which has as a scope the establishment of the promised Caliphate (Caris & Reynolds, 2014).

When control and authority are consolidated over a certain area (in which the group has vital strategic interest), the Islamic State, in the first place, reinforces its soft religious outreach through the proliferation of media points and erection of billboards to reiterate its narrative and message. IS also cleverly exploits symbolism: "raising its black flag it on poles, buildings, lamp posts and creating custom road signs welcoming people to its cities and towns (sometimes even changing their names), is part of its strategy not only to stake its claim to the territory, but also to show it is there to stay" (Zelin, 2016).

On the other hand, after taking full control somewhere, the Islamic State begins to enforce harshly and strictly its excessive and out-of-proportion interpretation of Quranic punishment (*hudud*). Regrettable reports of whippings, cutting off hands or feet, stoning, beheadings, crucifixions, caging individuals, point-blank shootings sadly showed the Islamic State's commitment in enforcing its distorted perspective of *Shari'a* and are to be considered also an effective and deceitful method to eliminate any form of dissent with fear (Zelin, 2016).

Education and Indoctrination Methods

When considering the Islamic State's ambitious long-term goal, namely the creation of a completely new society extremely different from the current one, the indoctrination of its supporters and people living under its authority assumes great importance. The influence on children is, in fact, essential to create an utopian new world, since they represent the first generation of actual citizens of the Caliphate that experience the radical and net separation from the existing social order. The terrorist group has proved to be able to carry out an effective indoctrination campaign not only for children and adults living in its territory, but also for sensitive subjects abroad.

The Islamic State publications and efforts in the indoctrination campaign amply vary, depending on the period and the specific scope the group is willing to highlight. As in the case of religious-centered governance, where the group locates consistent investments in human and material resources educational projects are ambitious, well organized and resource-intensive. By contrast, "in areas in which IS chooses not to pursue a long-term educational plan, it connect with children through one-off *dawaa* events, which are significantly less resource intensive" (Caris & Reynolds, 2014).

According to Olidort's accurate analysis of IS textbooks and indoctrination methods (2016), in the summer and fall of 2015 the terrorist organization was able to create a systematic indoctrination program. The group's education ministry elaborated a specific regulation in order to carry out the indoctrination campaign; predictably, all the material and teachings always refer to the supremacy of the Caliphate and the central role of jihad and are based on a strict selection of verses of the Quran that

deal with Islamic rulings (Olidort, 2016). Reforms delineated not only which subject were to be banned (including music, sports and philosophy), but were also very specific in prohibiting the use of modern nation states' names and nationalist themes in order to erase reference to modernity and promote a new vision of boundaries and territories.

Moreover, the minister's directives provided for courses in English, computer programming, physical preparedness and even called for "IS children to go through training camps in which they were taught to decapitate blond-haired dolls and use guns" (Olidort, 2016).

As observed in the first section of this chapter, before having its own material the Islamic State adopted the very same textbooks used in Saudi Arabia. Despite the similar extremism and intolerance in religious textbooks' interpretation, the Islamic State program can be considered unique in the way it conforms other subjects to the achievement of its goal. Its *sui generis* attempt to restore the Caliphate, creating a new world through merciless violence and apocalyptic narrative, is cleverly supported by the revision of every theme to its objective. This pedagogical process, named by Olidort (2016) "ISization", permitted the group to reinterpret external subjects (such as biology or mathematics) and modern technologies to justify its cause and to adapt them to its purpose and vision. A good example in order to better understand this approach can be found in the opening of a programming code textbook:

"The Islamic State has taken upon its shoulders the goal of training the fighter generation which will program not only for the sake of being employed but also for developing modern technologies to use for peace and war since the states of idolatrous tyranny [the Arab states] in the region have turned the sons of Muslims into consumers of the products of their companies" (Olidort, 2016).

The terrorist group's effort in the educational field should be considered noteworthy because IS proved to be able to center its teachings not only in a Salafist perspective, but also in its specific and peculiar approach that departs even from Salafi-jihadist groups, as seen in the previous section. These teachings reflect precisely its unique

concerns, namely the establishment and legitimacy of the Caliphate in an apocalyptic and extremely violent narrative. This qualitative improvement is allowing the Islamic State to systematically promote its vision of the world to the next generation of Caliphate's citizens, giving them a moral basis to justify its narrative and perspective, which are necessarily and always true. The "absolute" and clear separation between good and evil, between what is allowed and acceptable and what is forbidden is applied to history books and literature; explanations are given for every idea or conception, (such as democracy, nationalism or patriotism) which is not part of God's teachings and therefore represents idolatry; nation-state frontiers are not even taken into consideration and geographical boundaries are designed in their place (Olidort, 2016).

The justification of IS project, belief and attitude is carried out through a skillful incorporation of other disciplines in its perspective: the exclusive authority of God's law as only possible regime is used to counter any type of ideology or form of government (such as capitalism or socialism) and justify IS legitimacy. This antithetical mission is essential in the effort of depicting a deterministic and "absolute" view of history which rationalizes and supports the establishment of the Caliphate.

The combination of new works created by the Islamic State and an accurate selection and re-interpretation of classic literature of earlier scholars (which brings a sort of authenticity) are at the same time "bricks in the edifice" of the state-building process and the basis of the new generation's common background (Olidort, 2016).

To conclude, the Islamic State educational program indicates once again its long-term state-building goal. The considerable resources and effort which is allocating to this instructive project demonstrate that IS cannot be considered a mere terrorist organization; on the contrary, the systematic indoctrination process represents both a specific and unprecedented element that pushes the Caliphate to "see itself not as a terrorist organization indoctrinating children, but as a sovereign state educating its citizens" (Caris & Reynolds, 2014).

Justice and Police

The imposition of a fast and effective judicial system has been a first concern in IS controlled territories. Perhaps, the institution of Islamic courts is the primary motivation of the Islamic State immediate success in large areas of Syria and Iraq. Several reasons support this statement: first of all, due to the direct application of IS uncompromising ideology, courts are often less subject to corruption with respect to previous secular tribunals. Secondly, “court system established by other rebel groups are more likely to be temporary, ad hoc, and subject to competing interpretations of Islamic law” (Caris & Reynolds, 2014). The Islamic State, on the contrary, brought immediately a consolidated and undivided legal administration, registering a drop in crime in the areas under its control. Finally, the success and effectiveness of IS judiciary is to be seen in lights of the anarchy and lawlessness that marks territories affected by a long and exhausting civil war, and this is the case of Syria and Iraq. In this situation, it was easier for IS to enforce its strategy also because of the acceptance of the local population, who understandably preferred even the most strict and authoritarian judicial order to the complete absence of justice (Caris & Reynolds, 2014).

The Islamic State strong point in imposing law is an extremely effective enforcement mechanism. IS’ ability to “get the job done” is its most claimed advantage (McCants & Hassan, 2016): imposing itself as the exclusive authority (and being respected as such), the Islamic State is able to eliminate rivalry and subjectivity and ensure an inflexible and homogenous system. The group “would encourage people to seek its help when they had a complaint about a person and would forcefully resolve the issue, even if that meant confrontation with powerful groups or individuals” (McCants & Hassan, 2016).

In addition to personal disputes, the Islamic State legal administration proved to be successful also in regulations and price controls. Some practical examples can clarify this attitude: IS banned fishermen from using dynamite and electricity to catch fish, it prohibited residents from claim new land in conflicting areas (especially in the Syrian desert), it limited the profit margins on essential commodities such as ice, flour and oil by-products and forbid from building refineries close to private residences (McCants & Hassan, 2016).

As it occurred for the religious initiatives, the more the Islamic State exercises full control, the broader and stricter becomes its range of action. In cities in which it has an encompassing and exclusive authority for long periods such as Raqqa and Mosul, the judicial system is harsher and more rigid. Perceiving itself as an actual state intended to endure, the Islamic State strongly believes and invests in the judiciary branch: it has been therefore expanding the number of issues which its courts are in charge to cover (such as divorce or complaints against fighters) and increased the number of *hudud*, that are carried out openly and on a weekly basis (Caris & Reynolds, 2014).

In order to enforce the judicial acts and regulations, the Islamic State instituted specific police forces which are completely separated from the moral police *al-Hisba*. Likewise, this body is in charge of the regular functions of a normal police force, such as assuring internal security inside towns and patrolling. IS police, however, is secretly designed also to eliminate any form of political or civil dissent: in order to create its pure and totalitarian Caliphate, the group is in fact torturing and illegally detaining off the record “political opponents, activists and even children as young as eight years old” (Caris & Reynolds, 2014).

Considering the legal code is particularly important because enforcing a functioning and respected judicial system is a major step in establishing a legitimate authority. IS is being successful in imposing a “distinctive and authentic legal order from the here and now, one that is based not only on a literal reading of early Islamic materials but also on a long-standing Islamic theory of statecraft and legal authority” (McCants, Kasfir & Mampilly, 2016).

The judicial branch, in which the Islamic State is investing considerable resources, is another element that makes the group more than a terror organization. Its functioning, implemented even by a regular police force, demonstrates the ambition and partial success of Al Baghdadi’s group to create a long-term project, which in some areas is dangerously taking shape.

Tribal Affairs

Another element that has been pivotal to the establishment of the Caliphate has been the cooperation with the Sunni tribes in Syria and Iraq. It is interesting to

notice that previous rebel groups and even governments, in order to reach agreements with local communities, entrusted the management of cooperation to tribal leaders. “The Islamic State, by contrast, acts as a direct intermediary between different tribes and even within the same tribe to resolve disputes, some of which date back to the 1970s and 1980s. Furthermore, it has systematically disarmed local communities that came under its rule in a way that previous governments failed to do over decades” (McCants & Hassan, 2016).

In addition of the role of mediator, the group also used corruption and threats to force local tribes to cooperate and pledge allegiance. The majority of them accepted IS authority, in exchange of security and to gain advantage over rival tribes; the ones that opposed to Al-Baghdadi’s group, by contrast, “had their children kidnapped and their members dumped in mass graves” (McCants, 2015).

Nevertheless, it seems that the Islamic State has opted for alliance and cooperation over violence and fear. The group, in fact, is well aware of the importance of having Sunni tribes, which are certainly a pivotal actor in Syria and Iraq, on its side (Saltman & Winter, 2014). Knowing the danger that they could pose to its very same existence, the Islamic State decided to set up a specific institution with the sole purpose of handling tribal affairs. This move is to be seen in light of the previous Iraqi insurgence experience, when the USA bribed tribal leaders and made them fight against Jihadist rebel groups, provoking in most of the cases their defeat (Lister, 2014).

The office, named “Public Relations Bureau” “responds to the demands of the citizenry, liaises with community elders and conduct tribal outreach”, according to internal IS sources (Caris & Reynolds, 2014). The head of the institution is Daygham Abu Abdullah, a Saudi known to be well-versed in tribal lineage and dynamics, who has the task of meeting tribal leaders and delegations willing to settle conflicts or pledge allegiance. In order to facilitate the relationship with Sunni tribes, the Islamic State often involve preeminent tribal members in its military ranks (McCants & Hassan, 2016). This “divide-and-rule” strategy allowed IS to consolidate control of rural areas without using manpower and resources and at the same time to avoid costly and bloody uprisings.

Even if other rebel groups were aware of the importance of tribal outreach and made significant efforts to address this issue, the Islamic State is the first actor which created a specific department with the exclusive purpose of dealing with tribes. This peculiar initiative shows IS willingness to portray itself as a functioning and legitimate state and the distinctive character of the self-proclaimed Caliphate.

Public Services and Infrastructures

An additional element that marks the Islamic State internal governance is the managing and improvement of public services and infrastructure. Similarly to the judicial system, those fields have been particularly affected by the prolonged civil war and fights between rival factions.

Together with establishing a fast and efficient legal system and religious initiatives, the group's strategy after taking over a certain area is focused primarily on the provision of basic social services, such as electricity, gas, water, bakeries and industries. In little time, moreover, IS takes care of the functioning of municipal services such as roads, transportations, healthcare, schools and phone lines among others.

Many of these activities entails skilled technical expertise and qualified personnel in order to be run; resources that the Islamic State does not have in the necessary quantity. In order to face this issue, Al-Baghdadi's group exploited local know-how to manage those competence-demanding operations (McCants & Hassan, 2016): the sole allocation of its managers (often foreigners) in top position in order to ensure compliance, preventing the skilled workforce to leave with the use of force and threats, allowed the Islamic State to "undertake technically demanding infrastructure-related projects without having to devote much of its manpower resources" (Caris & Reynolds, 2014).

Despite the ambitious project that is carrying out and its uncompromisingly radical stance, the Islamic State nevertheless presents certain traits of continuity with prior governance (McCants, Kasfir & Mampilly, 2016). This is true especially when referring to food distribution: production and delivery of bread, for example, has been considered a fundamental element in the governance of Syria and Iraq during both dictatorships and war periods, because of the cheapness and effectiveness for

feeding large urban populations. “In pre-conflict Syria, the Baath Party had long understood direct control over the bread market as an integral task of the social welfare pact it struck with the population” (McCants, Kasfir & Mampilly, 2016): similarly, the Islamic State commitment to guarantee bread distribution to its population resulted not only in a oversight over production and provision but in a direct control over the means of production that permitted the immediate reopening of bakeries and even a direct distribution in needy areas.

The personal handling of bread production permitted the Islamic State to reduce costs of this primary good: “for example, after assuming control of much of Deir Ezzor governorate in July 2014, IS funded the reduction of bread price from 200 Syrian Pounds to 45 and also made it mandatory for bakeries to provide *zakat* (a charitable obligation in Islam) to the poor” (Lister, 2014). To highlight the importance of bread production and also to understand IS strategy in the production process, one can consider the considerable amount of resources that has been allocated in this process: in Aleppo an IS bakery was capable of producing more than 10.000 flatbreads per hour, with sixteen people working on it; Islamic State’s personnel was exclusively in charge of the supervision, while local skilled Syrians were in charge of logistics and maintenance (Caris & Reynolds, 2016).

A similar policy has been applied in Maskana (southern Aleppo), where IS delivered reduced-price beef for “poor and needy” (Caris & Reynolds, 2014). Not only food has been IS concern, but also healthcare: in Mosul, a free hospital was established (Lister, 2014) and free medical care was provided in Jarablus and Idlib (Caris & Reynolds, 2014).

As far as public services and infrastructures are concerned, the Islamic State applies a policy similar to the ones of religious institutions and justice: in full-controlled areas with large population it tends to invest in resource-intensive and permanent institutions and projects, while in countryside or desert areas its intervention is limited to the provision of primary goods such as food or gasoline. In Raqqa, for example, IS did not only take care of power lines and stations’ reparation, but has also been managing three dams and two power plants (Caris & Reynolds, 2014). In its *de facto* capital and in Aleppo province, the Caliphate was able to provide water and electricity on an industrial scale, reinforcing its presumption of being and acting

as an actual state rather than a rebel group. Where it holds a firm and full authority (and where it has interest to maintain it), the Islamic State carries out ambitious public works projects such as paving, fixing and cleaning roads, landscaping with trees, bushes and plants, building new mosques, markets and shops in order to demonstrate its state-like capacity (Zelin, 2016). “In Raqqa, IS even operates a consumer protection office, which has closed shops for selling poor quality products” (Lister, 2014).

The management of public services and structures is a strategically vital element for the Islamic State. The administration of civil offices allows the group to establish itself as the exclusive, and therefore necessary, source of production and distribution of service, making the local population dependent on it. The monopoly over crucial utilities is a key requirement to implement IS ambitious goal of establishing an enduring and invasive state project. Only through a relationship based on dependence, in fact, it would be able to continue its intrusion in citizens’ personal life, which they will continue to accept only if obliged by necessity.

The Islamic State’s initial success increased the certainty of the concrete imminent realization of its project among its supporters. IS ability to assume control over critical services and to widely publicize its efficiency as a state has boosted a post-war mentality, shifting the focus on the state-building process and on populating its Caliphate. This sentiment was made clear by a July 2014 IS media statement, in which an English-speaking Canadian, Abu Muslim, released the following declaration:

“So this is more than just fighting, this means more than just fighting. We need the engineers, we need doctors, we need professionals, we need volunteers, we need fundraising. We need everything. There is a role for everybody ... Your families will live here in safety, just like how it is back home. We have wide expanses of territory here in Syria, and we can easily find accommodation for you and your families” (Caris & Reynolds, 2014).

2.3 FINANCIAL AUTONOMY

Another central aspect which makes the Islamic State distinctive and unique is its impressive financial autonomy. “The richest terror group in history” (Atwan, 2015) is “light years ahead of other jihadist groups and this is most true with regards to the means by which the group is financed” (Saltman & Winter, 2014). “Unlike Al Qaeda, IS has been financially self-sufficient for at least eight years” (Levitt, 2014), making diversification the key of its business success.

External donations, which are perhaps the most important pillar on which Al Qaeda relies, represent just a minor aspect of the Islamic State financial revenues, accounting for a tiny 5 percent of its total income, according to the U.S. Department of Defense database (Lister, 2014). The outstanding financial history of the Islamic State began well before the official proclamation of the Caliphate on June 29th, 2014. Since 2006, Al Zarqawi’s group in Iraq has been extremely successful in the exploitation of the exceptional circumstances of the country, affected by a prolonged post-war instability. Thanks to a well-organized system of lucrative illegal activities, such as extortion, racket, kidnapping and gun-selling, among others, the terrorist organization was able to raise a yearly amount between 70 to 200 million dollars from illegal activities alone (Levitt, 2014).

The massive budget of the group did not only permit to former AQI (Al Qaeda in Iraq) to be independent from Al Qaeda’s donor network, but, ironically, it was so consistent that Ayman al-Zawahiri himself was compelled, unwillingly, to ask Al Zarqawi for a loan; in that period, in fact, Al Qaeda’s finance was being heavily targeted from the international community’s fiscal measures. “In a July 2005 letter to Zarqawi, Zawahiri humbly asked the leader of AQI if he could spare a payment of approximately one hundred thousand because many of the lines have been cut off. Zawahiri swallowing his pride and seeking support from the leader of AQI, despite the strained relationship among the two groups, was a clear indication of AQI’s superiority in running a self-sufficient operation” (Levitt, 2014).

After al-Baghdadi assumed the leadership in 2010, the group consolidated and expanded its efficient financial network. Currently, the complex and diversified financial system ensures IS the capability to fund its governance and army. This

section will analyze in depth the sources of its economic autonomy, which is based on three pillars: the illegal sale of oil, a multitude of illegal activities (illicit trade of antiquities, kidnappings, taxes and extortions) and in smaller part the donation from private multi-millionaires.

2.3.1 Oil

In 2015, the Islamic State had control over seven oil fields in Syria (including al-Omar, the largest of the country with a production capacity of 75,000 barrels per day) and at least six in Iraq, including Baiji refinery, one of Iraq's most important installation. With an estimated extraction capacity of 50,000 barrels per day in Syria and 30,000 in Iraq, the group was earning a striking sum of three to five million a day, selling barrels at a discounted price of 60 dollar per barrel (Atwan, 2015). Even if considering previous data from November 2014, which estimated the daily income around 3 million dollars, the Islamic State has been drawing more income than many small nations, including Tonga, Nauru and the Marshall Islands (Levitt, 2014).

The pre-existing smuggling routes which date back to the Saddam-era (more precisely, during the oil-for-food program) and with IS Iraqi members are familiar with, represent a reliable and extensive source of income; actually, the most significant revenues for the Islamic State. The group has been both selling the extracted oil to smugglers, who subsequently haul it outside conflict zones, and redirecting it to internal zones in order to provide it to its citizens. In the first case, crude oil arrives from Iraq to Turkey, Kurdistan, Jordan and Iran, among others, through a variety of means: trucks, vans, mules, boats and even underground pipelines as long as 5 kilometers (Levitt, 2014). Interestingly, the most important client of the Islamic State in Syria is none less than the Assad regime, whose oil production virtually ceased after 2011 EU and US ban (Atwan, 2015). In order to understand the sophistication of IS solid smuggling network, one can consider the following example: over 500 pipelines are located in the Syrian town of Ezmerin. Oil, which is pumped via tanks through simple "pump" and "stop" commands over mobiles, passes under kilometers of fields and streets and reaches private backyards

in small villages, where customer comfortably purchase the oil at a discount price (Levitt, 2014).

Due to the increasing cost of exporting illicit oil caused by the harshening of controls in Turkey and Kurdistan, the Islamic State has been switching its transactions towards the internal market (Levitt, 2014). This move had the major effect of deepening the relationship of dependence between IS and local communities and is part of the group's strategy to establish a monopoly over essential goods, as already seen in the previous section.

2.3.2 Antiquities

Perhaps the second most import source of income to IS is the looting and trading of artifacts (Levitt, 2014). As analyzed in the first section of the second chapter, iconoclasm is a meaningful part of the group's ideology; for this reason, the considerable amount of antiquities present in IS controlled territories (12,000 archeological sites in Iraq alone) have been a primary target of the Islamic State. Before destroying relics, nevertheless, IS takes great care of removing every valuable element from them: only the parts which cannot be sold because of their measures or their insignificant value are demolished with bulldozer and sticks.

