



*Department of Global Studies Chair of Security Studies*

Media and Security: The case of terrorism and the traffic of women.  
Case study: The Yazidi Community

SUPERVISOR

Prof. Carlo Magrassi

CO-SUPERVISOR

Prof. Emiliana De Blasio

CANDIDATO

ALESSANDRA CHECCHIA

Matr. 629742

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## Introduction

The main theme of the present thesis is the use of media by the self-proclaimed “Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant” (ISIL).

The complexity of the topic requires, first of all, a presentation somehow separately of the two key elements: communication and its political relevance on the one hand, and Islamic fundamentalism and related terrorist movements on the other.

The first chapter tackles therefore the two above mentioned subjects and is divided in two sections: the first one deals with information and its main instruments which have undergone in the course of last century a major change, moving from a primacy of radio and newspapers to a primacy of television and, in the last 20 years, of Internet. I have tried to concentrate on the complex relationship between the information world and the power in place, in the first place at state level, on its capacity to generate consensus and therefore on its central role in all modern revolutions. But, in addition to the role played in the case of revolutions and in supporting totalitarian regimes, the “media” (as collectors and in some cases creators of information) have become in time a resource through which manipulate people’s intentions including in the area fundamental for any democracy: political consensus expressed through the vote in free elections. A simple but complete example of how the more or less “public” character of an opinion poll may change the outcome of an election will make it possible to illustrate this point in concrete terms.

The other key-player, that is the “Islamic State of Iraq and Syria”, will also be presented in the frame of the first chapter. We’ll observe in particular how its founding idea (the caliphate of the Islamic State) is by no means a new one but dates back to the earliest age of Islamism, in particular to Mohammed and his first four successors. The development over time of this idea (and of the connected notion of fundamentalism) will then be illustrated. It will be detailed, in this context, how it went so to say underground for very long periods to explode again in a terrorist dimension between the end of last century and the beginning of the current one: with a date, September 11 2001, acting as a “watershed” between a “before” and a “after”.

The second chapter deals more directly with modern media and therefore, inevitably, with internet. It analyses at first the differentiation between the visible and invisible web (Deepweb and Darknet), proceeding then to describe how all the levels of the stratified communication can be utilized, and are in fact utilized, by different forms of criminality including international terrorism.

What has struck most public opinion worldwide, also for its character of absolute novelty (almost of “invasion” of a domestic and in many ways intimate space) has been the use by Al-Qaeda first and then by the IS of the most common and utilized broadcasting platforms of multi-media products, starting with YouTube.

The public all around the world (and of all age ranges) has thus found, so to say side by side with videos on recipes, on instructions for the mounting of household objects, or on how to make the best use of a software, chilling images of the execution of presumed “spies”, as well as other IS propaganda videos mixing

messages aimed at recruiting young Westerners with others threatening the conquest by the Islamic State of the most sacred and symbolic places of the West. The systematic analysis of each of these aspects, from the terrorist's capacity to produce supports of great technical quality and visual impact to the failure of the "antibodies" set in place by the managers of the different sites to avoid these contaminations, will represent an important part of the analysis.

A particularly incisive example of the utilization by the IS not only of new modalities of communication but also of new topics is offered by the propaganda which has accompanied the genocide of the Yazidi people, starting in 2014 and at least partially successful. The topic will be treated extensively in Chapter 3. Genocide (classified by the United Nations back in 1948 as a crime against humanity) is not, unfortunately, something new in history. History has in fact repeatedly seen the criminal fury a people against another with a view to erasing it forever from the world scene. This attitude towards the Yazidis is not something typical of the IS if we consider that this people, together with the more general ethnic group of the Kurds of which it is a part, has been the object over centuries of a number of campaigns of hatred with millions of victims.

The new feature, as said above being part of the aspects examined in Chapter 3, resides in the claim by the IS for this genocide in the simplest and most direct way and through all available means including multimedia platforms. A behaviour which is, therefore, totally different from the one adopted by the responsible of other more or less recent genocides in Europe and in the world such as those of the Armenians and of the Jews or, concerning the period after WWII, those occurred in Rwanda and former Yugoslavia. It is important that the international community as a whole, more than the victims as such, adjust its reaction to this new attitude of the assailant. The international community in its entirety should in fact feel hurt by crimes of this kind. The reaction up to now of international community will be analyzed in the final section of this thesis, with special attention to the role played by our country both at strategic and operational level.

# Chapter 1. Communication in the third millennium

## 1.1 Evolution from traditional media to the New Media

### 1.1.1. *Media as key players in modern revolutions*

Of all the evolutions in technology and habits occurred over the last hundred years, the most relevant and heralding deep changes are most likely the ones concerning the communication dimension, and in particular mass communication. In the relatively short time-span of a century a transition has in fact taken place from a communication characterized by barriers of a physical (the printing of books or journals and their distribution), cultural (different languages and no access to the news for the vast number of illiterate people), geographical (the distances which the deliverers had to overcome and borders to be crossed) nature to a system with almost no barriers, accessible, and in fact acceded to, by almost all the planet's population. The almost immediate consequence of this growth in relevance of the "communication factor" is that it becomes central for power's acquisition and management. Rather paradoxically, if we consider the importance the diffusion of knowledge has as a tool at the service of democracy, the first ones to realize how the system had changed and the enormous potential of the "mass media" were the protagonists of the totalitarian regimes of the first half of the twentieth century. Hitler's Germany, Mussolini's Italy, Stalin's Russia all shared a resort to that period's most innovative communication tool: i.e. the radio.

The three regimes not only occupied with the most trusted followers<sup>1</sup> the production and diffusion centers of radio's programs but also promoted the radio's diffusion both as an individual listening tool<sup>2</sup> and even more as a public listening tool in meeting places: for instance in pubs or through public diffusion in the squares through amplifier speakers<sup>3</sup>

But also, in the phase immediately following Fascism and Nazism "mass media" and the radio in particular, were the main actors in the transition of power. If we take for instance the Italian case the news of Mussolini's downfall and of the ensuing change in Italy's alliances on September 8 1943<sup>4</sup> was broadcasted

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<sup>1</sup> Goebbels' example is a case in point. Substantially number two of the party, right after Hitler, he was appointed as head of the Reichsministerium für Volksaufklärung und Propaganda (Ministry of Education and Propaganda), as such, the strictest control on radio broadcasting as well as on the more traditional media of that time, like newspapers. Almost symmetrical Fascism's behavior in Italy with the Ministry of Press and Propaganda (later on Ministry of Culture) entrusted to Galeazzo Ciano, Mussolini's son in law.