Profitable items such as coins, jewelry, seals and figurines are smuggled into Europe and the USA via Turkey, Iran and Syria. According to experts, antiquities can be exchanged for astronomical sum: for example, "a three-inch-tall, 5,000-year-old Mesopotamian lion made of limestone was auctioned in New York for 57 million dollars in 2007" (Atwan, 2015). In addition, records shows that the sale of 8,000-year-old artifacts in al-Nabk province (north of Damascus) brought to the Islamic State over 36 million dollars (Lister, 2014).

2.3.3 Kidnappings

Another important source of income is given by ransom payments from kidnappings, which account for around 20 percent of IS total income (Levitt, 2014). The Islamic State's practice of taking hostages has a double function: high-profile victims such as James Foley, David Haines and Alan Henning, are exploited for

propaganda purposes and often the kidnap of those people ends with a brutal and tragic execution.

On the other hand, in most of the cases the group demands huge sums in exchange of release: according to Kurdish forces, IS earned 10 million a month from kidnapping activity (Levitt, 2014) and in June 2014 the group was able to gain 12 million in the city of Mosul alone (Saltman & Winter, 2014). Moreover, “despite a French denial, unnamed NATO sources in Brussels, have claimed that IS was paid \$18 million in April 2014 in exchange for four French hostages” (Lister, 2014).

Human trafficking and slavery are also part of IS business activity: as stated in the first section of the second chapter, the Islamic State considers them legitimate practices. Therefore, the group developed a proper slave market in Mosul after the capture of thousands Yazidi women. According to some who managed to escape, slaves were bought by fighters for as little as 15 dollars and many were separated from their children (Atwan, 2015). Even if not relevant to the Islamic State income, the sex/slave industry represents one of the most peculiar and inhuman action that the group has undertaken.

2.3.4 Taxation System

Al-Baghdadi’s group, in the attempt to establish a proper state, also developed an organized and developed taxation system in the areas under its control. Even if tax collection is transparent and official only in cities and zones where IS enjoys full and consolidate control, it represents nonetheless an advanced and impressive improvement in its claim to be a state entity.

For example, a tax on trucks transporting food and electronics from Syria and Jordan via Iraq has been introduced. According to Lister (2014), in September 2014 “rates were placed at 300 dollars per truck of foodstuffs and 400 dollars per load of electronic goods, with an occasional 800 dollars flat rate for trucks”. What is surprising, however, is the high level of professionalism which marks those transactions: in the first place, the Islamic State guarantees complete protection from criminals and, in addition, it provides not only receipts of the paid IS taxes but

also fake documents which allow traders to pass Iraqi Army checkpoints without paying (Lister, 2014).

Together with the “legal” and transparent taxation system, the Islamic State carries out a considerable amount of informal extortion activity. Individuals and companies are obliged to pay taxes under the threat of murder. A computer shop owner from Mosul reported that extortionist asked for an unreasonable sum of 114,000 dollars (being 1000 dollars his monthly income) and killed three people who were late in their payments. In addition, pharmacists were asked to pay 20,000 dollars per month, a considerable increase with respect of the previous sum of 100-200 dollars (Levitt, 2014).

Seizing property of people who were murdered or fled and expropriating Shiites and Christians properties is also part of IS extortion activity, which permitted the group to assign houses to incoming fighters and create real estate markets.

Other made-up and improvised “taxes” are exploited by the Caliphate to increase its funding: non-Muslim minorities are obliged to pay *jizya*, a tax of 720 dollars per adult male in order to live under the protection of the state; cars and trucks carrying goods in large cities like Mosul or Raqqa are charged different amounts according to their dimensions (400 dollars for large trucks and 50 for cars) (Levitt, 2014).

To conclude, even if accounting for a little part of IS total income, also bank robbery is worth to be mentioned as part of its extortion activity.

2.3.5 Donations

As stated before, the financial autonomy of the Islamic State is primary attributable to its ability to be independent from private donations, which have been, by contrast, Al Qaeda’s major source of income. Nevertheless, as Treasury Undersecretary David Cohen declared, “even though IS currently does not rely heavily on external donor networks, it maintains important links to financiers in the Gulf” (Levitt, 2014).

In support of this argument, it is worthy to mention that the Islamic State received an amount of 40 million dollars in the period between November 2012 and December 2014 from Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Kuwait. Rich individuals from those

countries have been a major source of funding for Sunni terrorist groups in Syria, according to U.S. State Department (Levitt, 2014); especially Qatar and Kuwait's governments seem to not be committed in contrasting terror financing.

Despite significant legislative improvements to address this issue, mostly due to the pressures of the international community, Qatar still evidently lacks in implementation and enforcement of those laws, as reported by the U.S. State Department report in 2014. In addition, the Treasury Department noted that a Qatari academic and businessman, al-Nuaymi, sent over 2 million dollars per month to former Islamic State of Iraq (Levitt, 2014).

Similarly, Kuwait ("the epicenter of fundraising for terrorist groups in Syria" according to the U.S. Treasury) is being passing laws without a proper enforcement mechanism. Moreover, the system of the country, more affected by political instability when compared to its neighbors, is heavily conditioned by the powerful Salafist politicians and Sunni majority's commitment in supporting the Syrian opposition, which obviously includes jihadist groups as well as the Islamic State. In particular, two individuals were identified as direct financial supporters of IS, namely Tariq al-Harzi and Abd al-Rahman al-Anizi. The former was accused for fundraising efforts in Qatar, having facilitate the transfer of approximately 2 million to IS; the latter cooperated with an IS financial official to send funds from Kuwait to Syria and paid the travel of foreign fighters moving from Syria to Iraq (Levitt, 2014).

In the last two years, however, the already (relatively) minor role of donations in IS' business strategy became even less relevant. This is due essentially for two reasons: first of all, the massive profits deriving from other activities examined above had increased, diminishing even more IS reliance on private donations. In addition, IS apocalyptic view and exclusivist attitude became too extreme also for many jihadist patrons, who started to refuse to assist a group that has excommunicated even them from Islam (Saltman & Winter, 2014).



Examining in depth IS financial assets is pivotal to understand why the group differs from previous terrorist organization and how it became so powerful. Its successful

economic system is at the centre of the achievement of the establishment of the Caliphate and analyze it is essential for several reasons. The first and most important is that, thanks to its revenues, the Islamic State is able to finance, expand and improve not only all the aspects of the governance seen above, but also to assert itself as a concrete state-like actor capable of defending its border and increase its influence in the areas under its control.

Another reason that makes the financial aspect so central, is that “IS’s ability to present an image of wealth and success has strengthened its recruitment of new fighters locally as well as from abroad” (Lister, 2014). An Islamic Front political official declared: “IS is definitely expanding—it has a lot of money and right now, Syrians are so poor. Money changes everything—people will turn to and support extremism out of desperation“(Lister, 2014). Unfortunately, the current disastrous situation in Syria makes the Islamic State the only viable solution for many desperate people that would otherwise have to flee or die in the attempt to stop it.

2.4 MILITARY ASPECTS

2.4.1 *Roots of success*

The number of total military forces in Iraq and Syria varies widely: Fuad Hussein, chief of staff of the Kurdish President Massoud Barzani, stated in an interview that the number of militant fighters is “at least 200,000” (Cockburn, 2014); internal jihadist sources suggest IS soldiers are around 100,000 (Nakhoul, 2015), while according to more recent data from the Pentagon the number of Islamic State’s fighters is between 15,000 and 20,000 men.

Despite the discordant amount of fighters (which can differ extensively if considering exclusively soldiers on the ground or including logistic support of locals), what is certain is that IS military success is a milestone in the realization of the Caliphate. Although the phenomenon of foreign fighters (which will be deeply analyzed in the next chapter) has been impressive and contributed largely to the expansion and consolidation of IS military capabilities, the vast majority of IS forces are mainly Iraqi and Syrians (Nakhoul, 2015). This fact can be explained simply by economic reasons: in a region tormented by war and instability where unemployment is rocketing, joining the Islamic State ranks represents an accessible and effortless solution, since skills are not required and payments are relatively high, ranging from 500 to 650 dollar per month, the average salary being 590 in Iraq and just 243 in Syria (Atwan, 2015).

The high ranks of IS military apparatus are mostly Iraqi, former Saddam Hussein’s officials, who, thanks to their expertise and knowledge of the ground, permitted Al-Baghdadi to develop a professional army marked by a clear hierarchy and command structure. The competence of IS in the military field has been acknowledged even by American military experts, who stressed that its intelligence “knows the military terrain and demographic dynamics in Iraq as their own and how to exploit it” and “the military campaign bears the signature of multiple commanders who demonstrated an overarching strategy” (Atwan, 2015). The Islamic State, therefore,

is able to function as a highly disciplined army rather than as a terrorist group (Atwan, 2015).

Preeminent Al Qaeda's jihadist scholars such as Abu Mohammed al-Maqdisi (also al-Zarqawi mentor) and Abu Qatada al-Filistini highlighted the role of military superiority in IS success and declared that "they are winning militarily because they are depending on former Baathist officers who know their ground" and "this state is advancing because of the military, security and intelligence background of its leadership which seeks to impose a state of terror" (Nakhoul, 2015).

The decision of former high officials in the Iraqi army, such as Abu Muslim al-Turkmani (former Hussein's lieutenant colonel) and Abu Ali al-Anbari (both killed by US drone strikes); to join the Islamic State does not come as a surprise. Widespread discontent was present already by the end of his rule and the American invasion, with the subsequent imposed-dominance of Shiites who banned Baathists from government positions, accelerated the process of radicalization and alienation of many officials in Islamist movements (Hubbard & Schmitt, 2014).

IS battalions, however, are not only formed by ex members of the Iraqi Army. Besides the foreign fighters, who will be examined in the next chapter, another key element of the group's military success is the cooperation with local Sunni tribes and other jihadist organizations. In exchange of money or protection, members of those entities enjoy IS ranks or work independently on its behalf. Moreover, "IS has long-implemented policies aimed at professionalizing its members. The number of training camps appears to have increased since 2013, and an examination of the groups' social media output reveals that IS has been operating such camps in most sizeable municipalities under its control, both in Syria and Iraq" (Lister, 2014).

2.4.2 Flexibility

Nevertheless, the central key element which makes the Islamic State military so powerful and influential in the international scenario is its flexibility. IS troops and battalions are exceptionally versatile and adaptable to any type of situation, quality that gives the group the advantage of surprise and the ability to immediately seize

opportunities when they arise. The organization is not just a regular army limited to frontal war or a mere terrorist group which carries only small attacks on civilians. On the contrary, the Islamic mixes fast-moving guerilla-like techniques with both heavy and organized direct attacks and deadly sneaky terrorist-like activities such as suicide bombings or IEDs (improvised explosive devices), depending on what is more advantageous in a specific situation. Again, former Hussein's officers proved to be skilled in all this types of engagement, as a result of the experience refined through years of fighting American troops during the Iraqi insurgency (Hubbard & Schmitt, 2014). For this reason, they acquired not only traditional military, security and intelligence competences and terrorist techniques such as manufacturing the complicated IEDs, but also developed local knowledge of urban and mountain combat as well as key contacts in major cities and rural areas.

An example of this fast adaptable and easily convertible structure can be seen in IS quick shift of strategy after the beginning of U.S. bombings in Iraq in late 2014. Islamic State's military command ordered to focus on Syria and in very little time battalions and sleeper cells were reactivated in that area, where the group was able to "double the territory under its control in Syria between August 2014 and January 2015" (Atwan, 2015).

The Islamic State possesses of an impressive number of "weapons systems and vehicles, including tanks, armored personnel carriers, field artillery, self-propelled howitzers, and multiple-rocket launchers, as well as an assortment of anti-tank guided missiles (ATGMs), and a small number of man-portable air-defense systems" (Lister, 2014). Most of the heavy artillery has been retrieved from discarded Iraqi Army stocks and magazines, but other weapons arrived also from former leader Muammar al-Gaddafi's army through the desert, as a consequence of the Libyan revolution (Atwan, 2015).

Despite the lack of air force and navy, the collection of a multiplicity of Soviet, Chinese and American-originated weaponry dating back to previous wars allows the Islamic State to perpetrate multiple and diversified attacks. The increased unpredictability of its strategies permits the group to act with flexibility and be a serious threat even to conventional armies.

2.4.3 Military Strategy and Principles

Usually, the Islamic State's strategy to conquer territories is based in the first place on the inducement of turmoil and disarrays through multiple actions such as repeatedly attacks on checkpoints and patrols, assassination of officials in order to question the ruler's ability to govern. In this phase, the group is mostly acting from outer provinces and outskirts, where it is easier to impose control. Doing so, IS is able to impose a shadow authority and exploit the power vacuum created through those actions. With the community's trust in the government and military inevitably undermined, it is extremely easy for the Islamic State to complete its strategy with an organized and finally overt operation (Lister, 2014). To sum up, IS military offensive approach is primary based on prolonged insurgent attrition strategy (which often includes terrorist tactics) and, when the time comes, the group carries out coordinated ground assaults to definitively conquer the area and impose its authority. This is exactly what happened in Mosul, which fell in a matter of 24 hours, after being targeted covertly for about three years. After establishing its rule, "the Islamic State units assume a central role in all local affairs, as Abu Osama, a British fighter based in Homs explained in May 2014: Our average day here is now normally much of the same—manning checkpoints, going on patrol in the area, settling disputes between locals and between tribes, and a lot of meetings with village elders and their chiefs, so we can discuss their concerns and complaints" (Lister, 2014).

The Islamic military decisive and impressive military success has no parallel in the history of terrorism. The achievements accomplished by IS have been certainly facilitated by exceptional circumstances, but the remarkable performance of its army are also attributable to classic and always winning war principles. Even if probably unaware of them, the Islamic State has adhered to the timeless and effective assumption idealized by Klaus von Clausewitz, a 19th century Prussian military theorist (Hein, 2015). First of all, IS concentrated its combat power (as the march through Anbar Province largely demonstrated) towards clearly defined, important and achievable goals, namely the opening of a secure passage between Syria and Iraq and the further focus on larger towns. Secondly, as seen before, the group was able to seize the initiative and surprise the enemy thanks to its highly adaptable and

flexible army, acknowledging its limits (as the immediate shift of strategy after the airstrikes demonstrates) and seizing the opportunities as soon as they arose. Thirdly, IS won decisive battles with using minimal force, with an intelligent and precise allocation of resources: Mosul, for example, was conquered with only 800 soldiers, while, Iraqi forces in town were about 30,000. Finally, the strict hierarchal structure and unity of command led to clear, simple and concise operations that permitted the advancement in Eastern Syria and Western Iraq (Hein, 2015).



The aim of this section was to highlight the importance of IS military apparatus for its success in seizing a portion of territory comparable to Great Britain. Thanks to a clear hierarchical and unified leadership, the Islamic State was able to make a decisive qualitative improvement with respect to previous jihadist or, more generally, terrorist organization, mixing traditional terror techniques to proper military strategy. The group can engage frontal direct battles, create chaos in large cities and fight with guerrilla-like actions. The “liquidity” and adaptability of its army and the subsequent success is a decisive element for reinforcing the claim to represent the only pure Caliphate, the capability to exercise concrete control over a vast area with large population and for the appeal that it exert on potential recruits.

“As an American military commentator concluded, the Islamic State combines and hybridizes terrorism, guerrilla warfare and conventional warfare... and makes IS a new breed” (Atwan , 2015).

2.5 IS EXTERNAL GOVERNANCE

Al-Baghdadi's self-declaration of having established the Caliphate on June 29th 2014 brought several consequences in the global scenario. In his claim to represent the only possible and legitimate ruler of the Islamic community, the Caliph expected a response from every Muslim around the world. The ambitious goal and uncompromising ideology left no room for indecisions or half measures: to justify its inflexible, determined and "global" claim, the Islamic State's governance in vast part of Syria and Iraq was definitely not enough. On the contrary, the group needed an immediate reply from both jihadist groups around the world and individual Muslims living outside the land of the Caliphate.

Remarkably, an impressive number of both organizations and individuals responded to Baghdadi and Adnani's call to either travel to the promise land or carry out jihad in the land of infidels. The Islamic State, for this reason, was able to establish an "external governance" to assert its own interest globally and to reinforce its narrative of representing the true and pure Caliphate that everyone is required to recognize and pledge obedience to.

The external approach is, therefore, another element that makes the Islamic State an unprecedented terrorist group, capable to carry out at the same time a state-building project in the lands under its control and exercise influence worldwide. The aim of this section is therefore to examine how al-Baghdadi's organization managed its ruling externally and expanded its sphere of influence internationally.

The governance outside its territory shows once again the formidable IS flexibility and adaptability, taking different shapes and diversifying according to peculiar situations. Different strategies include the establishment of province (understood as actual expansion of its territory) through the pledge of alliance of pre-existing jihadist groups, the appeal to foreign fighters to join the jihad in the land of the Caliphate and the implementation of terrorist attacks in foreign lands (both solely inspired or through an actual planning from the central command).

2.5.1 Islamic State's Provinces

In defining itself not only a state but the Caliphate, the Islamic State expected the whole Muslim community and especially existing jihadist groups to acknowledge the authority of Baghdadi as the only legitimate ruler of the *ummah*, the Islamic community. This assumption was made explicitly clear by spokesman Adnani's first announcement in June 2014, which included the following:

"We clarify to the Muslims that with this declaration of the khilafah, it is incumbent upon all Muslims to pledge allegiance to the khalifah Ibrahim and to support him ...

The legality of all emirates, groups, states, and organizations becomes null by the expansion of the khilafah's authority and arrival of its troops to their areas. ... Listen to your khalifah and obey him. Support your state, which grows every day" (Adnani's speech in Lister, 2016).

The self-declaration of the establishment of the Caliphate was immediately followed by several groups and individuals' pledge of *baya* (religious binding oath of allegiance). Only on November 10th, 2014, however, Al-Baghdadi openly acknowledged the status of provinces to territories in Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Libya, Egypt and Algeria (Zelin, 2014). In the following year, the number of international *wilayat* (provinces) had raised to 18: Bahrain, Russian North Caucasus, Nigeria and Khorasan (old name for a region including Afghanistan and Pakistan) (Lister, 2016).

Such a quick and vast expansion was accomplished thanks to preexisting jihadist networks and structures: the rooted and wide connections of IS with local elements secured a considerable number of pledges of allegiance. The Islamic State, therefore, was facilitated in its outreach strategy by the immediate adherence of non-aligned jihadist organization looking for visibility, including some groups which decided to split from Al Qaeda and join the black flag. Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), for example, was the first branch to change side already in March 2014, but also many individual members of other Al Qaeda's groups switched part (Lister, 2016).

IS decision of not accepting pledge of fealty from several international organizations located, among others, in Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines and India reflects the

group's selectivity in the expansion process. Obviously the Islamic State is willing to increase its sphere of influence as much as it can, but the groups are required to meet certain conditions before being incorporated in the Caliphate. Potential candidates must have competent leaders capable of exercising territorial control and establishing (and maintain) direct connections with leaders in Iraq and Syria. To achieve this result, IS has been sending "ambassadors" worldwide to test aspirants' capacity to meet those conditions (Lister, 2016).

The establishment of provinces is mutually beneficial for both the Islamic State and the provinces themselves. "As General David Rodriguez, the commander of U.S. Africa command, has noted, groups affiliate themselves with IS to elevate their cause (Byman, 2016). In addition to religious affinity and "genuine conviction", joining the Islamic State offers practical advantages, such as financial and technical aid, improvement in propaganda techniques and the dispatch of qualified soldiers.

The institution of provinces, obviously, is profitable for the Islamic State too: the more affiliates will join, the more the group would look powerful and appealing for other organizations and potential recruits. In addition, the pledges of obedience reinforce IS narrative and conviction to represent the only legitimate Caliphate and can ignite a chain reaction, pushing other organizations to do the same. Provinces offer pragmatic advantages as well: they are strategic operational bases capable to welcome foreign fighters and function as logistic centers. Finally, they also represent a potential refuge for IS members in case of defeat in Iraq and Syria. This is especially true when considering that the group has lost 40 percent of its territory in Iraq since 2014 and its popularity has clearly diminished (Byman, 2016).

The relationship between the central command and affiliates differs quite widely, depending on local circumstances and conditions. In certain provinces like Libya and Egypt, the Islamic State has established a formal presence which ensures a straight rule from the central command. In those cases IS also attempts to undertake a form of governance similar to the one in Syria and Iraq, "complete with police, courts, and taxes" (Byman, 2016). Groups like Boko Haram in Nigeria or IS in Bangladesh, on the other hand, do not act under IS direct command even if they formally pledged allegiance and the Islamic State claimed responsibility for their acts. Rather, their actions are just inspired by IS and the relationship remains more distant than it may

seems (Byman, 2016). In every case, however, when groups takes IS label, they automatically assume its harsh, inflexible ideology and uncompromising tactics, starting attrition strategies through sectarian attacks towards minorities and Western targets.

The two closest and most significant affiliates are evidently in Libya and Egypt (Schmitt & Kirkpatrick, 2015), together with an important presence in “Khorasan”.