<sup>2</sup> Goebbels financed through a dedicated government funded program the acquisition of radio sets by German families obtaining a coverage of almost 70 % by the beginning of WWII;

<sup>3</sup> This phenomenon is well known in the case of Germany and Italy. It occurred however, broadly with the same modalities, also in the Soviet Union where Stalin considered wireless broadcasting the only way to reach a largely illiterate population;

<sup>4</sup> Here is the original text read by Badoglio and broadcasted by Eiar at 7.42 p.m. on 9/8/43: "The Italian Government, recognizing the impossibility of continuing the unequal struggle against the overwhelming enemy force, in order to avoid further and graver

by EIAR, an agency founded by Fascism in 1927 whose control had been transferred immediately after the regime's downfall, to the Psychological Warfare Branch of the Allied Command in Italy. In substance radio broadcasting and its command structure created by the regime to control the people were finally utilized by the winning side against the regime and to announce its official end<sup>5</sup>.

### *1.1.2. The postwar period: from television to Internet*

If in the interwar period the radio proved to be the communication instrument "par excellence", in the post WWII period and almost until the end of the twentieth century this role has doubtlessly been played by television<sup>6</sup>.

The role played by televised information was clear from the very start; so much so that there were prestigious voices, such as De Gasperi's<sup>7</sup>, very much interested in this new instrument and its political implications well before the beginning of official TV broadcasting.

The diffusion of TV broadcasting took place at an astonishing speed despite the uncertain economic conditions of most countries in the immediate aftermath of the devastating second World War: in the US the few thousand television sets of the pre-war period became 3 millions in 1950, 27 millions in 1953 and 57 millions in 1961<sup>8</sup> The growth was slower in the UK but the presence of TV sets in public places (mostly in pubs) allowed more than 20 million people to follow the coronation ceremony of Elisabeth II in 1953.

In Italy, despite a very reduced offer in terms of programs (at the beginning a few hours of broadcasting per day and only one channel) a double development took place: a multiplication of TV sets coupled with a "privatization" of TV viewing. In fact, in the period between 1953 (beginning of official broadcasting) and 1960 (just before in other words the introduction of the "second channel") the number of private viewers went up from 30.000 subscribers to more than 2 millions: with a shift in the proportion of spectators/subscribers in public places as opposed to private places moving from a value that goes from 1:5 in 1955 to 1: 20 in 1960<sup>9</sup> If we estimate in 7-10 people the average number of users in a public structure (mostly made up of small village or suburban pubs) we are with this witnessing the transition of the majority of the spectators from a "collective" fruition of the television tool to a family/private one.

And it is precisely this feature of the visual information entering the domestic sphere that constitutes one of the points of strength of the influence TV has on the shaping of public opinion. As properly observed by

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disasters for the Nation, sought an armistice from General Eisenhower, commander - in -chief of the Anglo American Allied forces. The request was granted. Consequently, all acts of hostility against the Anglo-American force by Italian forces must cease everywhere. But they will react to an eventual attack from any other source".

<sup>5</sup> Even before 9/8/1943 many Italians had used their radio sets to tune in not to the regime's news but to Radio London which broadcasted in Italian much more credible news, also because managed in full autonomy by the BBC;

<sup>6</sup> In effect official TV programs started in the UK, in the US and in Germany even before the war but they are really not relevant since the number of radio sets in each of these countries was very reduced (even in the USA there were only a few thousand);

<sup>7</sup> Grasso (2004) reports that in a private conversation with friends in 1950, the then Italian Prime Minister had said the following: "I discovered, in the US, television. And I discovered that with or against television one can win or lose elections. It is something we'll have to pay attention to"

<sup>8</sup> (Grasso, 2004)

<sup>9</sup> RAI, 2007



Umberto Eco<sup>10</sup> on the one hand the image is for the viewer more captivating than the written or spoken word; on the other hand, being able to use the TV appliance in the domestic sphere (in contrast to what happens with other visual experiences such as cinema) is a way of taking the spectator in a more intimate and relaxed moment (with the “antibodies” of a critical analysis of the message very low) and, therefore, of penetrating his sub-consciousness in an easier and more sneaky way.

Intellectuals and scholars almost unanimously agree on the effectiveness of TV as tool to condition spectators even though positions may differ from an ethical point of view: as they go from unequivocal condemnation, such as those of Pasolini, who draws a parallel between television and fascism<sup>11</sup>, or of professor Sartori who talks about a new “homo videns”, less qualified than the “homo sapiens”<sup>12</sup> to more balanced positions: such as those of the ones who view television essentially as an instrument of generalized cultural growth of the Italian people and of its convergence at least around a common language, as affirmed by Umberto Eco<sup>13</sup>.

In the final phase of the twentieth century a new player comes more and more to the forefront of mass communication: Internet.

Ideated for military purposes in the sixties of last century and later on gradually developing in academic and research centers, Internet knows a veritable explosion with the new millennium as it goes from around 10 millions of connected users to more than 600 in 2005 to reach, today, an almost complete coverage of the world population.

A recent data in this connection is reported in Figure.1, where it is shown how, on a world basis, 59% of the population (that is more than 4 and a half billions of people) is today connected to Internet with a value hugely superior to that of world-wide diffusion<sup>14</sup> of other communication appliances in the first thirty years since their launch.

This data is even more eloquent if referred to the geographical areas with a higher income and industrial production. If we consider Europe, we observe that Internet penetration is almost all pervasive (84 per cent of the population) with a multiplication of moments of use testified by the huge number of active smartphones more than one per capita).

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<sup>10</sup> (Eco, 2018)

<sup>11</sup> “Fascism, I want to repeat it, was not even able to scratch the soul of the Italian people: the new fascism, through the new media (in particular television), not only managed to scratch it but it has ripped it apart, made it ugly and violated forever” (Pasolini, 1973)

<sup>12</sup> (Sartori, 1998)

<sup>13</sup> “Television has given a language to the poor ones, the Italian language. Maybe they spoke Italian with Mike Buongiorno’s nervous tics but anyway they learned it”

<sup>14</sup> the first World Wide Web site was put online in 1991 by the CERN in Geneva

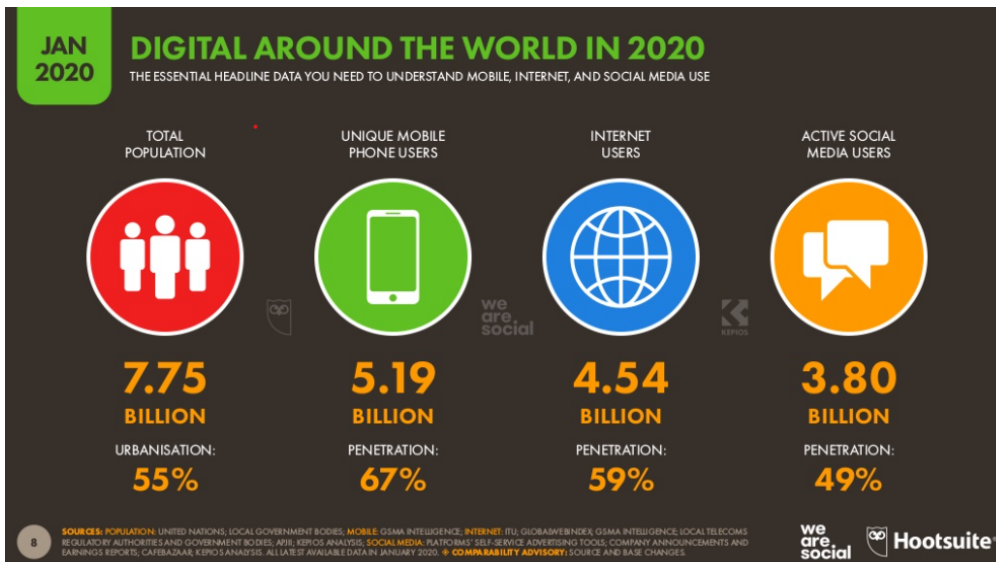


Figure 1 – Worldwide diffusion of Internet (wearesocial, 2020)

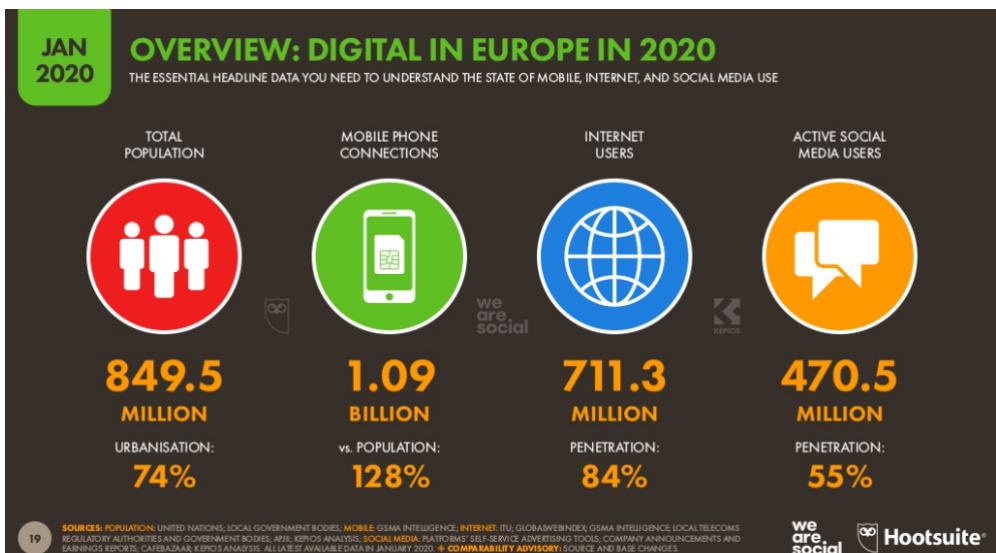


Figure 2 – Internet diffusion in Europe (wearesocial, 2020)

We find ourselves therefore, in the first decades of the new millennium, in a situation where the whole world is connected in real time and may roam, often using the same device, from one-to-one connection to broadcasting ones. All this without forgetting the still intense use of television and radio. In fact, one of the most striking features of the most recent media evolution is that the process has been more one of coexistence than of replacement: in the present historical juncture, we are seeing Internet overcome traditional television TV users<sup>15</sup>, that however remain billions at world level.

<sup>15</sup> With the expression traditional television we refer in this context to the one with a centrally defined palimpsest and a generalist approach (like RAI, BBC or NBC) while forms of on- demand television (like Netflix or Prime) appear , for the way they are utilized more than for the required technologies, more similar to communications via web.

Even radio which, with its more than a hundred years of history and limitation of transmission capacities, could appear until a few decades a kind of refuge for a few nostalgic, continues to be widely diffused. This coexistence of different typologies of mass media is partially due to the high specificity<sup>16</sup> which each of them manages to confer to its method of communicating; the author that before anybody else noted this specificity was Marshall McLuhan. In an almost provocative tone, he went as far as saying that the message conveyed is less relevant than the “medium” employed which constitutes the real essence of the message, resuming this concept in his famous expression “the medium is the message”<sup>17</sup>

Without going to these extremes one can however observe that what characterizes media, in addition to their transmission modalities and message typology (written, spoken, image), is even more the diversity in fruition modalities: the radio mostly used while driving and in any case while busy doing something else; the “web”, requiring a deeper personal involvement, “inter alia” for its natural interactivity, and finally television occupying an intermediate position accompanying, as it does, for instance our lunches but requiring a greater personal involvement than the one required by the wireless.

### *1.1.3. Management of information as a good*

In this more and more interconnected world, so much so that McLuhan used to call<sup>18</sup> it the “global village” information as a “common good” in the sense of allowing all of us to receive appropriate and credible information on all relevant topics, acquires paramount importance.

The economic value of information is a concept that legal and economic theories have been working on for decades. So much so that the presence of “asymmetrical information” is one of the causes envisaged when it comes to explaining “market failures”. Meaning with “asymmetrical information” the fact that one of the parties to an agreement disposes of much more information than the other party on the object of the contract<sup>19</sup>. A traditional example, and at the same time a modern one for its frequent application over the last few years, of the use of the “good” called information to get an economic advantage is represented by the (buying or sale) of shares of a given company because the “actor” holds information not publicly available: the so called “Insider Trading” forbidden by law but often practiced by operators of the most different kind.

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<sup>16</sup> With reference to Italy and to the most recent statistical survey by Istat (2019) 55% of the adult population listens to the radio with a very high number of regular listening to the radio every day (52%) and even better results in the 25-44 bracket (71% of listeners every day) (ISTAT, 2020)

<sup>17</sup> McLuhan & Fiore, *The Medium is the message*, 1967.

<sup>18</sup> According to the brilliant McLuhan’s formulation (*Understanding Media, The Extension of Man*, 1964), become so notorious that many of those who often quote it do not even know the name of its author

<sup>19</sup> A very rich analysis is Busacca’s one (Busacca, 2003). He distinguishes in the formation of contracts between “necessary” asymmetries, “voluntary” asymmetries and “pathological” asymmetries.

From a sociological/political point of view, the value of information as a “good” not unlike others is universally recognized; we consider it appropriate however to observe that the value of this good does not necessarily depend on its partisan use.