Libya

The Islamic State’ affiliate in Libya has been the “most worrying and the hub from which they project across all of North Africa”, according to the Defense Intelligence Agency’s top counterterrorism analyst Patrick Prior (Kirkpatrick, Hubbard & Schmitt, 2015). The group was able to establish an actual “colony” in North Eastern Libya, in 150 miles of Mediterranean coastline, including the cities of Sirte and Abugrein. The Islamic State decided to invest in this province because after the fall of Qaddafi’s dictatorship in 2011, no real government has ever been established and neighbor states, weak and unstable, were not considered capable of leading or even hosting a military intervention. This precarious situation provided fertile ground for jihadists, and for IS in particular (Kirkpatrick, Hubbard & Schmitt, 2015).

According to Libyan media and local citizens’ reports, the province’s command was entirely managed by foreign fighters and leadership was held by no less than Al-Anbari (killed in March 2016), former number two of IS who reached Libya by boat. With some 3,000 soldiers, the Libyan province represented the harshest form of governance version of governance outside Syrian and Iraqi strongholds, with enforcement of conservative norms such as veils for all women, ban of music and cigarettes, and closed shops during prayers (Kirkpatrick, Hubbard & Schmitt, 2015).

Likewise, the state-building project was strengthened by the establishment of Islamic police and courts, as well as taxes collection. Horrifying public execution, such as the beheadings of twenty Ethiopian Christian migrant workers (whose video was released by Raqqa group’s media in February, showing the close coordination with the central command) and the crucifixion of dozens of tribesmen in a traffic circle in retaliation for a tribal revolt in August (Kirkpatrick, Hubbard & Schmitt, 2015 and Byman, 2016), reinforced IS will to fully rule area.

Fortunately, the total defeat of IS province in Libya appears to be really close, with the group's forces surrounded in less than 100 square meters in Sirte.

Egypt

The Sinai group, former "Monotheism and Jihad", composed mainly by ultraconservative Sunni tribes, has always been focused on local targets, in particular Egyptian military and security personnel (Kirkpatrick, 2015). In 2011, after the fall of Mubarak, a considerable number of jihadists prisoners were released, which join the Sinai group and formed Ansar Beit al-Maqdis. The organization still targeted mainly Egyptian security forces when al-Sisi was elected in 2013 and was committed in limiting civilian casualties, "detonating its bombs in the middle of the night or on days when buildings were empty" (Kirkpatrick, 2015).

With the pledge of allegiance to the Islamic State, the group experienced an improvement in strategy (with simultaneous strikes at many location for example) as well as a raise in ambition, "going after UN targets, beheading a Croatian expatriate (supposedly in revenge for Croatia's participation in the international coalition) and attacking the Italian consulate in Cairo" (Byman, 2016).

More importantly, in November 2015, the Sinai group carried out the deadliest terror attack perpetrated by IS, bombing a Russian charter jet and killing 224 people. The plane crash brought prestige to the organization and was enthusiastically welcomed by IS members, who released a video taken in Aleppo in which a man, standing in the rubble, declared: "we thank our heroes and lions in the North Sinai and we hope that they would down more planes" (Kirkpatrick, 2015).

Khorasan

Even if less visible and perhaps less relevant to IS strategy, the group established a formal presence in the Nangarhar province in Afghanistan. According to General John F. Campbell, the American commander of the international coalition that is supporting Afghan forces, some 3,000 fighters were sent in the region from the Islamic State (Gordon, 2015). Those soldiers have been attempting to merger with Taliban forces (even if some clashes were registered). In addition, the Islamic State has been delivering hundred thousand dollars to the Afghan fighters, in order

to move into the city of Jalalabad and expand to Kunar province, establishing control of Khorasan region (Gordon, 2015).

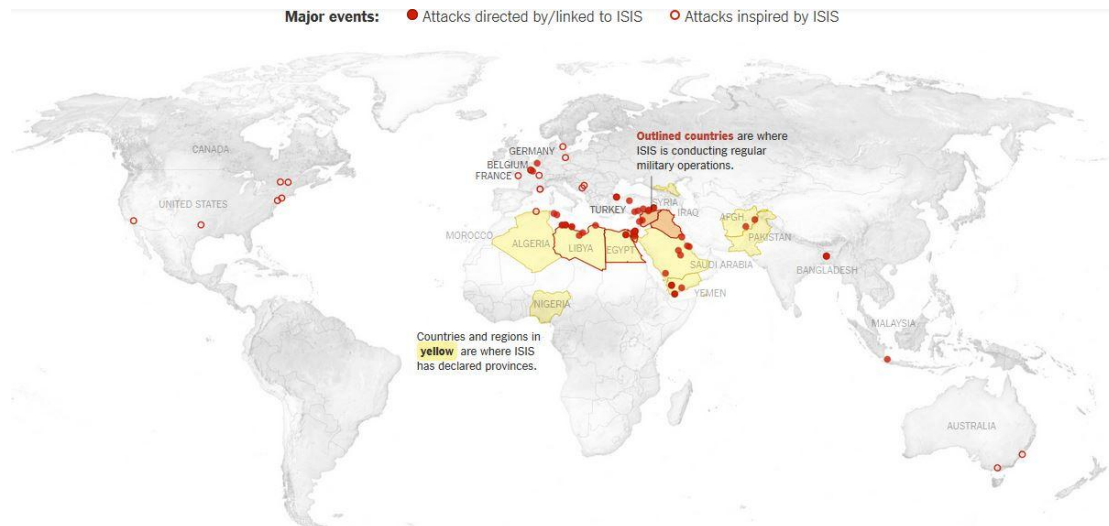
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The Islamic State’s strategy of expansion through the establishment of provinces proved to be very effective and beneficial, both for the core command and for local groups. Nevertheless, increasing the number of affiliates could also be counterproductive. IS provinces, for example, can take on to the group the enemies they make: this happened with the Russian plane crash, when Sinai Province leaders acted without the permission of the central command. As a result, “the move provoked Russia, which until then had limited its air strikes in Syria to attacks on the moderate opposition, to launch cruise missiles at ISIS’ forces and infrastructure in Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa, among other targets” (Byman, 2016).

Similarly, when local provinces declare their obedience to IS, they become target of bigger and dangerous forces that can threaten their own existence. Before becoming official IS provinces, the jihadist organizations in Sinai and Libya were not an objective of the United States. After the pledge of allegiance, for example, the U.S. air force destroyed the city of Darnah, where al-Anbari lost his life. Moreover, being affiliates of the Islamic State can be dangerous since local governments can be pushed to join the international coalition (Byman, 2016).

ISIS Declares Provinces Across the Region





Images via Karen Yourish, Derek Watkins & Tom Giratikanon (New York Times, 2016)

2.5.2 Foreign Fighters

The phenomenon of foreign fighters, meaning the participation of foreigners motivated by a shared religious ideology and membership of a non-geographical national identity (in this case the *ummah*, the Islamic community) is not new (Atwan, 2015). For example, in recent Muslim history, volunteers helped Palestinians in their struggle against Israel in 1967, fighters joined Bosnian jihad during the '90s civil war and thousands travelled to Iraq after U.S. invasion in 2003. The first event in which foreign fighters played a significant role, however, was the ten-year war against Soviets in Afghanistan in the '70s. In that conflict, approximately 20,000 fighters participated in the struggle and some 2,000 remained even after the Soviet withdrawal, most of them joining Al Qaeda (Atwan, 2015).

The nature of jihad has become progressively international during the years: the global approach has been caused in the first place by the active export of Wahabbism (analyzed in the previous section) with an emphasis on jihad as a religious obligation. Furthermore, more and more Islamic funds have been directed to the logistic support of foreign fighters and, finally, online recruitment methods

have become central and decisive in the influence of aspirant soldiers, both for the outreach and for practical support (Atwan, 2015).

The number of total foreign fighters who travelled to Syria and Iraq are discordant. The most recent estimate, given by American intelligence agencies, calculates the number of volunteers around 42,000 from over 120 countries, including 260 Americans among 7,600 Westerners (Schmitt, 2016). According to Atwan (2015), a peak of 1,300 foreign fighters signed up in just two weeks in September 2014, as a reaction to US aerial bombing campaign started in August.

What is sure is that the movement of fighters who moved to Syria and Iraq is unprecedented. "More people from Europe are being mobilized than in all the other foreign conflicts that have happened for the past 20 years combined" (Lister, 2015). This was made possible by the lawless situation which has been marking Syria and Iraq in the last five years: travelling to war zones is relatively easily for aspirant fighters, who normally travel to Turkey as first step. From there, as the Turkish authorities confirmed, "controlling the border with Syria to stop the flow of foreign fighter is impossible", due to the huge number of "safe houses" located at the border and expert jihadists who are in charge of helping the recruits with money and instructions on where to go next (Atwan, 2015).

Foreign fighters are present in the ranks of almost all the jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq. Nevertheless, most of them have joined the Islamic State, not only because it has overshadowed other jihadist groups with its visibility and success (Saltman & Winter, 2014). IS larger presence made it easier for aspirants to get in contact and receive logistic support from the group itself and, in addition, the Islamic State selection process is less rigorous than other jihadist groups like Al Nusra, for example, which requires at least three references from within its ranks for security reasons (Atwan, 2015). Moreover, the group is well organized and prepared to receive foreign fighters. The new recruits, after passing the border to Syria, are brought to pre-arranged accommodation, as British fighter Abu Dujana, reported: "when I crossed, I drove two hours through IS territory. Everything was tranquil and beautiful and it seemed life was continuing as normal. When I arrived, I was mainly with Syrians, but there were also Saudis, Tunisians, a handful of Brits and French" (Lister, 2014). Foreign fighters normally undergo several weeks of religious and

military training (focused on light weaponry such as pistols and assault rifles). “On some occasions, additional training is offered on more sophisticated weapons. Upon completion, new recruits are ordinarily assigned to guard duty for several weeks before being entrusted with frontline military operations” (Lister, 2014).

IS exercises a great appeal especially for Muslims living in the West, who experienced the failure of Arab spring democratic project and developed a sense of insecurity, reinforced by conspiracy theories and anti-Western sentiments. This feeling is strengthened by the success of the Far Right in Europe, who created “Islamophobia” and contributed to young Muslims alienation (Atwan, 2015).

The Islamic State has been able to exploit the phenomenon of foreign fighters better than everyone, finding a role for every aspirant who had reached its territory. Western fighters, normally younger and less familiar with religious matter (the case of two Britons who bought a copy of *Islam for Dummies* before travelling to Syria is a clear example), are often less competent in fighting with respect to the Arabs. Still, they represent an important asset for IS, since they play a central symbolic role in the propaganda, intimidating the West and encouraging potential recruits (Saltman & Winter, 2014). Ironically, there have been complaints on their attitudes and they have often been considered spoiled, asking for Nutella and spending most of their time on expensive mobiles and laptops (Atwan, 2015). Experienced veterans are, on the other hand, a formidable resource battles on the ground. A great number of Chechen Islamists, for example, led foreign battalions in many successful offensives in Syria and Iraq and one of them, Umar al-Shishani, is one of the most important IS military leaders in direct touch with al-Baghdadi (Saltman & Winter, 2014). Also many Libyans, Algerians and Tunisians are valuable military assets, having experienced years of civil wars and guerilla fights and sharing IS radical ideology (Atwan, 2015).

The Islamic State relies on foreign fighters also for maintaining good relationships with local groups and provinces. They act “as communication channels, bringing local concerns to IS and Baghdadi’s vision back to their countries of origin when they return” (Byman, 2016).

Even if the phenomenon of foreign fighters has significantly slowed, contributing to a 20 percent drop in their total military force, it remains a key aspect also for another

reason (Osborne, 2016). The dropped number of volunteers travelling to Iraq and Syria could result, in fact, in more attacks in the West, as a colonel in the coalition has warned. Also considering the loss of territory that is facing, the group will certainly search for alternative strategies to keep its powerful and influential position. One of these could be an increase in the number of terrorist attacks in the West in order to discourage military intervention and airstrikes in its territory. In order to carry out those attacks, the Islamic State could rely on returning foreign fighters: “up to 5,000 jihadists are feared to be in Europe after returning from terrorist training camps, the head of Europol has said” (Dearden, 2016). As already happened in the Paris attacks in January 2015, for example, when all members of the terrorist cell received training with IS in Raqqa before returning to Europe, foreign fighters can represent a threatening alternative resource for Islamic State’s retaliations.

Figure 1: Top 20 Sources of Foreign Fighters in Syria & Iraq

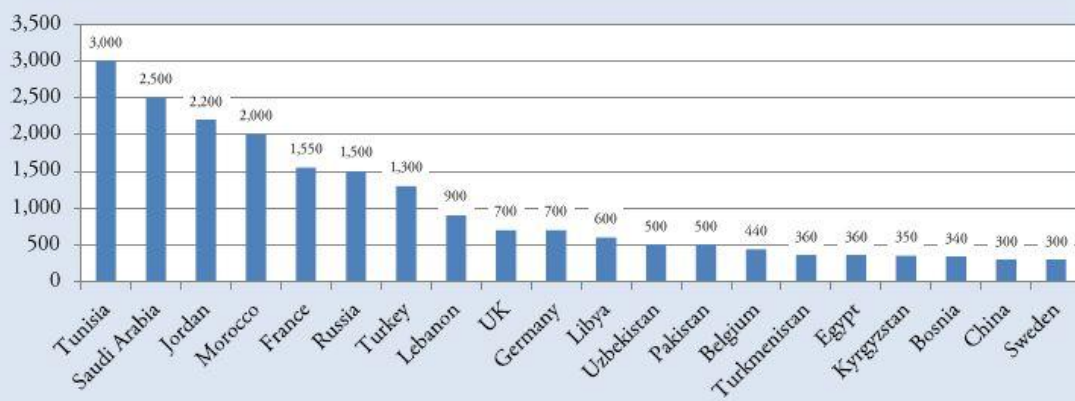


Image via Lister, 2015 (Brookings Institution)

2.5.3 Lone Wolves

Another distinctive aspect of IS external governance is the so-called phenomenon of “lone wolves”. As seen before, the first concern of the Islamic State after declaring itself the Caliphate has been to consolidate control of the areas under its authority (urging all Muslims to join the State) and expand its sphere of influence through the establishment of provinces which can serve as “micro” Islamic States in order to grow territorially. In addition to this “ink spot” expansion strategy (Lister,

2016), the group urged its supporters to carry out individual attacks on Western targets. This “call to arms” came as a direct result of the international coalition’s airstrikes began in August 2014: under pressure in its strongholds in Syria and Iraq, the group considered this deadly and devious strategy an alternative method to retaliate from Western attacks. In September 2014, spokesman Adnani called specifically for any type of lone wolves offences in a detailed speech:

“So O [Muslims], do not let this battle pass you by wherever you may be. You must strike the soldiers, patrons, and troops of the tawaghit [(or tyrants)]. Strike their police, security, and intelligence members, as well as their treacherous agents. Destroy their beds. Embitter their lives for them and busy them with themselves. If you can kill a disbelieving American or European—especially the spiteful and filthy French—or an Australian, or a Canadian, or any other disbeliever from the disbelievers waging war, including the citizens of the countries that entered into a coalition against the Islamic State, then rely upon Allah, and kill him in any manner or way however it may be. Do not ask for anyone’s advice and do not seek anyone’s verdict. Kill the disbeliever whether he is civilian or military, for they have the same ruling. Both of them are disbelievers. If you are not able to find an IED or a bullet, then single out the disbelieving American, Frenchman, or any of their allies. Smash his head with a rock, or slaughter him with a knife, or run him over with your car, or throw him down from a high place, or choke him, or poison him. Do not lack. Do not be contemptible. ... If you are unable to do so, then burn his home, car, or business. Or destroy his crops. ... If you are unable to do so, then spit in his face”

(Adnani’s speech in Lister, 2016).

When considering that “out of 30 terrorism plots or attacks in the West between July 2014 and July 2015, 24 (80 percent) were linked to IS” (Lister, 2016) and “between October 2015 and August 2016 radicalized individuals carried out over 20 attacks in response to the Islamic State’s call to indiscriminately kill “nonbeliever” civilians” (Mendelsohn, 2016), the decentralized strategy proved to be extremely successful. With the recent further loss of territories, declining number of foreign fighters and the siege of major areas of operations such as Libya, the lone wolf strategy has

become the only valid resource to face the need of victories necessary for attracting new recruits and preventing existing members from losing hope (Byman, 2016). In fact, individual indiscriminate attacks benefit the Islamic State for multiple reasons: first of all, they do not require any planning from above or specific knowledge and are therefore relatively easy and cheap. A simple call or message on Facebook before the attack in which the perpetrator expresses the pledge of allegiance is enough for the lone wolf to bring an important contribution to the Islamic State. Without direct connection to IS, moreover, they are almost impossible to prevent and even the most sophisticated network cannot identify them in advance. Finally, those attacks have the double effect of discrediting the host nation's leadership (inciting alarmism and affecting people's psychology, demonstrating governments' inability to protect its citizens) and promoting IS image, showing its power both to the enemies and supporters (Mendelsohn, 2016).

Not all the infamous attacks in the West have been carried out by lone wolves: on the contrary, understanding the difference between "IS inspired" and "IS directed" attacks are vital (Byman, 2016). The case of Paris in November 2015 is a good example: in that situation, perpetrators were expert in terrorism tactics, received training in Syria and carried out multiple coordinated attacks in teams. Their target were at the same time "soft" (cafes, restaurants and concerts) but they also aimed at bombing the Stade de France, where the French president was attending the soccer game (Byman, 2016). The type of explosive used in the attacks, the high-quality false documents and the professionalism and discipline of the perpetrators are clear indicators that they were not simple lone wolves. On the contrary, they were part of an IS organized plan which combined an explosion, a shooting and a hostage-taking and killed over 130 civilians, becoming the deadliest one in French history (Callimachi, Rubin, Fourquet, 2016). This type of attack, rather than lone-wolf strategy, seemed to be part of a centrally planned terrorist campaign aimed at inflicting huge civilian casualties on distant territory (Schmitt & Kirkpatrick, 2015).

Lone-wolf attacks tend to be amateurish and less bloody than IS directed plan, but they are not be considered less important. Unlike organized terrorist cells, individuals operate on their own: for this reason, the motivations that push them to act are more inspired by personal ideas rather than by the purposes of the group

they claim to represent. For example, Omar Mateen's attack in a gay club in Orlando which killed more than fifty people (deadliest terrorist attack in the United States since 9/11), was primary motivated by his homophobia (Byman, 2016).

Radicalized individuals are often present traits of violence in their personality, and they use Islam to justify and elevate the cause of their acts. In addition to specifically personal backgrounds, the reason behind lone-wolves attacks lie in social and economic marginalization. As Oliver Roy, French scholar of Islam, put it, the problem "is not about religion or politics or the radicalization of Islam, but rather a youth revolt and the Islamization of radicalism" (Holland, 2016). The unemployment rate among Muslim immigrants in Europe is estimated to be as high as 40 percent (depending on the country), Muslims are disproportionately like to experience poverty, they face discrimination in recruitment process, many are illiterate and have no hope of finding a job or be productive members of the society and most of the time they live in ghettos in the outskirts, such as in the *banlieues*. These conditions of alienation are present, among others, in countries where Muslim immigration rate is very high such as France, the UK, Germany and Belgium and they represent the main cause of the isolation of the Muslim community, especially young members (even of second or third generation). Life on the economic and social margins creates fertile ground not only for crime and depression, but also for radical Islamism (Holland, 2016). Akbar Ahmed, former Pakistani ambassador to the UK and now professor of Islamic studies in Washington, DC, noted that the focus to counter radicalism is now on theology, but young perpetrators are "nothing more than disaffected, disenchanting, illiterate young people who are not adjusting to society"; to clarify even more, he also added: "Look at these young idiots who are blowing things up—they're looking at IS videos with a beer in one hand and a joint in the other" (Holland, 2016). Alienated, lonely, weak, depressed and sometimes mentally ill young Muslims are the perfect targets for IS propaganda, which is cleverly exploiting the West's inability to integrate those potential resources in the society.

The phenomenon of lone wolves attacks, however, is not entirely attributable to social and economic conditions. On the contrary, religion plays an important role in the modality in which these attacks are carried out and in the choice of the target. In particular, IS peculiar ideology is perhaps the main driver that pushes lone wolves to

act. The unique violence which marks its propaganda fascinates sensitive marginalized individual, who, through the execution of massacres in the name of God, are able to draw attention, satisfy their need of revenge and be part of something important. In other words, IS ideology makes those terrible acts as something heroic and glorious which elevates the (perceived) miserable existence of the perpetrator. As seen in the previous section, the priority of the Islamic State is to purify society and establish the perfect Islam of the Prophet Mohammed and his earliest followers: according to this vision, the lone-wolves attacks become some sort of “punishment on expressions of legal deviance from Islam” (Olidort, 2016). In light of this perception, the slaughter perpetrated by Mateen comes as punishment to gay man; the massacre on the French holiday of Bastille Day in Nice, where 84 innocents lost their lives, is a punitive measure for an explicit expression of celebration for the State institution, which is considered a direct violation of God’s oneness. According to Olidort, “The attack was also a campaign slogan for the Islamic State's cause: Muslims, in IS view, today have no excuse for celebrating national identities when they have an Islamic one of their own in Iraq and Syria” (Olidort, 2016). To conclude, those lone wolves “punishment” attacks are and will continue to be promoted by the Islamic State, as part of its campaign to appear as the exclusive authority with the power to apply Islamic law in Muslim lands and also in the West.

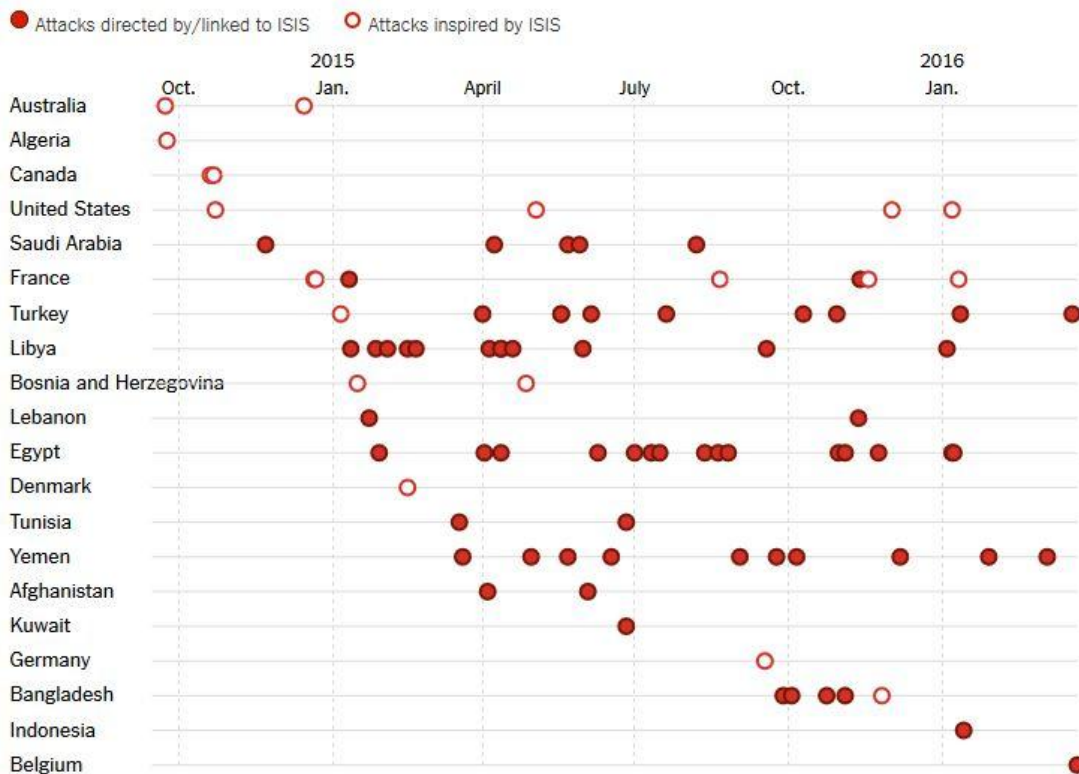
The phenomenon of lone-wolf terrorism was not introduced by the Islamic State for the first time. On the contrary, its emergence dates back to Al Qaeda and Anwar al Awlaki in particular: the New Mexico-born terrorist urged American Muslim to carry out individual attacks and his web magazine *Inspire* has been not only one of the most important source of inspiration for lone wolves, but also a practical manual “to learn how to make bombs and conduct violent jihad” (Riedel, 2016). Individual attacks were perpetrated as part of Al Qaeda “leaderless jihad” strategy, which will be analyzed in depth in the third chapter. Even if the introduction of a decentralized and unpredictable approach is attributable to Al Qaeda, the Islamic State has elevated this strategy to unprecedented level. Bin Laden himself, in fact, disapproved the articles in *Inspire* magazine and rejected the indiscriminate attacks on civilians, warning his followers to the danger of such a method which could potentially kill Muslims and undermine the public support of the group. His successor al-Zawahiri

not only continued to warn about the danger of indiscriminate massacres but also introduced a document titled “General guidelines for jihad” aimed at limit the use of unlimited violence (Mendelsohn, 2016).

The Islamic State, by contrast, recognizes no limits in the use of brutality. IS encourages the perpetration of slaughters towards everyone who refuse to accept its authority, including Shiites and even Sunni Muslims. The legitimate use of extreme violence is an expression of the uncompromising “total” ideology and contributes to deepen the rift between what is acceptable and good and what is evil (Mendelsohn, 2016).



Major ISIS Attacks



Images via Karen Yourish, Derek Watkins & Tom Giratikanon (New York Times, 2016)

2.6 INTERNET & SOCIAL MEDIA

The organization has been defined by Abdel Bari Atwan, one of the most distinguished Arab journalists who, among other things, interviewed Osama bin Laden twice in the '90s, as the "Digital Caliphate" (2015). The massive use of internet and social media is in fact not only one of the central aspects that makes the Islamic State peculiar but represents also vital part of its strategy of its military attack, defense planning, recruit and propaganda. This section will analyze in depth the digital techniques used by IS and how its skilled members were able to exploit the potentialities of the Web without being bother by any cyber security force.

Without digital technology it is highly unlikely that the Islamic State would ever come to existence, let alone be able to survive and expand: IS has used the internet and digital communications with great skill and inventiveness, competently fending off threats from global intelligence bodies and military opponents. Its mastery of the internet is, in other words, one of the main tool through which it achieved its territorial ambitions and recruited such a large army in so short time (Atwan, 2015).

Actually, the use of the technology (even if not in such an extensive way) is not new for Jihadist groups: the Taliban were constantly present in television already in the 90's, and Al Qaeda was the first organization to realize the potentiality of the worldwide web as a mean to spread its ideology, information. Encrypted communications were exploited by Al Qaeda to plan all its major attacks from 1998 embassy bombing in Nairobi and the terrorist organization could boast its first official website by 2000. Moreover, in 2003, the "cyber jihad" appeared in one of the Al Qaeda's most important manifesto, the "Thirty-nine Principles of Jihad".

In addition, the global success of YouTube from 2005 as a platform to share videos anonymously, represented a perfect device to show the world successful attack on Coalition target in Iraq (often characterized by the infamous cries of "Allah Akbar" and soundtracks of Islamic hymns) as well as the wills and testaments of suicide bombers (the first to realize this platform's potentiality was the ultra-violent Al Qaeda's *emir* in Iraq Abu Musab al-Zarqawi). However, the problem of the dissemination remained: potential viewers would need either to have been informed about precise material's existence or to have conducted an almost intuitive search

(Atwan, 2015). In order to spread extremist material more widely and reach new recruitment pools, the so-called “Bin Laden of the internet” Anwar al-Awlaki, a US born youth cleric prominent in AQAP, created his own blog, Facebook page and YouTube channel and used them to distribute the online magazine *Inspire*, which included recipes for bomb-making and increasingly sophisticated films (Atwan, 2015).

2.6.1 Improvement and Development

Islamic State’s members followed this successful trend and developed new sophisticated tools up-to-date with the online world. Most commanders and recruits are expert not only in the use of social media and internet in general but also in more skilled-requiring IT areas of expertise, like writing software programs or inputting information in html. Thanks to this recruitment strategy, IS has been able to spread its “brand” to a huge global audience: live reports from the frontlines via Twitter, snapshots of daily-life via videos or images posted in JustPaste.it, undisturbed conversations via Skype and instant messaging on anonymous Android platforms are just some examples of the Islamic State unquestionably fruitful activity. Furthermore, all these operations are disseminated worldwide through a high effective method, namely hijacking “Twitter storms”: Islamic State activists included high-trending hashtags such as #VoteNo and #VoteYes during 2014 Scottish referendum for independence or #Brazil_2014 during 2014 Brazil football world cup (Saltman & Winter, 2014).

Additionally, Islamic State IT activities proved to be very effective for recruitment: direct messages via platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp have been used not only to contact potential members but also to send them practical and logistical instructions to reach Syria. This type of secret and anonymous communications conducted via laptop or smart phone in teenager’s bedroom are particularly difficult to be prevented or stopped by parents or police and proved to be perfect recruitments instruments (Atwan, 2015).

IS activities online to reach and attract new members are diverse and various: activists exploit applications and social media platforms in several and different ways. Locating enemies and publishing their identities and addresses in order to permit to every member to act against them, releasing training manuals online for jihadists such as “Technical Mujahid Magazine”, disseminating information automatically via mobile phone app “Dawn of Glad Things” are just some examples of their activities. The latter especially proved to be very fruitful for IS propaganda: available through the Google Play store, subscribers downloaded the app onto their smart phones and, once installed, a centralized body could post tweets from the users’ personal Twitter account, synchronizing them with other IS supporters without doing anything. The application’s influence in disseminating IS propaganda has been immense; indeed, as J. M. Berger reported, it was responsible for posting almost 40,000 tweets in a single day as IS marched into Mosul (Saltman & Winter, 2014). Islamic State even produced its own video game, an Islamic version of the extremely popular “Grand Theft Auto”, renamed “Salil al-Sawareem” (Clashing of Swords), in which players can kill and ambush American soldiers and plant improvised explosive devices to blow up military vehicles to shouts of “Allah Akbar” (Atwan, 2015).

The exploitation of IT technologies and devices to provide a constant flow of news is pivotal to IS in order to keep potential recruits and supporters engaged. Most of material is dispensed in Arabic but much more is available not only in English, but Russian, French, German and Hindi among the others. Reports of battles and military news are central topics: through the countless number of accounts reporting about it, IS has turned one of the frontlines of the crisis in Syria and Iraq into something that can be witnessed in first person online. Indeed, if we consider the Vietnam War the first televised war and the Gulf War the first 24-hour news war, then the IS activities can be considered as the first social media war (Saltman & Winter, 2014). Moreover, the Islamic State is making a strong effort to build up an image of itself as an attractive, charming and pleasing place to live in. For example, Instagram images portraying fighters with fluffy kittens became viral in very little time.

Another important element in the Islamic State’s online propaganda is the normalization and celebration of death (Spencer, 2015). Martyrdom represents

jihadist's most powerful weapon indeed: a soldier who does not fear death is an invincible enemy, and close-up photos of dead fighters' smiling faces are frequently posted across all platforms. For instance, on 3 February 2015, one female resident of Islamic State, Al-Britaniya, shared "glad things" via Twitter: "My husband Rahimuh Allah has done the best transaction you can make, his soul returned Jenna (heaven) may Allah receive you martyr" (Atwan, 2015).

Islamic State's media department's head is 35-years-old Syrian Ahmed Abousamra: raised in Massachusetts and graduated in IT he fled to Aleppo in 2011. He is believed to currently run several media organizations with the purpose of propaganda and recruitment. His team is composed of professional journalists, film-makers, photographers and editors equipped with the best digital equipment available, such as HD cameras, editing software and special effects libraries. As a result, IS films turn out to be of an excellent quality more usually associated with Hollywood than with a terrorist organization.

The topics of those videos are varied and encompass different situations, from daily life among fighters to achievements and deeds, to harsh punishments and barbaric executions of enemies. Some of them managed to have international resonance and are sadly well-known globally: "Message from the land of Epic Battles" and "Flames of War" show foreign fighters in the midst of fierce battles; "Why did you come to Jihad, Uncle?" is a great hit on YouTube which displaying an interview of a seventy-year-old white-haired fighter and countless are the examples of atrocities perpetrated and shared by IS members. Videos showing fighters holding up severed heads, women stoned to death and burned alive prisoners are (unfortunately) just some of the cases than can be brought up. The latter, especially, was particularly shocking: showing a Jordanian pilot, Moaz al-Kasasbeh, it was so inhumane to the extent of dividing Twitter followers; even some supporters, in fact, expressed horror and sadness and took distance from it (Atwan, 2015).

2.6.2 Twitter

Twitter is unquestionably the most important platform that has been exploited by the Islamic State to spread its propaganda and draw in people vulnerable to radicalization. Thanks to this highly popular social media, IS has been able to deliver a distorted and overblown portrait of itself and of how the world perceives it, by disseminating images of brutal violence towards everyone who oppose it and at the same time addressing members and potential supporters with attracting pictures of daily life.

Despite the small and decentralized nature of its network, which makes an overall examination particularly complicated, an accurate and meticulous analysis on the definition and the description of the population of IS on Twitter is given by U.S. researchers J.M. Berger and Jonathon Morgan (2015). Even if the work is slightly aged for such a recent issue, the report presented by the two analysts is certainly the most complete and exhaustive investigation on the matter. The period over which the data was collected, in fact, goes from October 4th 2014 through November 27th 2014, with some seed data collected in late September 2014 (Berger & Morgan 2015).

As made clear by the study, the communication strategy carried out by Islamic State activists is remarkably and could be easily compared to most famous Western firms' marketing planning. Considering the fact that the IS digital campaign was obstructed by countless accounts suspensions, the work is undoubtedly impressive.

First of all, tweets are provided in many languages in order to reach the highest number of users. Among IS supporters, 73 percent used Arabic, 18 percent English and 6 percent French: the distribution reflects the large number of Western foreign fighters and the overemphasis on English reflects also IS' target audience in the West for inciting and harassing propaganda. Moreover, many users tweeted in more than one language, sometimes as part of IS social media strategy to direct messages at external audiences, such as when it publicized the beheading of Western hostages. Tweets also frequently featured a mix of languages, such as English hashtags attached to Arabic content (Berger & Morgan, 2015).

Secondly, the average number of tweets produced is a further indicator that suggests the state of salute of the Islamic State performance on the social media. Islamic State supporters, in fact, were much more active than the average Twitter user: 62 percent of IS activists had tweeted within 30 days of collection, compared to just 13 percent of all Twitter users. Moreover, the Islamic State strategy based on tweeting repeatedly in short bursts in order to widely disseminate important contents proved to be particularly successful. Those prolific users (referred to in IS social media strategy as documents as the *mujtahidun*, the industrious ones) formed the highly engaged core of its social media machine. These users may not have tweeted every day, but when they did, they tweeted a lot of content in a very short amount of time (Berger & Morgan, 2015). This activity, more than any other, drove the success of the Islamic State effort to promulgate its message on social media. Prolonged “storms” of activity caused hashtags to trend, resulting in third-party aggregation and insertion of tweeted content into unrelated search results. Highly organized activity among the *mujahidin*, who at one point were numbered as many as three thousands, allowed the Islamic State to dominate certain hashtags and project its material outside of its own social network to harass and intimidate outsiders, as well as to attract potential recruits (Berger & Morgan, 2015). The figure below clearly indicates that when users were online, they were extremely active, with an average number of 18425 tweets per user every day.

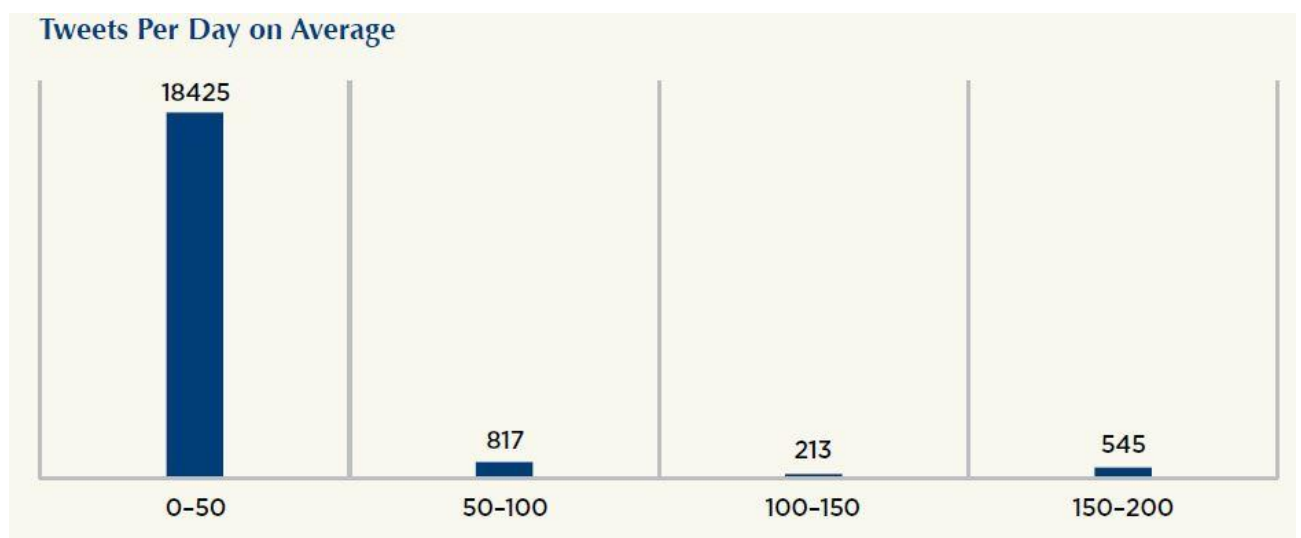


Image via Berger & Morgan, 2015 (Brookings Institution)

To conclude, the last benchmark worth to be taken into consideration to detect the Islamic State digital success is the number of followers. A large majority of IS supporters on Twitter (73 percent) had fewer than 500 followers each. Only 4 percent had more than 5,000 followers. While these numbers are very low for online influencers such as celebrities or mainstream politicians (who can have follower counts in the millions), they are very high relative to the average user. For this reason, it is possible to state that the typical IS supporter had more followers than the typical Twitter user, with an average number of 1,004 followers per profile (Berger & Morgan, 2015).

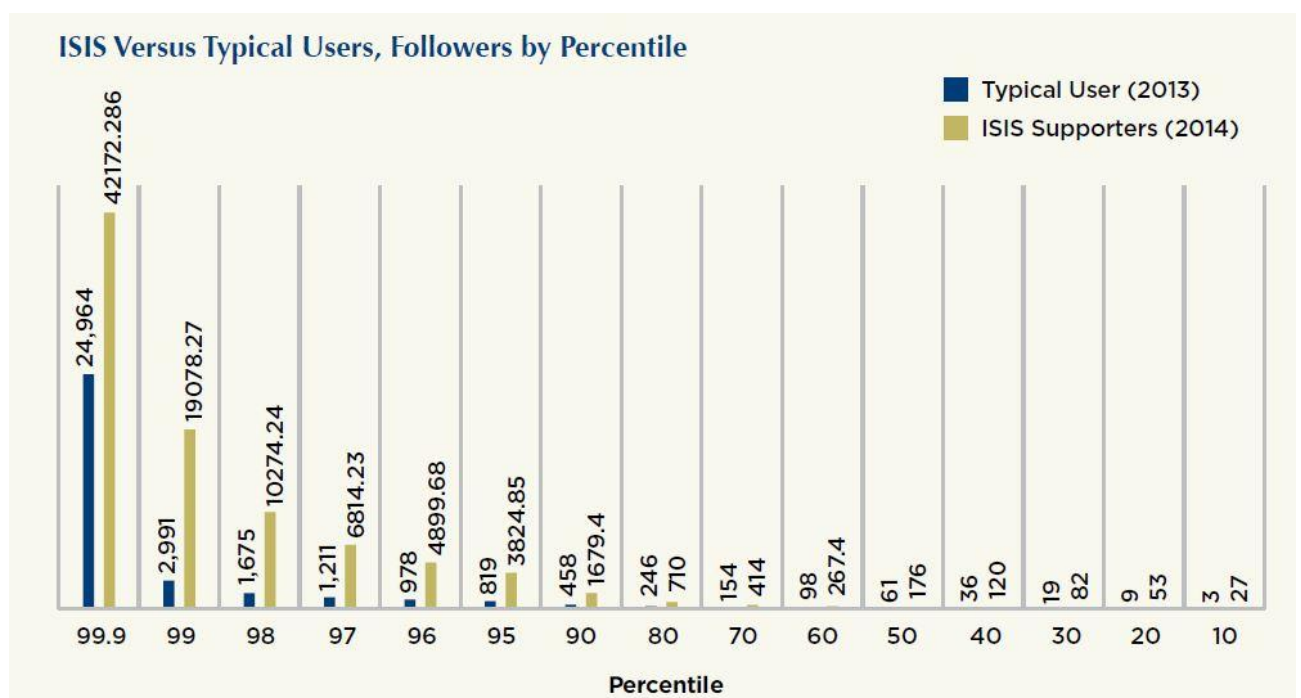


Image via Berger & Morgan, 2015 (Brookings Institution)

In spite of this data, even at their most popular levels, top IS influencers command an audience that is fractional compared to celebrities such as Cristiano Ronaldo (45.9 million followers) or prominent U.S. government officials such as President Obama (77 million followers). Despite the small number of followers that any given IS account could boast of (no overt account reached more than 50 thousand followers), IS supporters were still highly effective at getting their message out. They employ a variety of techniques, including repeated tweets on the same content by the same user within a short period of time, and tweeting within a short period of time

through a coordinating posting activity, as noted in the paragraph above (Berger & Morgan, 2015).