Let us consider for instance the situation of an election based on a “first past - the post-system<sup>20</sup>” with the participation of three candidates, and where the choices of the voters can be thus synthesized:

Group I: prefers A both to B and C

Group II: prefers B but between A and C it prefers C

Group III: prefers C but between A and B it prefers B

Let us imagine that in a relatively advanced phase of the electoral campaign, therefore close to the election day, the consistency of the three groups is as follows:

Group I: 45% of the voters

Group II: 35% of the voters

Group III: 20% of the voters

If this situation is unknown to the voters (for instance on account of the fact that it is prohibited to diffuse polls or simply because no credible information in this regard is available) candidate A will prevail with a good margin on election day.

If, to the contrary, the patterns of preferences were known in advance, it is most likely that an important number of Group C voters would realize that their vote is utterly “useless”. They might therefore, on account of their preference for B as opposed to A, decide to vote for B in order to avoid the election of the less liked candidate<sup>21</sup>. If 75% of Group III voters decided to opt for this choice, this would be the result on election day:

Candidate A: 45% (all and only the votes of Group I)

Candidate B: 50% (all the votes of Group II plus 75% of the votes of Group III)

Candidate C: 5% of the votes (25 % of the votes of Group III)

Therefore, the presence of a simple information, while not modifying the opinion of the single voters (whose preferences remain the same in the two scenarios) produces two different voting behaviors and therefore electoral outcomes, conferring to the concept of power of the information a special, and in many ways innovative, value.

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<sup>20</sup> Quite a frequent situation: in practice it is the one characterizing the election of the US President, of all the members of the British House of Commons, and of a third of Italy’s Lower House (Camera dei Deputati) according to the rules in place as of March 2020.

<sup>21</sup> This kind of choice is called “useful vote” (De Mauro Dictionary, 2020).

#### 1.1.4. *The fourth industrial revolution*

The expression “industrial revolution” indicates the complex phenomenon enshrined in the mutation of industrial processes and functions. This mutation may occur under different shapes and conditions related “inter alia” to the historical moment in which it occurs; there is a general agreement that three different moments of revolution in the industrial sector have until now taken place:

- The first revolution took place during the second half of the seventeenth century with the appearance of the first steam engines to be used in the textile and metallurgical sector
- The second revolution dates back to the eighteenth century and is characterized by the introduction of electricity as the new driving force for machines and industrial plants, as well by the utilization of chemical compounds derived from oil
- The third revolution coincides with the computer related discoveries of the first complex calculators and personal computers of 1970

Coming to our days we are witnessing a new change which will be most likely defined as the fourth industrial revolution or 4.0 industry. We can’t take it for granted because this change is still under way and at a very early phase. In fact, when we talk of a fourth industrial revolution we are not talking, unlike the other above-mentioned revolutions, of a single paradigm which changes as a result of a profound technological mutation. We are talking of a much more complex phenomenon conditioned by several distinguishing features.

The main ones are the following:

- Advanced automation: this means literally that the industrial and production processes are conceived on the basis of an advanced logic proposing them in an improved version. In other words, we are talking of highly automatized production processes not requiring a human intervention, the so called “machine to machine” interaction, or situations in which the human intervention takes place in a remote mode. This last option is made possible by a specific support hardware, called “wearable”, allowing the operator to steer the productive cycle in each and every phase.
- Internet of things: Through the internet network, which connects the different computers, one can command and monitor the different objects in the house or of any working space or residence. It is in other words an expression of that specific branch of computer technology known, in the past, as “domotics” or home automation. By an IP (Internet Protocol) address to the different parts or components of a house, such as for instance switches, household appliances, programmable thermostats and so on one can control a private space in its entirety keeping it much safer.
- Analytics: It helps us analyze a large amount of data coming from several sources including computer sources: the so-called Big Data. If, for a large part of our history, we were faced with the problem of finding out the necessary information’s contained in a few and well-defined printed sources, nowadays we are facing the opposite problem. Let us consider for a moment the mine of

information represented by internet and the social media in order to be able to get to know someone in depth. If we add to this the banking data and the online shopping<sup>22</sup> we can dispose of an almost complete picture of a person, including his aspirations and wishes. Handling this amount of information is difficult even for modern computers or server factories. Analytical software is therefore needed, being able to bring to the surface the most important information's, leaving behind the less relevant or duplicated ones.

If we believe that the above described scenarios are exaggerated or belonging to a distant future let's concentrate on the "wearables" technologies I already mentioned. We would realize almost naturally that we are referring inter alia to our modern smartphones and tablets. If we consider again the internet of things, we should bear in mind that objects of this nature are already in the market: for instance, Alexa or Google's hardware. What may be missing is the connection to the different home's subsystems.

It is therefore a much nearer future than we think, rich in innovations but also in implications for the labor market as well as for professions in general. If we take for granted the conclusions of the 2016 edition of the Davos Economic Forum, a number of so to say revolutions will be on the market by the current year such as:

- Artificial intelligences
- 3D printers
- Nanotechnology
- Machine learning

All these innovations will not only replace human workforce in a number of productive sectors, but professionals and technicians endowed with new competences will be badly needed to assemble and use at best the above said revolutions. We can therefore affirm that this fourth revolution is underway even though it has not yet produced all its effects in the outlet markets or in terms of needed skills and workforce. We'll have therefore to wait a little bit more to be reasonably sure that we've really entered this modern and innovative new industrial world 4.0.

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<sup>22</sup> . It is clear that for this kind of information specific authorizations are required, or a "green light" from the relevant bodies, in order to overcome the privacy - related limitations. Even though today jurists are considering how to overcome these legal and bureaucratic impediments, in order to better understand the phenomenon, let us pretend that a given company or interested person may have free access to these pieces of information.

## 1.2 The impact of information on the public

The informative content of a news is in itself important in relation to what has happened and to the context in which a certain event has occurred. Whatever the news even more important is, however, the impact that that same information has on the public to which it is directed.

In principle, the information and its impact should be substantially the same; in fact, things are considerably different. We'll analyze further on this phenomenon in practice; for the time being we'll analyze it from a theoretical point of view. The impact of information on the public of its interlocutors is not something casual or unexpected. In fact, it is something quite precise, implemented through a number of communication related instruments. In order to better understand the phenomenon, we have to analyze the main components characterizing communication: both the "one-to-one" and the "one to many".