2.6.3 Precautions

With regards to security issues, it is undeniable that IS activists are deeply aware of the risks they face and consequently they assume an appropriate approach to avoid detection. Members and supporters of the Islamic State have been adopted the most sophisticated techniques to remain anonymous: using Virtual Private Networks (VPN), that permits to create false location for IP's addresses in other countries, and anonymous browsers such as Third Party Onion Routing (TOR), which enables to access the dark internet and obscure IPs location, users are able to remain completely untraceable. Through these and others security features, Islamic State activists can freely develop social media networks and share their material openly. In addition, Jihadist fighters are able to send and receive money using "cryptocurrencies" like bitcoins and dogecoins, which can move without any restrictions or control. Moreover, the extensive use of mobile phones is surely an important part of its activities: for this reasons activists are often using a new Android phone, nicknamed "Snowden Phone" (named after Edward Snowden, the IT professional who leaked classified information from the NSA to the media in 2013), which permits all internet activities with minimum risk of its user being traced (Atwan, 2015).

2.6.4 Cyber Jihad

To conclude this short analysis on the digital strategies of IS, the last aspect to be taken into consideration is the so-called "cyber jihad", already mentioned before as part of the Al Qaeda's manifesto "Thirty-nine Principles of Jihad". The Islamic State strengthened the effort in this sense and, thanks to a qualitative and quantitative development of skills and strategies seen above, through 2015 was able to carry on several cyber attacks to the West. In January, for instance, a group of

hackers took control of the social media platforms run by the US government's Central Command, which oversees military operations in Syria and Iraq. Activists managed to obtain personal details of hundreds of US military personnel committed in the Middle East, inevitably compromising their personal safety and that of their families. Moreover, in February, the French Minister of the Interior Bernard Cazeneuve revealed that the country had been hit by 25,000 cyber attacks in a month, mostly directed to military defense websites. French cyber defense chief declared that this "was the first time that a country has been faced with such a large wave" (Atwan, 2015). Crashing website, however, is just one of the aspects of the "cyber war". Experienced and inventive hackers can use their skills also to intercept real-time battle information, giving Islamic State's fighters and commanders an obvious advantage and opportunities for ambush. Often rival opposition groups such as Kurdish PKK or even Iraqi and Syrian state forces lack the digital skills and experience to counter IS activists and sensitive information such as location of supplies and ammunition or strategies are easily hackable (Atwan, 2015). Furthermore, Islamic State members can use fake websites or profiles as cyber traps in order to identify and locate their enemies. This is the case of "Raqqqa is Being Slaughtered Slowly" (RSS), organization that highlights human rights abuses perpetrated by the Islamic State. The group was contacted by IS members, who pretended to be Syrians in exile in Canada; after expressing their support, they sent to RSS activists a draft of the report on Raqqqa's situation they said they was writing. The document contained links that were secretly downloading into their systems in order to obtain IP addresses of the members of the network. Consequently, Islamic State's members were able to get the location (given by the IP address) of anyone who opened the links that were sent as a trap. As a result, members of RSS were attacked by its police; houses were raided, two were kidnapped and tortured and at least one was murdered. Worth to mention is also the fact that hacking can be a useful source of funds too: credit cards details can be extracted and use to charge pre-paid anonymous credit card (Atwan, 2015).

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I decided to analyze in depth this feature of the Islamic State because it represents one of the main strength of the group's strategy. Governments appear relatively powerless in confronting these attacks and in countering the massive digital propaganda, which is key in recruiting new members, especially in the West. The potential provided by the internet is not fully exploit yet, and the Caliphate's young warriors are certainly working on ways to overcome the military superiority of their opponents. In the eventuality that Islamic State members learn how to hijack drones or interfere between communications of Alliance's commander and pilots, for example, the cyber warfare could reveal itself even more important than it is today (Atwan, 2015). On the other hand reversing the trend cooperating to counter digital attacks and striking back with new IT strategies and techniques could be decisive to stop IS expansion. A silent and "digitally defeated" Islamic State would probably mean the end of the Islamic State itself because it would lose its first and main mean to convey its message to potential recruits and backers.

Even if used by other terrorist groups before, the massive use of digital tools represents a new element for modern terrorism; the Islamic State has been able to exploit its members' digital knowledge not just to gain prominence in the virtual world (as most of hacking groups do already), but as an effective method to achieve concrete and outstanding results.

CHAPTER 3:

THE ISLAMIC STATE AS A NEW FORM OF TERRORISM

3.1 FOUR WAVES OF TERRORISM

One of the most relevant studies on modern terrorism and the first analysis of the history of modern global rebel terror by Professor David C. Rapoport, *The Four Waves of Modern Terrorism*, looks at specific time periods that can be categorized into specific phases precipitated by events. The “waves” are respectively Anarchist (1880s-1920s), Anti-colonial (1920s-1950s), New Left (1950s-1980s) and Religious (1980s-present).

First of all, wave is defined by Rapoport as a cycle of activity in a given period of time, characterized by phases of expansion and contraction. One of the most important features that all the waves of terrorism present is the international character: despite the fact that each wave shape its national elements differently, common activities occur in several countries driven by a common predominant “energy”, as their names (Anarchist, anti-colonial, New Left and Religious) suggest (Rapoport, 2004).

Waves are composed of organizations, which normally tend to disappear before the initial wave associated with them does. Sometimes, an organization can transcend a wave, reflecting the new wave’s influence. Inheritance and evolution of waves were facilitated by transformation and development in communication and transportation patterns, which made travelling and sharing information and experience easier for terrorists (Russian anarchists in the first place). For this reason, it was possible to create diaspora communities (large scale emigration of entire groups) and inspire sympathies and groups elsewhere.

Furthermore, the second factor which contributed to spread terrorism internationally was the creation of a doctrine and strategy. Again, Russian writers like Sergei Nechev and Nicholas Mozorov, as well as Marighella’s *Mini-Manual of the Urban Guerilla* or Osama Bin Laden’s training manual *Military Studies in the Jihad*

Against the Tyrants were the forerunner of terrorist strategies, tactics and methods which became source of inspiration for other rebels in the following years. Each wave produced major technical works that reflect the special properties of that wave and contribute to a common modern effort to formulate a “science” of terror (Rapoport, 2004).

Moreover, one common characteristic which all the waves of terrorism share is their aim, namely the “Revolution” that could present very different aspects from case to case: in the second wave, for example, the leading principle was self-determination, while in the religious one is intended as a radical reconstruction of authority based on sacred texts and revelations. In all the cases, however, revolution represents a new source of political legitimacy.

3.1.1 Anarchist Wave

Modern terrorism emerged in the first place when traditional revolutionary pattern, based on speeches and leaflets to inspire an uprising, suddenly seemed obsolete. A new form of communication was needed, one that could inspire masses through personal actions which, entailing personal risk and deep commitment, would represent an example to follow: the so-called “Propaganda by Deeds” of Peter Kropotkin (Rapoport, 2004). The Anarchist wave developed in Russia during 1880s, under the unbearable life conditions imposed by Czar Alexander II.

In that context, terror was meant as the quickest and most effective way to “wake up” society and put an end to structural injustice that was ruling the world. The strategy of this type of terrorism was essentially based on provocation: through their dramatic actions, rebels would force the government to respond harshly in manners that would violate the rules they claimed to respect and they would finally polarize the society, eventually provoking the revolution.

Assassination of prominent figures and political targets were the main tactics of this wave and the use of dynamite was the trademark of the Anarchist wave; given that from its use the assailant usually was killed too, it was not a weapon a criminal

would use. Killing those who could affect public attitudes was seen as a mean to an end rather than an end itself (Rapoport, 2004).

Despite a theoretical initial improvement of living conditions, namely the abolition of servitude and the promise of funding peasants to allow them to buy their land by Czar Alexander II, the situation for the Anarchist rebels of the first wave did not change much. Frustration and disappointment led to systematic assassinations of prominent officials that culminated in the death of the Czar himself on March 13th 1881.

The spread of the Russian Anarchist's doctrine and heritage encouraged and inspired other groups around Europe, Armenia, Poland, as well as several groups in the Balkans. The highest point of the first wave of international terrorist activity occurred in the 1890s, sometimes called the Golden Age of Assassination, when monarchs, prime ministers and presidents were struck down, one after another, usually by assassins who moved easily across international borders (Rapoport, 2004).

3.1.2 Anti-Colonial Wave

The second wave, or Anti-colonial wave, was fueled by the principle of self-determination emerged in Versailles Peace Treaty that concluded World War I to break up the empires of the defeated states. The implications of self-determination principle went beyond any expectations and after World War II terrorist groups actually developed in all empires, playing a central role in the further dissolution of colonial territories around the world. Terrorist activity was crucial in establishing the new states of Ireland, Israel, Cyprus and Algeria among others. With the intensifying of Cold War, additionally, the process was quickened given that the two Great Powers often viewed an opportunity to increase their influence supporting rebels in weak states.

Second-wave organizations realized that they needed a new language to define themselves because the term *terrorist* had accumulated so many negative connotations that those who identified themselves as terrorists incurred enormous political liabilities (Rapoport, 2004). An appropriate example of this trend is given by

Menachem Begin, leader of the Irgun, movement which fought for the independence of Israel from the British in Palestine: he defined his people as “freedom fighters” struggling against “government terror”. This self-definition revealed to be so appealing that all subsequent terrorist groups adopted it.

For this reason the political legitimacy of the anti-colonial struggle was perceived as “more legitimate” than the one used in the first wave, and became appreciated by political supporters and governments as well. It is in this phase of the development of modern terrorism that the importance of an appropriate language emerged: when ideals and action were supported and shared, terrorists became freedom fighters struggling for a right and lawful cause; otherwise, violent rebels were labeled as mere terrorists.

In the anti-colonial wave of terrorism also tactics and strategy changed. Few assassinations occurred, replaced by more complicated plans of action: targeting police through elimination of officers and/or their families was still a priority for terrorist, who sought to increase social support showing the atrocities that would be most likely provoked by the military units replacing ordinary police. Furthermore, more focus was addressed to guerrilla like (hit-and-run) tactics, making terrorism just one aspect of a more comprehensive rebellion that included para-military forces and extensive guerilla strategies, like in Algeria or Palestine (Rapoport, 2004).

Leaders of anti-colonial organizations acknowledged the common bonds and heritage of global revolutionary tradition but, unlike the Anarchist wave, the second wave presented less international vocation and was rather inspired by national and specific history and tradition.

Moreover, a new element was the widespread support of diaspora communities present in other countries (the Irish and the Jewish communities in the USA for example), expressed through money, volunteers and weapons. In addition, foreign states were also really active in the struggle for independence through direct support to organizations, like the Arab states helping rebel groups in Algeria.

Finally, also supranational organization represented a new element in the second wave of terrorism. The role played by the recently established United Nations became crucial in the struggle for independence and most of the terrorist

organizations sought the support of the UN in their attempt to be recognized as “freedom fighters” and receive support (Rapoport, 2004).

3.1.3 New Left Wave

The third or New Left wave of terrorism was mainly fostered by the Vietnam War. The effectiveness of the Viet Cong’s primitive weapons against the American goliath’s modern technology rekindled radical hopes that the contemporary system was vulnerable. Many groups developed not only in the Third World but also in the Western heartland itself, like the West German Red Faction Army (RAF) and the Italian Red Brigades. Most of these organizations were directly or indirectly supported by the Soviet Union, which encouraged rebellions with moral support as well as through training and weapons.

Similarly to the first wave, the New Left wave was inspired by radicalism and nationalism based on ethnic concerns, which in most of the cases did not reveal to be strong enough to lead to independence. Unlike the anti-colonial struggle, these movements did not have enough internal and international consensus to reach their purposes and most of them failed, despite initial success. Some of these groups’ aspirations are still present today, as made clear by cases like Basques, Kurds and Armenians.

When the Vietnam War ended in 1975, the Palestine Liberation Organization replaced the Viet Cong as the heroic model: its existence and persistence gave credibility to supporters who argued that only terror could remove Israel. Its centrality for other groups was strengthened by the strong support from Arab states and the Soviet Union as well as the availability of training facilities in Lebanon for other terrorist groups.

As well as the Anarchist wave, the third wave of modern terrorism replaced the military targets of the second wave with more “theatrical” targets that could provoke international resonance as primary victims of their activities. A perfect example of this technique is given by international hijacking: solely during the first

three decades of the third wave, over seven hundred hijackings occurred (Rapoport, 2004).

More generally, hostage crisis became one of the most well-known third-wave features. From 1968 to 1982, 409 international kidnappings involving 950 hostages occurred in seventy-three countries (mostly Italy and Latin America) becoming not only a *modus operandi* to increase political awareness but also a very lucrative activity for terrorist organizations: in fact, this practice permitted the groups to earn an estimated amount of 350 million dollars.

Another similarity that the New Left wave shared with the first wave is the assassination of prominent figures. The murder of Italian Prime Minister Aldo Moro, the attempted assassination of PM Thatcher and Jordan's King Hussein are only some of the many examples that can be pointed out. Unlike the first wave, however, which considered manslaughter as a mean to an end, the public murders of the third wave were in most of the cases carried out as punishments, considered as an end itself. Referring to the examples cited above: Aldo Moro, as head of the Italian government, refused to enter hostage negotiations; Jordan's King Hussein had forced PLO out of his country; Margaret Thatcher was considered responsible for the death of nine IRA hunger strikers (Rapoport, 2004). All these cases show that the action of the terrorist was motivated more by anger and resentment rather than a strategy.

Mainly due to the availability of facilities for foreign groups in Cuba and Palestine and the internationality of the targets, the third wave was strongly marked by a global dimension. As a clarifying case, the PLO was more active abroad than on its home territories, carrying out attacks mostly in Europe than on the West Bank. Other two elements reflect the international approach of the New Left wave: firstly, the cooperation between different national groups in attacks such as the Munich Olympics massacre in 1972 and, secondly, the international relevance of the target chosen, such as attacks on embassies and diplomat personnel (Rapoport, 2004).

The inability to negotiate between the conflicting demands imposed by various international elements was the main cause of the third wave failure. Unequal relations within cooperating entities turned out to be deeply problematic, often causing the dissolution of the weaker groups that could not manage to carry on their

own strategies. Furthermore, involvements of states in terrorist causes turned out to be disastrous, as illustrated by the Egyptian raids from Gaza to attack Israel, which led to a disastrous war; or the Palestinian raids from Syria which triggered the infamous Six Days war in 1967.

Due to the reasons listed above, the New Left wave began to ebb in the 1980s, when revolutionary terrorists were defeated in one country after another and international counterterrorist cooperation became increasingly effective (Rapoport, 2004). Also the United Nations role changed dramatically in this period: terrorists' practices became targets of conventions and the once popular term "freedom fighter" was substituted by "terrorist" in many official documents.

3.1.4 Religious Wave

Religious elements have always been important in modern terror because religious and ethnic identities often overlap, but in all the cases that preceded the "religious wave" (such as Irish, Israeli or Palestinian struggles) the aim were limited to create secular states. In the fourth wave of modern terrorism, on the contrary, religion provided not only the ideology, but also the motivation and the organizational structure for the perpetrators (Juergensmeyer, 2000). Religion surely represents the most powerful tool that push people to perpetrate extreme acts, such as suicide bombing attacks on civilians. The power of religion is essentially the promise of a better afterlife and the certainty that the extreme act will be rewarded by God. Its persuasive strength is the most successful source of legitimacy, which not only transcends politics but encompasses it, creating an absolute and indisputable power. This "absolutization" is the main strength of the religious wave terrorism: making a belief universal and undoubtedly right allows terrorist groups to legitimate and justify indefensible actions perpetrated in the name of the absolute concept. Violence is placed within the context of a cosmic war, a symbolic and transcendent conflict; for this reason, the wave's casualties become martyrs and their opponents are demonized.

“Religious violence has much to do with the nature of the religious imagination, which has always had the propensity to absolutize and to project images of cosmic war. It also has much to do with the social tensions of this moment of history that cry out for absolute solutions, and the sense of personal humiliation experienced by men who long to restore an integrity that they perceive as lost in the wake of virtually global social and political shifts” (Juergensmeyer, 2000).

Related to this is the valorization of the warrior (religious violence often involves ex-military personnel), coupled with male bonding and an appeal to men "on the margins". Moreover, the fourth wave of modern terrorism is marked by a widely shared perception that current world is at war: due to this approach, violent acts may be regarded as legitimate. On the contrary, in fact, if the world is perceived as peaceful, violent acts appear as mere terrorism. Fourth wave's cultures are strongly shaped by the feeling that their communities are already under attack and that their actions are therefore simply responses to the violence they have experienced (Juergensmeyer, 2000).

This type of strong justification mechanism is at the heart of the religious wave, which appears to be more enduring than its predecessors.

3.1.5 Al Qaeda and the Fourth Wave

Islam is at the heart of the wave. Islamic terrorist groups have conducted the most significant, deadly and profoundly international attacks since the '80s. Furthermore, three important events for the Islamic community occurred in that decade and represented a dramatic political turning point: the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the beginning of a new Islamic century and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan were vital to launch the fourth wave (Rapoport, 2004).

All the three events had strong political and ideological influence but the latter, especially, represented a new hope for the Islamic world. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 was harshly opposed by volunteers from all over the Sunni world who (also thanks to U.S. support) forced the Soviets to leave the country ten

years after. The success of a religious movement over a secular superpower represented an impressive event which revitalized terrorist activity, especially in the Islamic community.

A typical feature which was inspired by the first wave was the massive use of suicide bombing as an effective deadly strategy. Moreover, Islamic groups proved to be more durable than their third-wave predecessors, since major organizations in Lebanon, Egypt and Algeria are still functioning. Islamic terrorist groups are also large organization when compared to all other waves, in which the larger organizations were composed by few hundred active members at max. Al Qaeda, for example, in its most influential period, was formed by an estimated number of five thousands members with cells operating in seventy-two countries (Rapoport, 2004). The choose of the target and the scope of the religious terror groups were also two new elements for modern terrorism: the USA, renamed by Iran the “Great Satan”, became the main antagonist and its military and civilian installations were the primary target of Islamic religious groups attacks. Unlike the previous terrorist waves, which attacked symbolic and functional targets in order to achieve their scopes, the Islamic religious terrorism aimed at the complete annihilation of the enemy. The numerous attacks on American targets, such as the 1998 bombing attacks in Nairobi and Dar el Salaam embassies, provoked the U.S. reaction with missile attacks: for the first time, rockets were used against a group rather than a state. Those attacks, however, had a major unintended consequence: they turned Al Qaeda’s leader Bin Laden from a marginal figure in the Muslim world to a global celebrity. The lack of a U.S. serious response in the years before 9/11 permitted Al Qaeda to grown and organize until the infamous massacre, which radically changed the approach towards religious terrorism. Within weeks of the airplane attacks, in fact, U.S. forces invaded Afghanistan to destroy Al Qaeda sanctuaries (Sageman, 2008).

The most important innovation of the fourth wave was perhaps the supranational character of the organization. The initial Al Qaeda’s global approach was reflected by its unique and unprecedented recruiting pattern: a countless number of volunteers, which were not part of any organization but rather individuals that reached training camps in Afghanistan and Pakistan, came from at least sixty Muslim and non-Muslim

countries. Every previous terrorist organization (including Islamic groups) drew its recruits exclusively from a single national base (Rapoport, 2004). Similarly to the first and the third wave, the geographical boundaries did not represent a limit for the terrorist organization: the transnational group was allowed to exponentially increase the number of its members (volunteers coming from everywhere) and was able to reach several targets in different countries thanks to his multi-national affiliates placed worldwide.

Furthermore, Al Qaeda (especially after 9/11) presented a new and different organizational structure. The West's muscular response to 9/11 surprised Al Qaeda leaders, who expected a more moderate response, such as another cruise missile attack. The rapid turn of Afghan population against them, the tracking and drastic reduction of its funding, the increased monitoring of its communication members, the killing or arresting of several key leaders and the large-scale action of the international community seriously affected Al Qaeda's operations. In particular, its central command was neutralized operationally (Sageman, 2008).

Despite a drastic reduction of its power of influence, though, the organization was not defeated. With the central command struck down, the terrorist group was inevitably forced to change its architecture, but it proved to be ready to fulfill the task with an inventive and effective solution. The new structure was not only based on a strict hierarchy anymore but it assumed, on the contrary, the shape of a horizontal network, in which linked but independent cells could act autonomously under the same banner and were not necessarily forced to wait orders from above.

The War on Terror, in other words, had as a direct consequence the decentralization and dispersion of al-Qaeda, which was forced to split its network in two separate entities: on the one hand al-Qaeda "Central Command" remained based in the borders between Afghanistan and Pakistan; on the other, the group sent different factions led by veterans who were trained in Afghanistan to on to establish new al-Qaeda franchises elsewhere. These groups maintained strong links with al-Qaeda Central, like Al Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula (AQAP) or al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) (Saltman & Winter, 2014).

Terrorism scholar Marc Sageman has aptly coined the phrase "leaderless jihad" to describe the Islamic extremists who do not rely on direction or orders from al-Qaeda

or any organized terrorist group. According to Sageman, this new generation of Islamic extremists is quite different from its predecessors: It consists mostly of would-be terrorists, who, angered by the invasion of Afghanistan in the first place and then Iraq in 2003, aspire to join the movement and the men they hail as heroes. But it is nearly impossible for them to link up with al Qaeda Central, which was forced underground after 9/11. Instead, they form fluid, informal networks that are self-financed and self-trained. They have no physical headquarters or sanctuary, but the tolerant, virtual environment of the Internet that offers them a semblance of unity and purpose. They are part of a scattered, decentralized social structure, a “leaderless” jihad (Simon, 2011).

This global approach made prevention really hard and increased exponentially the unpredictability of the terror groups, which could fully exploit the mechanism and the advantages given by the increasing globalization.

The objective pursued by Al Qaeda, namely the creation of a single Islamic state under *Shari’a* (the Coranic law) represented a drastic innovation as well. In the attempt to realize this ambitious project, Bin Laden supported countless Islamic groups that were active in various states of the Sunni world, creating a unique and well-connected global network capable to carry out attacks independently all around the world.



Unlike the previous waves, which all lasted around forty years, the religious wave is considered by many scholars more enduring and most likely not ending by 2025. The reason for that could be the fact that religious terrorism, like its anti-colonialist predecessor, draws from a strong social base (much stronger than the social bases supporting anarchism and the New Left). Religious communities and religion in general are well-known for their longevity and this suggests that parents might well be able to transfer their belief structures to another generation.

Moreover, the religious terrorist wave, while it’s been strong in building public awareness and conducting strikes, has generally under-achieved on the political

front. Anti-colonialist terrorism weakened as independence was granted, even though that process unfolded largely because of a belief in self-determination rather than because of terrorism. Politically, the most vigorous religious terrorists can't be satisfied while the Middle East retains much of its current shape (Lyon & Huang, 2015).

The fourth wave of terrorism seems to endure because it did not exhausted what Rapoport called "energy"; its force to influence and inspire the creation of new groups is not over yet. The countless number of Jihadi groups that arose from the Arab spring, the persistence of Al Qaeda and the prodigious success of the Islamic State seem to prove this theory. In the next section it will be argued that, even if motivated by religion, the Caliphate went actually beyond Rapoport's definition and, due to its peculiar features and attitudes, it cannot be included in previous definition.

3.2 THE FIFTH WAVE OF TERRORISM AND JIHADIST GROUPS

3.2.1 Fifth Wave

Many scholars, such as Paul Berman and Robert Nalbandov, argued that rational analytical models cannot be applied to millenarian and irrational groups like the Islamic State. The theological imperative and the strong belief in mystical "prophetic" forces, in fact, make them unique and distinct not only from secular terror groups but also from previous religious terror organizations.

Fortunately theoretical frameworks exist that may explain large millenarian terror organizations. Jeffery Kaplan argues that such groups belong to a *fifth wave* of modern terrorism (Celso, 2015).

"The four waves is a theory of international terrorism, but it does not account for groups that begin on an international wave but which for some reason have turned

inward, cut ties to their international benefactors or ideological/religious bedfellows and sought to realize a utopian vision of a radically perfected society on the *local* level. The goal of such groups is the creation of a new man and a new woman comprising an ethnicity or tribal society that is the reconstitution of a lost Golden Age model or an entirely new world *in a single generation*" (Kaplan, 2008).

Fifth-wave movements find their origins in previous waves of terror, which gave them inspiration and ideology but towards which they have become disillusioned. For this reason, millenarian groups aim at the realization of an utopian society in the current world in which they live, for which they are ready to take any necessary step. Achieve this glorious goal simply becomes a way of life (Kaplan, 2008). Thanks to radicalization, this unachievable utopia becomes possible in the eyes of Fifth Wave terrorists.

Evidently, there have been cases in which terror, as a tactic to install existential fear, has been used to impose radical and totalitarian regime and to terrorize the entire globe. Still, no groups can be included in Kaplan's definition of Fifth Wave terrorism: Nazi Germany, for example, despite the imposition of a totalitarian and to certain extents millenarian regime, does not fit the definition because it came into power through democratic means, namely the elections of Hitler's National Socialist Workers Party. In a similar manner, Mao's Chinese Communist Party can at first sight be associated with a new form of millenarian terror. Also in this case, though, the definition is not fitting, because Mao's people were not terrorists and did not use terrorist tactics; they were rather peasants that came to power through a rural insurgency based on a guerrilla hit-and-run strategy. Even the following attempt to modernize Chinese economy and the Cultural Revolution, which led to massive number of death, cannot be considered as Fifth Wave features, because they miss intentionality (Kaplan, 2008).

According to Kaplan, the precursor of the modern fifth wave was the Khmer Rouge during the 70's in Cambodia. The genocidal actions of the Khmer Rouge, once the instruments of state power were in their control, were predictably based on both their stated ideology and their activities in areas of the countryside under their control. The attempt to destroy the old order and to form a radical new society (with

proclamation of a new revolutionary calendar beginning in “year zero”) through the brutalization of war that killed millions makes them the forerunner of the Fifth Wave of modern terrorism. With their defeat by the Vietnamese in 1979, the fifth wave, like Rapoport's second wave, saw an almost two decade long time lag between the disappearance of the Khmer Rouge, who served as the early avatar of the fifth wave, and the emergence of other terrorist groups that could suit the definition of millenarian and irrational groups with the desire to remake the world in their very same generation (Kaplan, 2008).

Fifth Wave terror groups present copious features that make them different from any previous interpretation of theoretical terrorism. Even if some of these distinctive qualities can be detected in other terrorist groups, no organizations can claim them all in once. Among those characteristics, Fifth Wave terror groups, which are always evolution of preexisting terror waves, present first of all a “hopeful” extreme idealism, a desired aim to recreate a past “Golden Age” by beginning the calendar anew through the destruction of the old world that will permit the creation of a pure new society. The rejection of the existing social-political order requires separation from society and rebellion against it. Secondly, Fifth Wave groups show an inability to compromise and the systematic use of force against internal dissidents through genocidal violence is endemic. Only a strict and severe vision of the ideology is allowed and minorities are persecuted. Finally, a particularistic emphasis on racial purity and ethno-tribal centrism, pragmatic reliance on foreign allies to enhance group survival, a charismatic and authoritarian leadership and an apocalyptic world view buttressed by intense religious commitment is also typical of these groups (Celso, 2015).

3.2.2 Fifth Wave, Jihadist Groups and the Islamic State

Kaplan is reluctant to include Jihadist Islamist groups in the Fifth Wave (worthy to mention that he elaborated his theory in 2008, well before the affirmation of the Islamic State). According to his view, those groups assume an international approach based on a quest for a united *Ummah* (the Islamic

community *in toto*) which clashes with Fifth wave's autarkic tendencies. Hence, he believes that rural isolation and a physical withdraw in the hinterland are central traits of the Fifth Wave terrorist groups.

The Islamic State, which is driven by ideology as its most preeminent force, present all the characteristic of Kaplan's Fifth Wave, but, since its declaration in June 2014, the group have unleashed an ultra-violent campaign to build up a transnational empire, a unified *Ummah*. Historically this quest has been challenged by localism, power struggle and divisions. After the Ottoman empire's dissolution, in fact, no one has proved to be able to restore the Caliphate and ethnic-tribal divisions have prevent its creation. Fragmentation, local variation and bloody civil wars have been the norm governing Islamic history, even before the consolidation of the Ottoman empire. This pattern has plagued jihadist movements which, despite their international vocation, are marked by localism, brutality and barbarism as systematic attempts to re-create Muhammad's mythic Medina.

Where they manage to establish a sort of governance, jihadist groups often impose drastic version of Islamic law (thanks to religious police to harshly enforce moral codes) in order to purify the "unclean" society and build their micro-communities into a Caliphate. The extensive use of *takfir*, the excommunication of co-religionists, is their most powerful mean to conduct mass slaughter. Its use has been progressively enlarged by clerics and religious scholars in order to free the would-be society from any opponents. Through these strategy accompanied by the massive use of extreme violence, extreme Islamist movements assume their own unique fifth wave-like vision and separated themselves from the rest of the Muslim society (Celso, 2015.)

More specifically, the Islamic State has done something unprecedented: repudiating colonial era borders and linking Northern Syria with Western Iraq, the IS evokes the glory of the Abbasid Caliphate that ruled for centuries in the Middle East. Confident in the prophetic inevitability of the Caliphate's resurrection, IS seeks the territorial cohesion of the empire and the perfection of *Shari'a* rule.

The organization led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi present all the features typical of the Fifth Wave terrorism mentioned above. First of all, the rejection of the existing social and political order is reflected by the repudiation of historic injustice of nation-state

boundaries created by colonial era Skyes-Picot accord that portioned the lands of the Caliphate. Besides, in the Islamic State's view, Assad and Maliki minority regimes in Syria and Iraq oppressed Sunni majorities under secular rule rather than *Shari'a's* divine rule. Furthermore, the idealization of a mythic past is identified in the creation of a modern version of Medieval Abbasid caliphate with al-Andalus and Ottoman Empire territorial extensions, in which all the apostate minorities are eliminated and the Sunni rightful rule is restored. The sectarian and ethnic cleansing is an important point of interest for the Islamic State: targeting of Kurds, Sufis, Shiites, Alawites, Yazidis and Christians, bombing their shrines and burial sites, kidnapping of women and children and forcing entire rival group's population to leave is part of IS meticulous strategy to "clean" the society. The use of unrestrained violence legitimated by *takfir*, also towards fellow Sunnis and opposing jihadist groups, is another landmark that makes IS part of the Fifth Wave of terrorism. Finally, the effort for the development of a new society is carried out intensely and vigorously according to a very strict interpretation of Quranic principles (Celso, 2015).

As pointed out by this detailed comparison between the Islamic State and Kaplan's Fifth Wave of terrorism, it becomes clear that the al-Baghdadi's group went well beyond the fourth wave of religious terrorism. However, also the definition given by Kaplan appears to be tight and not comprehensive of all IS aspects. For example, unlike the Khmer Rouge, which were proud to occupy Cambodia's seat at the United Nations, the Islamic State refuses to recognize an authority other than God's. This form of diplomacy is in their eyes *shirk* (polytheism) and would immediate cause to condemn its leader Baghdadi (Wood, 2015).

So, did the terror group go even beyond one of the most recent and accurate analysis of the newest form of terrorism?

3.3 ISLAMIC STATE: A NEW FORM OF TERRORISM?

As one can deduct from this analysis, the Islamic State's practices do not represent an entire innovation. Brutal violence, bloody methods and extremist strategies are, regrettably, not new. On the contrary, IS rules and system present a strong connection and find their basis in the religious wave's tradition and especially in its evolution in jihadist terrorism. The Islamic State, however, proved to be able to redefine Islamic terrorism and distinguish itself from every previous group, maturing and developing from the same matrix rather than breaking up with the tradition.

3.3.1 The Only Legitimate Caliphate

First of all, one of the feature the make the terrorist group unique and distinctive from any other jihadist organization (or terror organization in general) is the impressive large-scale portion of territory that was under its direct control. By June 2014, when Mosul (the second-largest city in Iraq) fell under its authority, the Islamic State could boast a segment of land stretching from Mosul in the East to the outskirts of Aleppo in Syria in the West; a fraction of land bigger than many European states (McCants, 2015). In stark contrast to other jihadist groups that have, in the past, taken over swathes of land but then continued to operate more or less covertly, like AQIM in the Sahel and AQAP in Yemen for example, IS has been operating openly and successfully (Saltman & Winter, 2014).

What is astonishing is the fact that the Islamic State, through an effective control over its territory, either accepted or imposed with force, is no less than a *de facto* state. This reality is evidenced by the attempt of its leaders to legitimate its governance by various means, from extreme and brutal violence to popularity and religious theories. Thanks to a profound and unprecedented instability in the region caused by the prolonged Syrian civil war and ethnic-tribal tensions emerged from sectarian politics, the Islamic State was able to establish itself as one of the most important actor in the Middle East turmoil and imposed its influence as no other terrorist organization did before.

“Here, the flag of the Islamic State, the flag of monotheism, rises and flutters. Its shade covers land from Aleppo to Diyala. Beneath it the walls of the tyrants have been demolished, their flags have fallen, and their borders have been destroyed... It is a dream that lives in the depths of every Muslim believer. It is a hope that flatters in the heart of every mujahid monotheist. It is the Caliphate. It is the Caliphate – the abandoned obligation of the era... Now the Caliphate has returned. We ask God the exalted to make it in accordance with the prophetic method.” (Adanani’s declaration in A. Zelin, 2014)

The claim of the title of only legitimate Caliphate, furthermore, is another huge step forward for IS with respect to its jihadist predecessors. There had not been a credible claimant to the office of caliph in the Muslim world since the disintegration of the Ottoman empire after World War I. Apart from individual attempts to establish the Caliphate throughout the 18th century, which all ended very soon after ridiculous declarations and silly strategies (such as excommunicating every opponents from the beginning). It is essential to understand the importance and the significance that the title of Caliphate has especially for Sunni Muslims. Hence, the dissolution of the Ottoman sultanate was perceived as the definitive victory of the West over the Muslim political power. From that moment on and with the development of radical ideas which led to the surfacing of jihadist groups, the ultimate goal of extremist Muslims has always been the restoration of the Caliphate, considered the symbol of Islamic power, prestige and importance.

By establishing a government and declaring it a Caliphate, the Islamic State totally overturned the traditional attitude of Sunni Muslims, who considered the ultimate goal as remote and distant. No previous theory denied the inevitability of the Caliphate one day, but the current situation did not permit it yet: either the West influence was strong enough to prevent it or the Muslim community too disunited to achieve it. Unlike any other rebel pretender in the Middle East, however, the Islamic State had the money, fighters, weapons and lands to make a plausible cause that it was the Caliphate reborn. Most Sunni Muslims may have rejected it as a sham, but

they could not easily dismiss it as a joke when it declared itself a Caliphate in 2014. The Islamic State was simply too powerful (McCants, 2015).

The exclusive nature of such a declaration was to be considered also as a direct challenge to Al Qaeda's legitimacy. It is inevitable, in fact, that affirming the uniqueness of the title of legitimate caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi expected the whole Muslim world (including his previous boss from Al Qaeda) to pledge alliance and subordinate to its newborn empire. Bin Laden's organization, as a Salafi-jihadist group, had obviously the same goal. Unlike the Islamic State, though, Al Qaeda was more prudent in declaring such an ambitious objective and Bin Laden himself preferred to wait a more opportune moment to establish the Caliphate. Bin Laden viewed his terrorism as a prologue to a caliphate he did not expect to see in his lifetime. His organization was flexible, operating as a geographically diffuse network of autonomous cells. The Islamic State, by contrast, requires territory to remain legitimate, and a top-down structure to rule it (Wood, 2015). In Al Qaeda's view, the founding of a Muslim empire was more a long-term and almost platonic achievement, which could be reached only with a united Muslim community and a defeated West. The Islamic State, on the contrary, has gone from being a terrorist group to a terrorist *de facto* state that purports to be a pristine Islamic utopia with the claim of being the only legitimate Caliphate which made it appealing to extremists who reached it in thousands (Saltman & Winter, 2014).

3.3.2 Millenarianism

The lawlessness that dominated most of the Arab countries after 2011 "spring" and the social-political turmoil that followed the event boosted the most inventive apocalyptic imagination (McCants, 2015). Theories circulating online that Hosni Mubarak, the former president of Egypt, had really been the Antichrist announced in old Islamic sacred texts. Others swore they had witnessed the presence of the End-Time heroes participating the rallies in Egypt and Tunisia. According to a 2012 poll among Arabs from different countries, half of them were certain of the imminent appearance of the Mahdi, the Muslim savior. The growing

bloodsheds happening in al-Sham (earlier Arab region identified with modern Syria), mentioned by many prophecies as the gathering place for the final battles of the apocalypse against the infidels, made the doomsday interpretation of events even harder to resist. As stated by an Australian converted Muslim, Musa Cerantonio, “Syria is very significant for devotees, since it is the designated place of the future of the Muslim community”; according to another Sunni prophecy Al Sham is the land of gathering for the Day of Judgment” and Damascus and its surroundings are mentioned several times as relevant places during the Apocalypse (McCants, 2015).

The attention and emphasis on predictive religious prophecies as a strategy for convincing and recruiting are not new in extremist religious movements. Other jihadist groups, especially, have intensively used myths and legends in their propaganda as a powerful mean to grow their influence among believers. None of them, however, exploited the theme of the end of the world as much as the Islamic State, which made it a central and always-present argument in its propaganda. Members and supporters believe that the events that are currently happening in Syria and Iraq are actually the realization of the battles preceding the End of the Times prophecy. Any significant progress, either on the frontline or in other fields, is attributable to specific part present in the sacred scriptures. Islamic State’s religious scholars find no difficulties in associating any type of event to specific prophecies due to the huge number of interpretations of the *Hadith* (Mohammad’s words, actions and habits) that developed throughout the highly divisive and conflicting Islamic history. Moreover, their relevance to the current conflict heightened by the fact that these prophecies mention the same places of today’s battles, which makes them perfectly suitable for young jihadists. “O youth of Islam! Go forth to the blessed land of Sham! Come to your state to raise its edifice. Come for the Great Battles that are about to transpire” declared the Caliph short after the state’s foundation (McCants, 2015).

The theological weight of the prophecies, coupled with the initial success and their convincing application to reality, is not to be considered a matter of secondary importance in IS success. Its ability in exploiting such a persuasive way is undoubtedly a distinctive feature that makes the Islamic State unique and different from its predecessors (Saltman & Winter, 2014).

3.3.3 Relevance as a “glocal” actor

Controlling 423 miles on Iraq and Syria at the moment of its establishment declaration (June 29th, 2014), the Islamic State has gone far in implementing its governance on the ground. The mix of “sticks and carrots” methods, brutal tactics, astute recruitment and meticulous planning made it possible for IS to credibly consider itself as a proper state. Another stark difference that makes the Islamic State unique is therefore the acceptance of its ruling by a large part of population. No other jihadist or terrorist organization in modern history, in fact, was able to exercise authority on such a considerable number of people.

The main cause of this accomplishment is the absence of government in Iraq and Syria and the general lawlessness which has been affecting the region for so many years. The primary reason why the Islamic State was so successful and rapid in achieving this result is to be identified in its complete freedom of action in that area. First of all, it must be recognized that IS brought a sort of stability in a moment of extreme destabilization and harsh conflicts: local population did prefer even the most severe and rigid Islamic order, which was somehow able to make the area more stable than in its absence, to complete chaos.

Moreover, the Islamic State did recognize the importance of building alliances with other Sunni factions and local tribes, many of which it would normally perceive as enemies. In Iraq, it fully exploited the hostility towards the government forces of Baghdad of a large part of population and especially the feeling of hatred of the Sunni tribes towards the Shi'ia rulers. It managed “relationship of convenience” with other armed groups, which also had a strategic interest in pledging temporary alliance with IS: for example, it appointed two Ba'thist former Iraqi Army generals, Azhar al-Obeidi and Ahmed Abd al-Rashid, as governor of respectively Mosul and Tikrit. (Lister, 2014).

Likewise, in Syria the Islamic State proved to be able to become the biggest actor fighting against Assad, merging under its umbrella different tribes and militias who have subordinated themselves to IS rule because it makes strategic sense to

(Saltman & Winter, 2014). Assad did have an interest in allowing IS to expand and for its influence to divide and weaken the opposition, but the regime's immediate interests were also focused further south, in Damascus, Homs, southern Aleppo, and the Qalamoun region. Meanwhile, ISIS interests were focused on the northeast, where its principal adversaries were opposition groups and the Kurdish YPG (Lister, 2014).

In addition, IS tried to legitimate to certain extents its governing providing public services, such as post offices, mosques, food assistance and sanitary services. On the other hand, the Islamic State differentiates itself from other terrorist group for its extreme, abhorrent and shocking authoritarian punishment and cruelties on every opponent. It has been applying the Islamic punishments (*hudud*) frequently and intensively in public (whereas countries like Saudi Arabia for example prefer to carry out these practices undercover) and it has been performing them with inventive, like in the case of the Jordanian pilot mentioned in chapter two. The Islamic State showed no mercy not only to the people living under its rule but especially towards rival groups that did not accept its authority or decided to not cooperate with it: kidnappings, mass executions and mass graves, people buried alive, slavery and raping are daily routine for IS soldiers, who are proud to exhibit their deeds in their propaganda.

Finally, the Islamic State has been the only jihadist terrorist groups that was able to survive (for a significant period of time at least) to the intervention of foreign powers. The former, in fact, has been the ultimate cause of every Al Qaeda's attempt to establish a government, as seen in chapter two. IS, on the contrary, even if seriously affected by the international coalition's air strikes and ground operations which dramatically reduced its area of control in the last year, has proved to be able to reject ground forces through terrorist and guerilla-like attacks which slowed down the retreat and discouraged the enemy. Countless and resounding terrorist slaughters in the rest of the world, moreover can be seen as a retaliation for taking part in the international coalition. While in previous cases the foreign intervention promptly marked the end of any terrorist governance, the Islamic State is the only actor which was able to strike back, causing painful massacres of civilians.