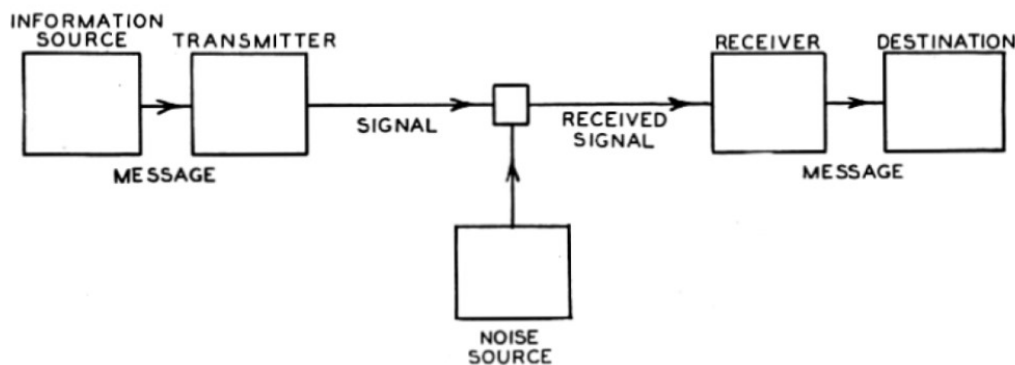


Figure 3 - Basic communication model (Pastore Comin 2010)

The scheme in figure number 3 allows us to have a view of the communication process in its entirety. Three are the elements on which we have to concentrate in order to better understand the impact of news on the public:

1. The codifying transmitter situated between the source of the information and the channel selected to convey the message. In substance, it is the way the source of the information decides to present his message in relation both to the kind of message it is conveying and to the public to which the latter is directed. The encoding modalities can vary from static images to dynamic ones, written words, words read by a voice over accompanying a video or images, and many other options.
2. Decoding by the communication's receiver: that is the way the message encoded by the source of the information is interpreted by the recipient/s of the message. This is exactly the key point of the analysis.

3. The background noise of the whole communication circuit: it is a relatively new concept in the communication theory, both in personal and in mass communication. It is in fact the interference, present in each and every communication channel, while the source and the recipient are communicating. In a more modern sense, the background noise in communication is generally associated to the overlapping of news which alter the message that the source of the information wishes to convey.

Even if the message, as sent by the source remains the same it will inevitably have to go through two different filters, encoding and decoding, and prove moreover able to withstand the natural background noise generated by the communication process.

In other words, no matter how neutral and not misleading the message we want to convey is, it's inevitable insertion in the communication circuit could in the end change its nature. Its impact on the public could be therefore totally unexpected. It is in this connection good to precise since the first encoding is done by the source of the information, possible errors in the transmission of the facts to the public can be corrected if not wholly avoided.

What is, on the contrary, beyond any control is on the one hand the decoding by the recipient; on the other, the quantity of the background noise. No matter how hard we may try to convey a clear and transparent information the unknown factor which will inevitably remain within any communication exercise is how the public will absorb the message and whether it will reach the recipient/s without interferences.

The practical examples we will present later on will allow us to better appreciate the phenomenon and to transpose in the contemporary world the above illustrated communication theory.

#### *1.2.1. Loss of intermediation and greater impact*

The rapid development of ICT technologies and in parallel the equally rapid diffusion of wearable hardware's, a topic already touched upon in connection with the fourth industrial revolution, has resulted, when it comes to communication, into a constant and progressive disintermediation of the "good" called information vis-à-vis the public of the recipients. As illustrated in the previous paragraph, communication is characterized by different passages even though the starting point, the source, and the point of arrival, the recipient, are always the same; the passages may however be executed by different players or orchestrated by a single entity in control of all of them. Regarding traditional media as radio, TV or newspapers, historically all of them the expression of an intermediation-based information, we can see that they embody all the critical phases of the communication process as analyzed in the previous chapters.

In more practical terms: the main task of a licensed journalist is to receive information from a news agency or get it on the field and then to convey or intermediate them to the public making the best of the instruments



at his disposal. The radiophonic journalist will pay more attention to the verbal/co-verbal elements of his presentation to the public on account of the fact that his voice is the only thing the public will receive; a print journalist will devote special attention to his prose carefully selecting his words and periphrasis in order to better communicate with his public through a limited number of words; finally, the TV correspondent will be able to convey his information through words, in writing, through images. It goes without saying that the larger the informative channel through which I intend to convey the message the louder will most likely prove to be the background noise.

The information in our country, as is the case in the rest of the western world, is therefore intermediated and, in a way, filtered and controlled by public and private media. The control by the newspaper editors should not be seen in a completely negative way, because a lot of the filtering is done in an indirect more than in a conscious way. In other words, the decision of a given medium to put in the front-line, or in the case of a newspaper in the first page, foreign policy news and not others related to domestic issues or the last crime news instead of world news prioritizes, by itself, the different facts and the different news. This happens because both in the case of TV news and of daily newspapers the space is limited. Therefore, we defined it an “indirect” filter because it is not executed with malice or with hidden goals by the editor. There are of course also case of more direct, active, filters always at the hands of the medium/media top management who may decide, in an arbitrary way, to publish or not a given piece of information or not to treat adequately a news story. Being in control of the information’s transmission is much more important even in respect of the press agencies which are the very source of the information.

That said, the public at large has gradually understood that a filter was being applied, albeit in an incremental way, on the “good” called information. It decided therefore, in order to adequately respond to this development which it perceived as a limitation to his right to know the truth, to disintermediate the news and information from the pressure of traditional media relying on the new players coming to the fore-front: the so called new media. It is important to understand that had it not reached the current technological and infrastructural level, this revolution would have never been implemented.

It is important to emphasize that while respecting the tenets of a market economy, a new technological paradigm makes room not only for the creation of new markets within a given economic system. It provides at the same time the opportunity to overcome institutional and market barriers limiting competition. In the case of the media, the barrier was that of a professional register for journalists: a register called to ensure not only their professionalism but also that, in order to preserve the credibility of the media concerned, a third subject would take care of correcting mistaken or imprecise information by publishing the appropriate denial.

The new media, mostly through blogs, autonomous newspapers, YouTube channels and social networks gave life to a new way of conveying information: exactly what people were looking for. By eliminating intermediation and by presenting facts as they were it became in fact possible for the interested public to

mature an autonomous impression of the news as well as to deepen with all the autonomy required topics only superficially or not at all treated by traditional media. A new way of conveying information and communicating in general had seen the light. However, there were drawbacks too in this new way. The absence of intermediation brought to the surface problems which until then had never characterized the information sector.