To conclude, the group, thanks to its ability in managing its “external governance”, became the most important terror organization in the planet, overshadowing its jihadist rivals. Expanding its territories through the declaration of provinces, attracting a countless number of foreign fighters and inspiring so many attacks carried out by individuals are part of its unparalleled success. Its capacity to remain at the center of the international agenda for such a prolonged period of time has no precedent in the history of modern terrorism.



The deep analysis of the peculiar features of IS in chapter two demonstrated that the Islamic State can be consider a departure from modern conceptions of terrorism. First of all, it re-shaped the interpretation of global jihad: unlike Al Qaeda, which has been promoting the spreading of affiliate groups around the world, the Islamic State focused on state-building struggle, encouraging Muslims to reach the only legitimate Caliphate and to be part of its glorious expansion. Its success, thanks to the actual control of land and population, made it so attractive that an unprecedented number of foreign fighters left their countries to come to the holy land. Its progresses have been strongly achieved through a strongly convincing ideology, which, being promoted by well-known and respected religious scholars, proved to be an extremely powerful tool to increase its affiliates (women included).

Unlike other groups before it, IS does not rely on private donation, but on the contrary developed a sophisticated and advanced financing system which guaranteed it autonomy and fortune. Based on kidnappings, antiquities black market and mostly on oil and gas smuggling, IS financial structure permitted the terrorist group to affirm itself as one of the most powerful actor in the Middle East.

Unlike any other group before it, IS developed an impressive propaganda apparatus in terms of quantity and quality, which provided portraits of the daily lives of its inhabitants and fighters in such a detailed and constant manner never seen before. Decentralized actors on social media platforms are humanizing the jihadist experience, lowering the threshold for potential recruits to feel comfortable, and

find comradery, with IS members. More important than anything else, though, it is facilitating the recruitment process of foreigners (Saltman & Winter, 2014).

Furthermore, the rigorous investigation of the specific distinctive elements presented in this chapter, makes possible to assert that the Islamic State is certainly not just a traditional terrorist organization. On the contrary, it went well beyond previous terrorist models, credibly declaring itself as a state with a growing immigrant population, progressively conventional army, outstanding propaganda machine and an independent financial structure (Saltman & Winter, 2014). In spite of these qualitative improvements and its statehood claim, IS core bases remain rooted in terrorism: therefore, the Islamic State represents a unique and unprecedented case study which is transforming existing theories on modern terrorism.

CONCLUSION

It is complicated to express definitive considerations with regard to a phenomenon which is still evolving. Nevertheless, this work was aimed at giving a contribution in the analysis of the self-proclaimed Islamic State, which is in the first place a terrorist group. Even if it presents characteristics which are common to other terrorist organizations (in particular jihadists groups), it is at the same time marked by several peculiarities, which make it a unique and unprecedented case in the history of modern terrorism.

Through a deep analysis of the distinctive elements that mark IS structure, this work encompasses and highlights all the aspects that make the group different from previous terrorist organizations. The first chapter focuses on the historical factors, both internal and endogenous, which made possible the rise of the Islamic State as a key actor in the global scenario. The extraordinary circumstances that marked Middle East and especially Iraq in the last twenty years played a decisive role in the group's success: in normal conditions, the Islamic State would not have been able to assert itself and most likely would not even exist. Therefore, the historical sphere is examined extensively in order to highlight its importance in relations to IS emergence.

The second chapter describes the Islamic State's peculiar aspects. Actually, most of them are not entirely new and are recognizable in previous jihadist terrorist groups. The point of the thesis is to analyze these common aspects and link them to the case of IS, highlighting the variations which make the group unique and different. The investigation of the distinctive elements starts with the ideology, which is one of the main driver of the Islamic State's strategy and organization. The group adapted an uncompromising and extremist approach, which has its roots in the Salafist doctrine, an ultra-conservative version of the Sunni branch. What makes the group unique is the presumption of representing the "true and pure" Islam and the only possible authority for the Muslim community as a whole. The messianic, hard-line and inflexible vision gives to IS supporters an over-simplified image of the world, in which "grey areas" do not exist and everything is either good or evil. Obviously, who do not accept this relentless school of thought is an infidel who deserve nothing but dead.

Understanding this “absolute” intransigent ideology is pivotal to explain not only the Islamic State’s unprecedented use of violence, but also its strategy, appeal and determination.

Another essential aspects is the group’s capacity to govern vast portions of territories in Syria and Iraq. The Islamic State proved to able to provide basic state-like services in areas affected by prolonged upheavals and civil war. The internal governance, despite its intransigency and ferocity, is determinant for the group’s legitimacy. IS was capable to exploit lawlessness and instability to impose its authority which, no matter how ruthless, represented the only valid alternative for millions of citizens living under its rule. The Islamic State managed to apply its ideology in the real world, administering the provision of basic services (such as water, electricity, food) and assistance, together with the implantation of totalitarian and repressive measures such as indoctrination programs, Islamic courts and medieval-style horrible punishments in public spaces for “unbelievers”. The imposition of authority in a huge portion of territory with almost eight million people reinforced the Islamic State’s narrative of having established the Caliphate in accordance with the Prophet and his early believers. Moreover, the acquisition of lands allowed the group to freely carry out its projects, posing a threat to the entire world.

The Islamic State has been defined the “richest terror group in history” (Atwan, 2015). The financial autonomy is certainly another element that permitted the group to achieve its goals. IS, unlike Al Qaeda or other terrorist organizations, has been self-sufficient for many years. Thanks to a diversification of its business activities, it has been able to finance its ambitious project, namely the establishment of the Caliphate, with all the consequences that it brings. The Islamic State controls an impressive number of oil fields in Iraq and Syria, and obviously the illicit sale of oil, which is smuggled in Kurdistan, Turkey and Jordan, represents the major source of income. Other important financial resources are the abundant antiquities and artifacts present in Iraq and Syria, which are sold in the black market in the West, and other criminal activities such as kidnappings and extortions. Private donations represent only a tiny percentage of IS total income.

The territorial expansion achieved in the last two years was made possible by an organized and impressively flexible “army”. The IS military structure is, in fact, another determinant of its success. The group operates simultaneously as a terrorist, insurgent, and light infantry force. The extreme versatility and rapidness permitted the Islamic State to adapt to different circumstances, exploiting the element of surprise in its offensives and consolidating its territorial gains through a clever mix of military techniques. IS multiple strategy allows the group to face at the same time different situations, from frontal battles with national armies, to other rival rebel organizations with insurgent guerilla-like warfare and classic terrorist attacks on civilian targets. No other terrorist organization in history could claim such a professional, flexible and successful military force, whose leadership is almost entirely composed by former members of Saddam’s army.

The claim to represent the only authority for the entire Islamic community intrinsically calls for an international approach, in order address to every Muslim in the world. For this reason, the Islamic State developed an effective system to manage its “external governance”: also in this case, it cleverly exploited different situations adapting to local circumstances. In unstable areas with preexisting jihadist networks, such as Libya, Egypt and Afghanistan, the group declared provinces: these territories received direct orders from IS leadership and became actual expansion of its territory, assuming the same type of governance and strategies. In order to broaden its message, the Islamic State asked every Muslim to reach the promise land: an unprecedented number of foreign fighters answered the call and travelled to the territories of the Caliphate. Moreover, the group encouraged Muslim who had no possibility to physically go to Syria and Iraq to carry out individual attacks in the land of the infidels: the so-called phenomenon of lone-wolves is another aspect which distinguish the Islamic State, which has been able to cause an unprecedented number of terrorist attacks without any coordination from above. The adaptable approach for specific situation is what makes IS a distinctive terror organization.

The extraordinary recruitment ability has been fueled by a unique propaganda machine, which exploited modern technologies like no one before. The sophisticated and massive use of internet and social media (especially Twitter) represents a qualitative improvement that permitted the Islamic State to consolidate its influence

not only in the territory under its rule but in the global scenario and is therefore broadly examined at the end of the second chapter.

The deep analysis of all these aspects is meant to make clear how preexisting elements undergo such a qualitative change that is not possible to include the group in traditional terrorist organizations' patterns.

The last chapter compares traditional theories of terrorism with the Islamic State, in order to verify if the latter can be included in existing terrorist schemes. Starting from Rapoport's fourth waves, it investigates if recent theories of modern terrorism can apply to IS. The conclusion is that, even if the Islamic State presents existing characteristics and does not introduce something new *per se*, the qualitative improvement of the features which it shares with previous terrorist groups is such as to be considered a unique and distinctive form modern terrorism.

While it will always remain a terrorist organization at its most basic level, the group achieved its explicit goal to establish and consolidate a self-sufficient Islamic State, capable to govern, defend and even expand its sphere of influence through conventional and unconventional methods. "Islamic State's achievements on the ground lend it unprecedented credibility. After all, it succeeded in dissolving the Sykes-Picot imposed border between Iraq and Syria, something the sloganeering partisan of Marxism, Ba'athism or pan-Arabism were unable to achieve in the intervening century" (Atwan, 2015). Its governance model proved to be particularly effective in unstable environments; its multiple military strategy ensures both capacity to defend and to carry out offences; its propaganda and external governance methods allowed it to reach an impressive number of people and countries and manage relations with distant provinces.

The Islamic State is not a mere terrorist group or a real state; it represents rather an hybrid flexible model capable to be at the same time a recognized reality with a precise geographical, historical and ideological position with a hidden, intangible and elusive terror strategy. The ultimate goal of establishing the Caliphate is strengthened by an uncompromising and firm ideology which contributes to fortify its authority over the Islamic community. The utopian objective of creating an ideal world, eliminating entire categories of people is not new to us and we are sadly aware of the consequences of the totalitarian regimes' attempts of achieving this

goal. The Islamic State is pursuing the same end, and the more it will continue with its successful strategy, the more its actions will be seen as legitimate.

To conclude, IS is a unique and innovative case in the category of terrorist organizations. Currently, it is not possible to foresee what the final outcome of this phenomenon will be. Nonetheless, taking into consideration the recent loss of ground in Syria, Iraq and Libya, the decreasing number of foreign fighters and Obama reassurance to the Pentagon that the Islamic State will “inevitably be defeated” (Olidort, 2016), it is plausible to hypothesize that it will be soon be crushed by the international coalition intervention. On the other hand, however, it is historically proved that the ideas which inspired movements and terrorist organizations often outlived even after the disappearance of the very same concepts which animated them, sometimes fomenting new initiatives many years after.

This consideration can apply to the Islamic State as well: “while it will eventually expire as a state, it will continue to “inspire” terrorism as an idea with lethal implications” (Olidort, 2016).

Its peculiarities, innovative features, distinctive methods of action and expression, the radicalism of its principles and goals will certainly endure, regardless of the destiny of the organization.

GLOSSARY

AYATOLLAH: Literally “Sign of God”. Originally, was the title assigned to the most preeminent representative of the Shiite clerics community, as the reincarnated Imam. The appointment is decided by other religious scholars, by virtue of his authoritative capacities and knowledge of sacred texts. With the 1979 Iranian Revolution, however, the title assumed a more politicized connotation, which, in contrast with the tradition, allowed self-appointments as in the case of Ayatollah Khomeini, who self-proclaimed himself as spiritual and political leader of the Shiite community and direct sign of God (Chebel, 1997).

BAY’A: Literally “sale”, indicates a pledge of allegiance. It refers to a juridical binding act which recognize the spiritual and political authority of a leader. It was documented for the first time when Arab tribes submitted to the Prophet Mohammed in Medina.

DAWAA: Literally “call, plea, address”. It refers to the proselytism of Islam and it is considered a duty of every Muslim. Put differently, it is religious outreach through peaceful means in order to spread Islam.

FITNAH: Multiple-meanings word which can assume the significance of sort of upheaval, tribulation, chaos or secession. It has two main meanings, namely “persecution” (situation in which believers are harassed because of their religious convictions) and refers also to a situation which misleads from God’s oneness. It can indicate therefore the causes of fragmentation and discordance which led to a rift within the Muslim community.

HADITH: Literally “report, account, narrative”. Second only to the Quran as source of reference for Islamic jurisprudence, they report the words, actions and habits of the Prophet Muhammad. Unlike Quran, which was drafted right after the dead of the Prophet, the hadiths were collected after many generations and from different locations. For this reason different branches of Islam developed specific selections

and interpretations of the hadiths, which became therefore one of the main cause of disagreement within the Islamic community (Brown, 2009).

HUDUD: The term refers to the punishments present in the *Shari'a* which are commanded by God. According to the Islamic law, these provisions are carried out on the ground of fixed crimes, namely adultery, fornication, ill-founded accusation of illicit sex (fail to present four eyewitnesses), apostasy, provoking rebellions against the Caliphate, robbery and theft (Campo, 2009). The *hudud* consists of several practices such as lashing, amputation of hands, crucifixion and stoning to death and are performed in public spaces. The evidentiary standards that the punishments required were so high that their application was not only unfrequented but almost impossible. At Mohamed's time, they were considered as a mean to deter rather than a concrete legislative practice. Currently, *hudud* are implemented in Muslim nations that follow a strict interpretation of *Shari'a*, such as Iran and Saudi Arabia (Esposito, 2004).

JIHAD: Perhaps the most controversial term in Islamic culture, it literally means "struggling, persevering, striving". Generally, it has two interpretations: the "greater" jihad refers to an inner spiritual struggle aimed at reaching the perfect faith, while the "lesser" jihad indicates the outer physical struggle both to consolidate Islam and to expand outside the land of the Caliphate. The divisive development of the Islam led to very different interpretation. "Defensive Jihad" is broadly recognized not only as the right but rather as the obligation that Muslims have to defend their lands from oppressors. On the other, others consider "offensive jihad" as an obligation as well; therefore the military struggle aimed at expanding Islam is justified and legitimate. However, the concept of Jihad has been widely exploited both by Muslims and the West in order to serve their scopes and justify their policies (Morgan, 2010).

JIZYA: It refers to a tax of "compensation" which is paid by every non-Muslim living under the Islamic authority. Only believers of monotheistic religions mentioned in the Quran were allowed to live in the Caliphate's territories and were obliged to pay

this special contribution in order to receive protection, freely practice their religion and be exempted from Zakat and military service. In the Ottoman empire, the Jizya was abolished only at the end of the 19th century.

MADRASSAS: In the Islamic world, refers to any type of educational institution for the study of Islamic religion.

MUJAHIDEEN: Indicates fighters committed in the struggle for Jihad. In a broader sense, it can be interpreted without a religious connotation but as general effort for something honest and magnanimous, such as the liberation of the country from foreign invaders.

SALAF: The term refers to the first three generations of Muslims, namely the generations of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions, their successors, and the successors of the successors.

SHARI'A: Indicates the Islamic sacred law. It can be interpreted in a metaphysical perspective (the Law of God unknown by human kind) and in a more pragmatic way, applying it in current legal system. The two most important sources for the Shari'a are the Quran and the Sunna.

SHIRK: The root word of this term is "to associate". According to Islam, to associate something with regard to the oneness of God is one of the worst sin, which is incompatible with Islam. Put differently, shirk refers to polytheism, the major offence to any monotheistic religion.

SUNNA: Collection of the totality of the hadiths. Covering most of the aspects of the Prophet's life, the Sunna became the major source of legitimacy and assumed a normative value. It refers to norms and behaviors of the first period of Islam (Mohammed and his prophets' life).

TAKFIR: Refers to the practice of excommunication of a Muslim by another Muslim, by virtue of a major sin or abandonment of Islam (apostasy). The traditional consequence of declaring someone infidel is the capital punishment. The authority which is allowed to takfir is a major source of dispute within the Islamic community. According to the majority of Muslims, however, only the Prophet himself or the State which represents the Ummah have the authority to declared someone as a non-believer. Moreover, ill-founded takfir accusation is a major forbidden act (Brown, 2009).

TAWHID: Is the pillar of Islam and refers to the uniqueness and unity of God. It is the foundation of monotheism and asserts the concept of Unitarian. From this concept derives the belief that only God can be worshipped and the strict separation line between believers and disbelievers (Philips, 2005).

UMMAH: Indicates the Islamic community as whole, regardless of ethnicity, language or culture. The community of believers refers exclusively to religion.

WILAYAH: “Governorate, province, district, region”. Indicates an administrative division, which is still present today in many countries which received an Islamic influence.

ZAKAT: Is one of the five pillars of Islam and it is part of the “purification” process. It is therefore a completely separated practice from charity. The action consists in a devolution of one’s income to the most needy categories of people identified in the Quran. Once managed by the Caliphate, it is currently handled on voluntary basis, but it still represents one of the most important practice for Muslims (Visser, 2009).

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SUMMARY

After the infamous 9/11 terrorist attack, our society has witnessed a crumble of certainties and values which radically changed our way of life. Economy and finance, security and privacy issues and international relations had radically changed. Most of these changes have been originated by new expressions of terrorism, in most of the cases by Islamist jihadist organizations which caused inconceivable migrants and refugees flows which are affecting the whole planet. This process is, in its turn, largely rooted in the breaking up of wide areas of the Arab world that led to disintegration of entire nations and communities.

A deep knowledge of Islamic terrorism proves to be extremely complex, mainly because of the difficulty to understand the convoluted mosaic of contrasting cultures and traditions which this specific matter presents. The precipitations of the events started with the so called “Arab Spring”, whose beginning itself is hard to collocate. January 4th, 2011, can be considered a significant and important date in this regard: in that day Mohamed Bouazizi, a Tunisian salesman, burned himself in Tunis to protest against the oppression of the government. The consequent popular uprisings expanded not only throughout the country but well beyond the Tunisian borders, reaching large part of Arab countries at the end of January. By November, four Middle East long-lasting dictatorships felt down already.

Today’s scenario is striking: almost every Arab country, either monarchy or republic, has been affected by the phenomenon of the “Arab Spring”. In particular, states which have experienced the most radical upheavals, namely Iraq, Syria and Libya, had been a product of the Western powers drawing board after World War I. Countries deriving by the defeated Ottoman Empire became the war booty of France and the United Kingdom, which determined new territorial boundaries without taking into consideration national homogeneity and specific tribal divisions. For example, Iraq originated from the unification of three Ottoman provinces: Sunni, Shiia and Kurdish found themselves to live under the same flag from one day to another. Also Italy, which took part to the imperialistic divisions some years later, united three regions of North Africa to create the Libyan colony.

With the end of the dictatorial regimes, which somehow kept together religious, ethnic and cultural differences, the old and complex social organizational system of these areas, composed by countless clans and tribes, re-emerged. The chaotic and confused situation represented the perfect fertile ground for new and varied form of terrorism, which have been able to firmly establish and develop. It is not a coincidence that already in 2002 Muammar Ghaddafi declared in an interview that the actor who would have benefit the most from U.S. intervention in Iraq in such a complex environment would have been Osama Bin Laden and his organization.

The objective of this work is first of all to provide an accurate portrait of the causes that led to the establishment and development of the Islamic State, currently the most powerful terrorist actor in the planet. A deep analysis of the organization will be provided, with particular consideration of its more peculiar aspects. More importantly, the aim of this work is to establish if this unprecedented form of terror organization can be considered a new phenomenon or if it possible to include it in any previous theoretical definition of modern terrorism.

It will be pointed out that, even if to certain extent the “Caliphate” presents features known by precedent form of terrorism, this hybrid organization is a different and unique case study.

IDEOLOGY

The Islamic State is first of all an idea, which has its roots in a strong, convincing and very specific ideology, which developed from a specific branch of Islam. As Major General Michael K. Nagata, special commander for U.S. Central Command, confessed in late December 2014: “We do not understand the movement [i.e., the Islamic State], and until we do, we are not going to defeat it.” Of the group’s ideology he said: “We have not defeated the idea. We do not even understand the idea” (Bunzel, 2015).

Ignoring its religious motivations would lead to an inadequate comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon; for this reason, ideology is to be considered of the utmost importance and as the main driver of the terrorist group’s strategy.

The origins of IS doctrines can be detected in the branch of the Sunni school of thought called Salafism. The modern conception of this ultra-conservative doctrine, which advocates a return to the *Salaf* (the pious ancestors' way of life) emerged in the second half of the 19th century in Egypt, but its origins can be traced back well before that period. The foundation of this juridical-theological school of thought dates back to the 9th century, when its founder Ibn Hanbal stressed the importance of accepting the sacred scriptures simply as they are, without ambiguous interpretation (Basanese, 2015). After spreading in all the Muslim world, during the 14th century, Salafist doctrine split in two different interpretations which persisted till today: one ascetic, which refuses any contact with modernity and seeks to avoid any contamination with the corrupted world; and one marked by an active and concrete effort to re-establish the Golden Age of the pious ancestors, which can be identified in the figure of Ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328). The Syrian religious scholar amply advocated *Jihad* (conceived as holy war) as a mean to imitate the Prophet's life and gestures. According to him, in order to be a "true Muslim" it is necessary not only to recognize the oneness of God (*Tawhid*) and Mohammed as his messenger, but to strictly emulate the Prophet and his people concrete behaviors and practices (Basanese, 2015).