### *1.2.2. The problem of the sources: the case of fake news*

The diffusion of the New Media has brought the public at large to continuously wonder whether an information appearing on the web is true or false. This happens, most likely, because all throughout history people have rarely asked themselves this kind of question, but now, for the first time in history, the sources of information largely exceed people's need to know the world. The web has in fact provided us with a number of sophisticated and tailored tools allowing us to get in a few minutes a summary of the main events occurring not only in our country but worldwide. In the past acceding to the same amount of information would imply the need to dedicate hours of one's day to reading newspapers and to the listening of news on TV at very precise hours.

In other words, today, should I wish to know about the main facts in my country in the heart of the night it would be sufficient for me to use my personal terminal and I would get these facts on the web in the form of an article/video or TV news in podcast. And it is precisely the speed at which the information is conveyed the main advantage and the main drawback of the web as far as information is concerned. Each new content published on the web, no matter its source, is conveyed in a very rapid way to the whole public of the web be it in front of the terminal or even not connected. I'm talking here of the announces which news-related apps or other programs installed in our appliances do send us when an informative content likely to meet our interest appears.

In order to favor freedom of access and of creation of contents the truthfulness of the conveyed information relies inevitably on the good faith of the source of the communication process.

A further verification of the credibility of a given piece of information, for instance, is not only not practical but also useless for that part of the public which finds in the above said information a confirmation of his vision of the world. This is a phenomenon which regularly happens and has an impact on almost all the information categories: politics, sport, finance so much so that a specific name was created to identify them: Fake News<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> The fact that this expression has become part of our everyday language and that it is generally applied to the New Media does not mean that the phenomenon is totally new one. One historically known example to the contrary, with most important consequences, is the so called "Constantine's donation": the document held by the Vatican attributing the "temporal" power of the Catholic Church to an act of donation by the Roman emperor as a result of a miraculous healing. It proved a fundamental text for the supremacy of the papacy over the empire in the Middle Ages and, later on, for establishing the legitimacy of the Papal state. A philological analysis in modern times proved it was a fake.

Only a careful and analytical search of the sources can ensure the identification of an authentic piece of information as distinct from a fake news.

There are however some elements we can utilize to detect, and if possible isolate, fake news beyond any reasonable doubt:

- Most fake news are conveyed through images and/or videos
- They are often accompanied by short captions and/or comments
- The image or video are generally of a good quality both from a technical and graphic profile
- The textual part of a fake news is generally easy to interpret and written in a clear prose
- The image or video are often included in “social platforms” which not only guarantee their speedy diffusion but at the same time certify their quality

Fake News prefer images because the latter produce a greater impact than a simple text on the public’s psychology and sentiments; moreover, an image or video require a passive attention by our brain whereas reading requires a greater effort.

A message both immediate and easy to assimilate, these are the main elements to create a perfect fake news. Conveying these fake news through social platforms or, in the case of video, through YouTube is for instance necessary to reach the kind of public they aim to. The more a real or fake news becomes viral through the web the more it acquires credibility because this credibility will not any more depend on the source of the information but on the user’s community<sup>24</sup>.

It goes without saying that the possible damages a fake news may produce to information recipients will largely depend on the content of the information conveyed. I will make clearer this concept in the following pages of this thesis.

### *1.2.3. Towards the post-truth generation*

The existence and rapid spread of Fake News have stirred a debate on the attribution of truth to the different pieces of information.

In more practical terms one may wonder, in these modern times, whether a way exists to reach truth whatever the cost, and if this is the precisely the goal that information has to pursue.

It might seem a philosophical debate more than a technological one. However, as we will see, the issue has a larger impact than we may think on our daily life.

Can the diffusion of fake news be a necessary and sufficient condition to impose a centralized information control?

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<sup>24</sup> As Umberto Eco observes in one of his essays ( Umberto Eco, 2018) , a modern intellectual wishing to provide a real support to a credible information more than watching over the contents of the production will have to watch over the listening groups , so as to be able to explicit the symbols employed and to stimulate the critical sense ( which , together with the message, and even more, constitutes the information).

Don't we thus run the risk of transforming the world of the New Media in the one of traditional Media? Is truth always the best thing or can it also produce negative effects on the population?

These questions and many others have materialized in our world the post-truth phenomenon. In a nutshell, the present generation and the future ones will have to accept to know whether a piece of information or a news is true or not only after the effects of what has been conveyed to the public have been felt in the real world. All this might seem more a show of surrender than a social phenomenon triggered by the fake news. It is as though the world of medias both the old and the new ones, preferred to accept the existence of fake news instead of doing whatever possible to control or limit the amount of "bad" information. We may be tempted to believe that this is an evil belonging to our modern times, and that we have therefore to accept it as a price to be paid to progress.

In fact, if we go through the pages of our history, we will notice that the control of information has always existed for the most different reasons. Many facts pertaining to the world of politics, finance or sport just to mention a few, are shrouded in mystery because the official version does not coincide with the general perception or simply with the facts as such.

We don't know whether this happens because of a lack of coordination between the different media or simply because the phenomenon of fake news has a much more ancient origin and what we witness today has in fact always existed. The answer to these questions and many more is still uncertain.

One thing however is sure: only a careful personal or group analysis on the sources and on the nature of a given piece of information may lead to distinguish in credible way a false news from a true one. In the following chapters of the present work concrete examples will be provided to facilitate a better understanding of this complex and articulate phenomenon.

### 1.3 The origins of modern Islamic terrorism

#### 1.3.1. *The caliphate: from Mohammed to IS*

The main feature of terrorism of Middle Eastern origin, the one in other words which came to the fore-front at the end of the XX<sup>th</sup> century and even more at the beginning of the current century (having as its symbolic date September 11 2001), is its reference to “fundamentalism”, that is to the word of the Qur’an interpreted not only as a prayer’s book but also a code of conduct in daily life<sup>25</sup>.

This kind of vision, which has as an important corollary that the political leader is also the religious one and vice-versa, dates back to the remotest periods of Islam history: the ones of Mohammed and his first four successors Abu Bakr, Omar, Othman and Ali, the so called “well-guided” Caliphs. The very title of these 4 leaders, Caliph, that is the “successor” to Mohammed, refers both to his so to say “secular” legacy as leader of the country and to his religious one as leader of believers. It is not by chance that that the well-guided Caliphs alternate the title of “caliph” with that of Amīr al-mu'minīn that is: “prince of the believers<sup>26</sup>”. Such a vision, and in particular the identification in one person of the two functions declines over time even within the Islamic empire and a dualism gradually appears between the Caliph (as the religious leader) and the Sultan representing the political leader. This division is brought to its extreme consequences by Atatürk in 1923 with the abolition of the Caliphate in the frame of the secularization of the Turkish state (the latest heir to the Ottoman empire).

But exactly in the years in which the dissolution of the Ottoman empire seems to bring to an end the principle of a confessional Islamic state, therefore of the Caliphate, the idea resurrects via the creation of Islamic movements making reference to the fundamentals of the Islamic faith<sup>27</sup> which are, for this reason, known as “fundamentalist”. This tendency finds its main expression, on the one hand, in the Wahhabi movement which develops in parallel with the growth of the Saud dynasty and considers the guardian of the Mecca both as the religious and civilian leader; on the other, in the Salafī movement (also known as the “Muslim Brotherhood”) with a more supranational character<sup>28</sup> aiming at “Pan Arabism” and even more at a “single State of all the believers” under the command of a Caliph.

Both these orientations thrive in the period between the two wars but know a crisis, or to be more precise a dormancy period, during the decolonization following WWII. A decolonization whose key- players are, in almost all the countries of the region, the armed forces and political/military leaders of a secular orientation

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<sup>25</sup> The Qur’an is a book of prayers, it is true, but also a Code, a collection of rules on whose application the Caliph has to watch over and whose violations, even the slightest one, he has to sanction (Quirico, 2015)

<sup>26</sup> (Nallino, 1940)

<sup>27</sup> As an example, the “Muslim Brotherhood” slogan is the following: “Allah is our program, the Qur’an our constitution, the Prophet our leader, the fight on the way to Allah our path, death for Allah’s glory our greatest aspiration” (Guolo, 2002)

<sup>28</sup> It is not by chance that the Salafī movement develops, at least partially, outside the Arab world with the Indian scholar abu Ala Mawdadi (1903-1979) as its leader.

such as the symbol of this period: the Egyptian General Nasser become meanwhile Head of State and in substance the leader of the “pan-Arabic” movement.

However, when Nasser’s aura of invincibility (as well as that of the regional secular movements) had to come to terms with the heavy defeat in the “Six Days war” (1967) the “traditionalist” and fundamentalist forces are again in the upswing decrying the secular leaders as traitors to Islam . This is the historical context in which modern terrorist movements developed. These movements on the one hand theorize a systematic return to a convergence between the political and religious leadership, both identified in the unifying figure of the Caliph, on the other hand, they take a distance from all the existing state entities: capable as such of entering cultural and geo-political mediations being connected to the international logics of exchange and, in some cases, alliances.

Fundamentalism, taking a clear distance from national states, becomes political extremism targeting with all available means all the “non-believers”, and in the first place all the Arab leaders perceived as traitors<sup>29</sup> In this logic Egypt is a traitor: a country which has signed with Sadat, Nasser’s successor, the peace treaty, with Israel thus betraying (in the fundamentalist’s view) the Palestinian cause and conferring legitimacy to the “Zionist” state which for the fundamentalist represent a “cancer” in the Arab world.

Even more traitors are the princes of the House of Saud. In fact, so goes the fundamentalist narrative, the latter while claiming their convinced and intransigent allegiance to Islam have committed unforgivable sins: on the one hand, resorting to troops proceeding from Western countries (and therefore “non-believers”) during the Gulf war when the US and their allies were called to protect Saudi territory from the aggression by Saddam Hussein’s Iraq in 1990; on the other, by once again resorting to Western (in this case French) support and intervention in order to put an end to the occupation of the Great Mosque of the Mecca by anti-Saudi fundamentalists in 1979.

### *1.3.2. The Jihad and its visions: religious and political*

The other concept representing, together with the one of the Caliph examined in the previous paragraph, the cultural and doctrinal basis of fundamentalism and of its terrorist drift is the concept of Jihad.

This concept is present in the Qur’an as a duty of the believer but can interpreted in several ways: in the first period, therefore the one of the “well-guided Caliphs”, the interpretation was without any doubt that of the “Holy War”: the one the believer has to wage to bring the whole earth under God’s dominance<sup>30</sup>. It embodies therefore an ideal thrust to the conquest of a world empire, in which the Islamic faith should be the dominant one (but not necessarily the only one<sup>31</sup>).

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<sup>29</sup> Even today in Saudi Arabia it is strictly forbidden to practice any religion other than the Islamic one and proselytizing for other religions is a crime punishable with the death (Nessuno tocchi Caino, 2020).

<sup>30</sup> (Cook, 2007).

<sup>31</sup> The Qur’an explicitly admits that “infidels” may live in conquered territories, but they have to pay a tribute and cannot hold public offices.

In the following period of the Dynastic Caliphate, this vision of a war of conquest tends to decline as the expansionist drive of the Islamic empire progressively decreases until it comes to an end (after conquering the whole of North Africa, Spain and penetrating France where they were stopped in Poitiers).

At the turn of the first millennium, we witness therefore a double transformation of the concept of Jihad: there are those who keep seeing it in its war-like dimension but as a defensive war (against the attacks brought by enemies bent on conquering Islamized territories: this applies both to the Mongol threat on the Eastern front and the Christian one surfacing in the Pyrenees or bent on a direct conquest of the holy places through the Crusades) ; others see the jihad in its intimistic and sacred dimension devoid of any military connotation.

A fundamental representative of this second interpretation is Abu Hamid Ghazal (1058- 1111); he goes through all the Qur'an incitements and refers them, at least in his historical juncture, not so much to the "external" war (which he defines the "little jihad) but to the "internal" war: the one each and every believer fights against sin in his perpetual search for a sincere conversion ("great jihad<sup>32</sup>").

This purely religious and intimistic vision of the Jihad prevailed for almost a thousand years: that is until, in the XX<sup>th</sup> century, the "rediscovery" of the Qur'an and Sharia by Wahhabis and Salafists as texts to be interpreted literally proposes once again to a minority, but well equipped and quite large in numbers, of the Islamic world a return to the "holy war".

It has to be said that the expression "holy war", for today's fundamentalists, is essentially defensive in meaning. This is however a very partial limitation: on the one hand, because it is difficult to define the boundaries within which one can feel threatened (even a conquest of Spain could be defined defensive by a "fundamentalist" because once upon a time this land was the one of the Islamic empire); on the other, because once defined the aggressor the war becomes by its very nature without limitations of places and means (as clearly demonstrated by the attack on the Twin towers of September 2001).

Moreover, as made clear by an authoritative Islamic fundamentalist 'Abd Allāh Yūsuf al-'Azzām on the occasion of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the defensive jihad is a sacred duty of every Muslim: from the attacked one to the neighbor to the neighbor's neighbor stretching till the limit of the world<sup>33</sup>.

One of the most important modern expressions of Jihad at the hands of fundamentalists were the two "liberation" wars undertaken by the latter at the end of the XX<sup>th</sup> century: the Palestine liberation war and the Afghanistan liberation war.