At the centre of the Salafist theology is the concept of *Tawhid*, God's oneness. This conception does not limit itself to simply respect monotheism, but, on the contrary, it encompasses a wide range of applications. Only what is deriving from God can be worshipped, therefore is it strictly prohibited to enforce man-made laws or venerate saints or sacred sites which are not directly related to God, for example. The opposite concept of *Tawhid* is *Shirk*, which is used by Salafists to describe the extensive spectrum of issues which are not addressed in traditional Islamic literature. Due to this doctrine, also law interpretation is based exclusively on Mohammed's example as the unique legitimate source of reference. This approach, therefore, condemns even the Muslim tradition and practices which developed after the Prophet's death, since they arrived after the "pious ancestors" era (Olidort, 2015).

The modern conception of Salafism, as a political movement in order to establish Islamic law in modern states, dates back to 1924, when the Ottoman Empire, the last

Caliphate, was officially abolished. For the first time in history, there was no religious government or authority to lead the Islamic community; this absence reinforced Salafism narrative based on the belief that for authentic Muslim guidance one must look at the very origins of the religion (Olidort, 2015). This assumption was emphasized by the fact that after the fall of the Ottoman Empire, Western powers arbitrary divided territories in the Middle East and exercised intrusive policies in Arab countries. Salafism, therefore, developed and gain momentum as a Muslim political response to Western interference.

modern Salafist ideology which developed after the fall of the Ottoman Empire can be divided in three different categories, which do not differ in their theology or legal worldview but rather in the way they interpret the role of politics. Purists or Quietists' efforts are aimed exclusively at the religious aspects of Islam and strictly separate religion from the social-political world. Reformist approach aims at spreading the Quranic message through political parties and associations, intended as peaceful instruments to achieve power. Politics is therefore considered a modern mean to achieve and establish the Islamic law. Finally, jihadist Salafism presents a stricter and very narrow view of religion: religious norms and regulation should be applied literally and cannot be discussed or interpreted, in particular those regarding the authority and power. *Jihad*, intended as a violent instrument to achieve power, is the primary mean which becomes at the same time an ideological and physical obligation

As it is possible to evince, the main cause of the violence and extremism is to be considered only the Jihadist Salafism, which separates itself both from Sunni and other Salafist ideologies. The main strength of this specific doctrine lies in the reduction of the complexity of reality to elementary choices; Jihadists describe a world limited to Manichean choices which opposes good, pure and religious people to evil forces identified with non-Muslim or even moderated Muslim. They promote a universal interpretation of history and a sense of superiority of their members, who are seen as the chosen ones. Jihadist Salafism advocates an absolute and always-right knowledge, which must be accepted by everyone and cannot be contradicted.

The Islamic State borrowed its ideology from the Salafi-jihadist approach of Salafism, which is in its turn a fundamentalist interpretation of Sunni Islam. However, the group has been able to transform and interpret this doctrine even further in order to reach its goals. IS, in fact, exploits religious ideology to promote its role as the only rightful leader of the Muslim community and to affirm that the Caliphate is the exclusive authority allowed to define what Islam truly is. “By extension, as the IS view goes, anyone residing outside of IS territory or who refuses to defend its cause is not a true Muslim. Islamic concepts are reframed to include *bay’a* (obedience, submission) to the Islamic State as a legally-binding obligation” (Olidort, 2016).

More specifically, Baghdadi’s group is absolutely uncompromising on doctrinal matters, prioritizing the promotion of an unforgiving interpretation of hyper-Salafi thought (Bunzel, 2015). From this approach derive detrimental implications, such as a stricter and harsher application of the *hudud* (the Islamic punishments mentioned in the sacred scriptures) and a genocidal anti-Shia perspective: fellow Muslims who do not submit to IS are, according to IS, apostates on equal terms of other religions’ followers.

Another element which the Islamic State’s unique ideology is its capacity to exploit the theme of the End of the World. Due to the upheavals which are upsetting the region, especially Syria, IS can justify its messianic religious message: battles are happening in the very places mentioned in the sacred scriptures’ prophecies and Sunni and Shi’ia are at war, both appealing to their own versions of prophecies to justify their politics (McCants, 2015). References to the End of Times, for this reason, fill Islamic State’s propaganda and are a central point in the recruiting strategy, proving once again the important role that ideology plays.

To recap, “IS possesses a totalitarian, millenarian worldview that eschews political pluralism, competition, and diversity of thought. Baghdadi and his associates criminalize and excommunicate free thought, and the idea that there should exist a legitimate other is alien to their messianic ideology. Any Muslim or co-jihadist who does not accept IS’s interpretation of the Islamic doctrine is an apostate who deserves death” (Gerges, 2016). The pure, apocalyptic, absolutist, exclusivist ideology translates into a concrete attempt to accomplish the group’s divine mandate. In other words, the Islamic State is trying to realize *here* and *now* the

sacred project of establishing the Caliphate as the sole religious and political authority.

Unlike Al Qaeda and Bin Laden, who was aware of the impossibility of the mission and wished for a gradual and almost ideological change, Islamic State's members, motivated by this convincing ideology, are willing and happy to die in the utopian struggle for the foundation of the divine and eternal Caliphate.

INTERNAL GOVERNANCE

Perhaps the most important aspect to take into consideration in order to evaluate the self-proclaimed Islamic State's success in carrying out its ambitious project, extensively depicted in the previous chapter, is its capability to govern. According to many scholars (Bunzel, Zelin, Caris and Reynolds among others), IS has indeed not only "demonstrated the capacity to govern both urban and rural areas under its control" (Caris & Reynolds, 2014), but also made "its ability to rule the determinant of success" (Lister, 2014)

In the understanding the group's unexpected success, one should give a good measure of the precarious situation afflicting large part of Syria and Iraq before the Islamic State's advent. The region, in fact, has been affected by severe upheavals materialized after the surge of the Arab Spring, which brought chaos, fear and disarray. The Islamic State's success in governing has been partly determined by its ability to bring back a kind of normalcy to local communities afflicted by daily kidnapping, highway robbery, theft, and warlordism.

Even if the critical circumstances played a pivotal role in the imposition of IS authority, they are not the main cause of its success. The group, in fact, proved to be capable to run local administration in a fast and efficient way, providing several benefits that a nation-state offers to its citizens. More specifically, it has been the only entity capable to provide basic public services and assistance for people living under its government. If, on the one hand, the intransigency and inflexibility which marked IS governance represented a risk to alienate and antagonize local population, they led, on the other, to the immediate return of essential benefits such as security, effective courts and unified rule.

The Islamic State succeeded where other rebel factions failed because it has been able to overcome uncertainty and ineffective governance with the enforcement of an exclusive and unchallenged authority. In large portion of territories in Syria and Iraq, the group established a systematic and encompassing governance system. It has been able to promote religious outreach, in order to familiarize with local population, and to create education and indoctrination centres for instructing its “citizens”. Moreover, it concretely implemented state-like functions such as justice and security, public services and infrastructures. The group even created a specific institution with the sole purpose of handling tribal affairs, in order to reach agreements with tribal leaders. Well aware of the decisive role that tribes play in its areas, the Islamic State has systematically disarmed local communities that came under its rule in a way that previous governments failed to do over decades.

FINANCIAL AUTONOMY

Another central aspect which makes the Islamic State distinctive and unique is its impressive financial autonomy. “The richest terror group in history” (Atwan, 2015) is “light years ahead of other jihadist groups and this is most true with regards to the means by which the group is financed” (Saltman & Winter, 2014).

The outstanding financial history of the Islamic State began well before the official proclamation of the Caliphate on June 29th, 2014. Since 2006, former ISI (Islamic State of Iraq) has been extremely successful in the exploitation of the exceptional circumstances of the country, affected by a prolonged post-war instability. Thanks to a well-organized system of lucrative illegal activities, such as oil smuggling, extortion, racket, kidnapping and gun-selling, among others, the terrorist organization was able to raise a yearly amount between 70 to 200 million dollars from illegal activities alone (Levitt, 2014).

The primary source of income derives certainly from the illegal trade of oil: with an estimated extraction capacity of 50,000 barrels per day in Syria and 30,000 in Iraq,

the group was earning a striking sum of three to five million a day in 2014, making the group richer than even small states such as Tonga or the Marshall Islands.

The looting and trading of artifacts represent the second most important lucrative activity. A big part of the huge amount of profitable archeological objects present in Syria and Iraq is smuggled into Europe and the US, contributing to IS business activity. Another important source of income is given by ransom payments from kidnappings, which account for around 20 percent of IS total income. Finally, Al-Baghdadi's group also developed an organized and developed taxation system in the areas under its control. Even if tax collection is transparent and official only in cities and zones where IS enjoys full and consolidated control, it represents nonetheless an advanced and impressive improvement in its claim to be a state entity.

Examining in depth IS financial assets is pivotal to understand why the group differs from previous terrorist organizations and how it became so powerful. Understanding its financial success is essential because, thanks to its revenues, the Islamic State is able to finance, expand and improve not only all the aspects of the governance seen above, but also to assert itself as a concrete state-like actor capable of defending its border and increasing its influence in the areas under its control.

MILITARY

IS military success is a milestone in the realization of its territorial project. The central key element which makes the Islamic State military so powerful and influential in the international scenario is its flexibility. IS troops and battalions are exceptionally versatile and adaptable to any type of situation, a quality that gives the group the advantage of surprise and the ability to immediately seize opportunities when they arise. The organization is not just a regular army limited to frontal war or a mere terrorist group which carries out only small attacks on civilians. On the contrary, the Islamic State mixes fast-moving guerilla-like techniques with both heavy and organized direct attacks and deadly sneaky terrorist-like activities such as suicide bombings or

IEDs (improvised explosive devices), depending on what is more advantageous in a specific situation.

Such a success was by made possible also by the professionalism of its military leadership: The high ranks of IS military apparatus are mostly Iraqi, former Saddam Hussein's officials, who, thanks to their expertise and knowledge of the ground, permitted Al-Baghdadi to develop a professional army marked by a clear hierarchy and command structure.

Thanks to a clear hierarchical and unified leadership, the Islamic State was able to make a decisive qualitative improvement with respect to previous jihadist or, more generally, terrorist organization, mixing traditional terror techniques to proper military strategy. The group can engage frontal direct battles, create chaos in large cities and fight with guerrilla-like actions. The "liquidity" and adaptability of its army and the subsequent success is a decisive element for reinforcing the claim to represent the only pure Caliphate, the capability to exercise concrete control over a vast area with large population and for the appeal that it exert on potential recruits.

"As an American military commentator concluded, the Islamic State combines and hybridizes terrorism, guerrilla warfare and conventional warfare... and makes IS a new breed" (Atwan , 2015).

EXTERNAL GOVERNANCE

Al-Baghdadi's self-declaration of having established the Caliphate on June 29th 2014 implied a response from every individual Muslim and jihadist organizations around the world. The ambitious goal and uncompromising ideology left no room for indecisions or half measures: to justify its inflexible, determined and "global" claim, the Islamic State needed an immediate reply from both jihadist groups and individual Muslims living outside the land of the Caliphate.

Remarkably, an impressive number of both organizations and individuals responded to Baghdadi and Adnani's call to either travel to the promise land or carry out jihad in the land of infidels. The Islamic State, for this reason, was able to establish an "external governance" to assert its own interest globally and to reinforce its

narrative of representing the true and pure Caliphate that everyone is required to recognize and pledge obedience to.

The external approach is, therefore, another element that makes the Islamic State an unprecedented terrorist group, capable to carry out at the same time a state-building project in the lands under its control and exercise influence worldwide. The external governance has been first of all on the establishment of provinces in the territories where it enjoys full control, namely Libya and Sinai. This move offered not only practical advantages such as strategic operational safe heavens and logistic centres, but also boosted IS image and ignited a chain reaction, pushing other organizations to do the same.

Secondly, the group, thanks to its propaganda and success, has been able to boost an unprecedented number of foreign fighters to move to Syria and Iraq. "More people from Europe are being mobilized than in all the other foreign conflicts that have happened for the past 20 years combined". Even if the phenomenon of foreign fighter is not new *per se*, the Islamic State has been able to exploit it better than everyone before it, finding a role for every aspirant who had reached its territory: while people from the West has been more useful for propaganda purposes, experienced Northern Africans and Chechens are valuable military assets.

Finally, another distinctive aspect of IS external governance is the so-called phenomenon of "lone wolves". The group has been able to inspire countless terrorist attacks on civilians carried out by individuals, such as the slaughter of Orlando perpetrated by Omar Mateen or the massacre of San Bernardino.

With the recent loss of territories, declining number of foreign fighters and the siege of major areas of operations such as Libya, the lone wolf strategy has become the only valid resource to face the need of victories necessary for attracting new recruits and preventing existing members from losing hope (Byman, 2016). In fact, individual indiscriminate attacks benefit the Islamic State for multiple reasons: they do not require any planning from above or specific knowledge and are therefore relatively easy and cheap, they are almost impossible to prevent and they definitely boost IS image and discredit Western governments.

Alienated, lonely, weak, depressed and sometimes mentally ill young Muslims are the perfect targets for IS propaganda, which is cleverly exploiting the West's inability

to integrate those potential resources in the society. The unique violence which marks IS propaganda fascinates sensitive marginalized individuals, who, through the execution of massacres in the name of God, are able to draw attention, satisfy their need of revenge and elevate their cause.

IS encourages the perpetration of slaughters towards everyone who refuse to accept its authority, including Shiites and even Sunni Muslims. The legitimate use of extreme violence is an expression of the uncompromising “total” ideology which aims at “punish” every behaviour which is not included in its narrow vision of the world.

INTERNET

The massive use of internet and social media is not only one of the central aspects that makes the Islamic State peculiar but represents also vital part of its strategy of its military attack, defense planning, recruit and propaganda.

Without digital technology it is highly unlikely that the Islamic State would ever come to existence, let alone be able to survive and expand: IS has used the internet and digital communications with great skill and inventiveness, competently fending off threats from global intelligence bodies and military opponents. Its mastery of the internet is, in other words, one of the main tool through which it achieved its territorial ambitions and recruited such a large army in so short time

The massive use of digital tools represents a new element for modern terrorism; the Islamic State has been able to exploit its members’ digital knowledge not just to gain prominence in the virtual world (as most of hacking groups do already), but as an effective method to achieve concrete and outstanding results.

IS AS A NEW FORM OF TERRORISM

One of the most relevant studies on modern terrorism and the first analysis of the history of modern global rebel terror by Professor David C. Rapoport, *The Four Waves of Modern Terrorism*, looks at specific time periods that can be categorized into specific phases precipitated by events. The “waves” are respectively Anarchist (1880s-1920s), Anti-colonial (1920s-1950s), New Left (1950s-1980s) and Religious (1980s-present). Every wave is driven by a specific “energy”, namely the goal that the movement is meant to achieve. Islam is at the heart of the wave of the religious wave, which is considered by many scholars more enduring with respect to its predecessors.

The Islamic State’s terrorism, even if primary motivated by religion, went actually beyond Rapoport’s definition and, due to its peculiar features and attitudes, it cannot be included in the scholar’s definition.

According to another important scholar, Robert Kaplan (who theorized the existence of a Fifth wave of terrorism), rational analytical models cannot be applied to millenarian and irrational groups like the Islamic State. The theological imperative and the strong belief in mystical “prophetic” forces, in fact, make them unique and distinct not only from secular terror groups but also from previous religious terror organizations. Millenarian Fifth-wave-like groups aim at the realization of an utopian society in the current world, for which they are ready to take any necessary step. Achieve this glorious goal simply becomes a way of life for Fifth wave’s terrorist organizations, which present several features that distinguish them from any previous interpretation of theoretical terrorism. Some of their trademarks are, for example, the rejection of the existing social-political order, which requires separation from society and rebellion against it, the inability to compromise, the systematic use of force against internal dissidents and an endemic genocidal violence.

The precursor of the modern fifth wave was the Khmer Rouge during the 70’s in Cambodia: their genocidal actions, once the instruments of state power were in their control, were predictably based on both their stated ideology and their activities in

areas of the countryside under their control. The attempt to destroy the old order and to form a radical new society (with proclamation of a new revolutionary calendar beginning in “year zero”) through the brutalization of war that killed millions made them the forerunner of the Fifth Wave.

However, Kaplan is reluctant to include Jihadist Islamist groups in the Fifth Wave , since those groups assume an international approach based on a quest for a united *Ummah* (the Islamic community *in toto*) which clashes with Fifth wave’s autarkic tendencies. Hence, he believes that rural isolation and a physical withdraw in the hinterland are central traits of the Fifth Wave terrorist groups.

The Islamic State, therefore, did not only go well beyond the fourth wave of religious terrorism, but overcame also one of the most recent definition of terrorism given by Kaplan, which appears to be tight and not comprehensive of all IS aspects. The group, in fact, proved to be able to redefine Islamic terrorism and distinguish itself from every previous group, maturing and developing from the same matrix rather than breaking up with the tradition.

The impressive large-scale portion of territory that was under its direct control and in which operated openly is the first motive of departure from previous terrorist groups. What is astonishing is the fact that the Islamic State, through an effective control over its territory, either accepted or imposed with force, is no less than a *de facto* state. This reality is evidenced by the attempt of its leaders to legitimate its governance by various means, from extreme and brutal violence to popularity and providing basic services and assistance.

The claim of the title of only legitimate Caliphate, furthermore, is another huge step forward for IS with respect to its jihadist predecessors. There had not been a credible claimant to the office of caliph in the Muslim world since the disintegration of the Ottoman empire after World War I. Unlike any other rebel pretender in the Middle East, the Islamic State had the money, fighters, weapons and lands to make a plausible cause that it was the Caliphate reborn.

Moreover, the theological weight of ideology is not to be considered a matter of secondary importance in IS success. Its ability in exploiting the religious persuasive power, using End of the World prophecies and millenarianism, is undoubtedly a

distinctive feature that makes the Islamic State unique and different from its predecessors.

Finally, another element which marked IS uniqueness is its capacity to assert itself as a “glocal” actor. The Islamic State has been the only jihadist terrorist groups that was able to survive (for a significant period of time at least) to the intervention of foreign powers, which marked the end of every previous attempt of jihadist groups to rule a territory. Furthermore, the group, thanks to its ability in managing its “external governance”, became the most important terror organization in the planet, overshadowing its jihadist rivals. Expanding its territories through the declaration of provinces, attracting a countless number of foreign fighters and inspiring so many attacks carried out by individuals are part of its unparalleled success. Its capacity to remain at the center of the international agenda for such a prolonged period of time has no precedent in the history of modern terrorism.

The rigorous investigation of the specific distinctive elements, makes possible to assert that the Islamic State is certainly not just a traditional terrorist organization. On the contrary, it went well beyond previous terrorist models, credibly declaring itself as a state with a growing immigrant population, progressively conventional army, outstanding propaganda machine and an independent financial structure (Saltman & Winter, 2014). In spite of these qualitative improvements and its statehood claim, IS core bases remain rooted in terrorism: therefore, the Islamic State represents a unique and unprecedented case study which is transforming existing theories on modern terrorism.



It is complicated to express definitive considerations with regard to a phenomenon which is still evolving. Nevertheless, this work was intended to give a contribution in the analysis of the self-proclaimed Islamic State, which is in the first place a terrorist group. Even if it presents characteristics which are common to other terrorist organizations (in particular to jihadists groups), it is at the same time marked by several peculiarities, which make it a unique and unprecedented case in the history of modern terrorism.

Through a deep analysis of the distinctive elements that mark IS structure, this thesis was aimed at encompassing and highlighting all the aspects that make the group different from previous terrorist organizations. My hope is that this investigation can bring clarity on the how pre-existing elements underwent such a qualitative change that is not possible to include the Islamic State in traditional terrorist organizations' patterns.

While it will always remain a terrorist organization at its most basic level, the group achieved its explicit goal to establish and consolidate a self-sufficient Islamic State, capable to govern, defend and even expand its sphere of influence through conventional and unconventional methods.

IS is not a mere terrorist group or a real state; it represents rather an hybrid flexible model capable to be at the same time a recognized reality with a precise geographical, historical and ideological position with a hidden, intangible and elusive terror strategy. The ultimate goal of establishing the Caliphate is strengthened by an uncompromising and firm ideology which contributes to fortify its authority over the Islamic community.

To conclude, taking into consideration the recent loss of ground in Syria, Iraq and Libya, the decreasing number of foreign fighters and Obama reassurance to the Pentagon that the Islamic State will "inevitably be defeated" (Olidort, 2016), it is plausible to hypothesize that it will be soon be crushed by the international coalition intervention. On the other hand, however, it is historically proved that the ideas which inspired movements and terrorist organizations often outlived even after the disappearance of the very same concepts which animated them, sometimes fomenting new initiatives many years after. This consideration can apply to the Islamic State as well: "while it will eventually expire as a state, it will continue to "inspire" terrorism as an idea with lethal implications" (Olidort, 2016).

Its peculiarities, innovative features, distinctive methods of action and expression, the radicalism of its principles and goals will certainly endure, regardless of the destiny of the organization.