The first one originating from the endless tragedy of the Palestinian people, which had left what is today Israel at the foundation of the Zionist state, right after WWII and the Holocaust. Hardly tolerated also by Jordan, the country in which they had found shelter, Palestinians were traditionally represented at

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<sup>32</sup> Many modern Islamic authors (like Morabia, 1993) uphold this vision as the only one compatible with the Qur'an. They stigmatize therefore the warmongering interpretations as betraying the absolutely peaceful meaning of the original text. Other authors (Cook, 2007) are however of the view that the latter is no more than a posthumous reinterpretation of the war oriented original message, and therefore at best a praiseworthy attempt to live one's faith in a more modern and tolerant way.

<sup>33</sup> Fatwa "Defense of the Islamic territories", first duty according to the law of 1979.

international level by the secularly oriented OLP. However, when the latter reached a deal with Israel through the “Oslo Agreements” of 1993, the initiative was taken by the fundamentalists, divided in two groups (one of them significantly called “Islamic jihad” and the other Hamas).

In particular, they started the so called “intifada” against Israel and managed to become the main force in the Palestinian territory (in the only election which took place in 2006) without however finding a solution to the more and more intricate Palestinian issue.

A greater success had, at the beginning, the war in Afghanistan. A war in which the Islamic fighters, also thanks to the huge financial contributions from Saudi Arabia, managed to prevail over the powerful Soviet invasion forces and to set in place a fundamentalist government dominated by the extremist Islamic students (Taliban).

This government will remain in place till the armed intervention of the USA in 2001 (as a consequence of the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers).

### *1.3.3. Modern terrorism from Al-Qaeda to IS*

It is precisely during the Afghan war that both the ideological basis and the leading group of modern terrorism take shape. From a doctrinal point of view the ideological support to the fight, not only against the invading “non – believers” (Soviet in Afghanistan, Americans in Iraq, Israelis in Palestine) - but also, and sometimes even more, against the Arab moderate countries (practically all of them except Taliban’s Afghan) - is provided by the above mentioned Abd Allah Yusuf al- Azzam interpretation of Jihad .

And it is in Afghan war that the leader of one of the most active terrorist formations Osama Bin Laden comes to the fore front.

Born in a very rich family he inherits from his parents the family’s fortune but not the allegiance to the Saudi rulers. On the contrary he vehemently opposes them since he considers the latter as traitors, being the ones who had called the US with their soldiers, chaplains and rabbis to settle down in the Holy lands of Arabia (to defend the Saudi dynasty from the Iraqi aggression, but this is not relevant for Osama) .

After the success of the “liberation war” in Afghanistan, it is precisely in Afghanistan that Osama Bin Laden settles down and organizes a world-wide terrorist network, called Al-Qaeda<sup>34</sup>, of Wahhabi fundamentalist inspiration. Its main purpose was to be the liberation of Islamic countries from Western influence, especially the American one, through an Islamic Jihad which Osama explicitly mentions in a fatwa of February 1998.

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<sup>34</sup> The origin of the name is uncertain: the Arab expression means “basis” and, according to Osama Bin Laden, (interview to al Jazeera of 2001) it referred to some basis or training camps set up during the war in Afghanistan to train volunteers. Others, however, believe that it derives from the locution “Qaeda bayanat” which means, in Arabic, the data-base with reference to the Afghan volunteers memorized in organization’s PC. In other word Al-Qaeda would mean: the “register”.



Al-Qaeda operates through terrorist attacks, and the first ones the organization claims credit for were the attacks against the US Embassies in Nairobi (Kenya) and Dar Es Salaam (Tanzania) which took place on 8/7/1998 (anniversary of the arrival of US troops in Saudi Arabia in frame of the Desert Shield operation). The most awful show of the terrorist capacities of Al-Qaeda was of course the attack on the Twin Towers of 9/11/2001 which caused in total 2996 victims<sup>35</sup> and proved that Al Qaeda was in a condition to strike everywhere and not only in Arab or anyway Islamic countries.

These attacks were followed by a number of targeted actions aimed at hitting US allies like in Spain (Madrid 2004), UK (London 2005) as well as in “traitor” Islamic countries hosting foreigners (Bali 2002 and Sharm el- Sheikh 2005) with victims mostly among Western tourists. The military reaction to the 2001 terrorist attacks (invasion of Afghanistan and down-fall of the Taliban government) substantially reduced Al-Qaeda’s centralized operational capabilities. Its structure however, based also and mostly on semi-independent “cells” spread almost all over the world, did not stop planning and organizing terrorist attacks also after Osama Bin Laden death (2011) and his replacement at the top of the organization with his right-hand man: Ayman al- Zawahiri.

A feature distinguishing Al-Qaeda from other previous terrorist organizations that preceded it, and this is essential in connection to the objectives of the present work, is its use of audio and video communication. An operating modality started by Osama immediately after the attacks on the Twin Towers and continued even after his death both with posthumous videos and with communications/announces by his successor. If Al-Qaeda’s structure, both on account of its founder’s decision and for operational reasons especially after the collapse of the Taliban’s regime, is structured as an entity territorially distributed, secret and tentacular, with “sleeping cells” and so to say “free-lance” acolytes which compensate the weaker organization with a greater unpredictability of their acts, a different story takes place at the border between Syria and Iraq.

Here an organization emerges with a state-like character, making an explicit reference to the Caliphate of the most ancient Muslim tradition.

This organization called *ad-Dawla al-Islāmiyya fī al-‘Irāqī wa sh-Shām*, in English Islamic State of Islam and the Levant (ISIL), is the offspring of an anti-USA resistance movement during the second Gulf war (March 2003) and even more during the troubled post-war period. A period in which the Shia majority in Iraq took the upper end over the Sunni minority, which had been the very core of Saddam Hussein’s strength and was now living with greatest concern the fact of being overpowered by the Shia “separate brothers”, by the important Kurdish minority and, of course, by the invading “non-believers”.

In this complex situation, the terrorist group led by Mus’ab al Zarqawi called *Tawhid wa-l-I-Jihad* took at first an ideological and organizational path not too different from the one of Al-Qaeda, so much so that it came to present itself as Al-Qaeda in Iraq: in the following period, especially since the withdrawal of the

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<sup>35</sup> This number is greater than the 2459 victims of the attack on Pearl Harbor at the onset of WWII. It represents therefore the bloodiest attack ever occurred on US soil, be it in a state of war or peace.

US forces from the Iraqi territory (2011), and profiting from the impossibility for the central Shia - led government control the whole country, it managed to take control of a large swath of Iraqi territory and expand in the neighboring Syrian border zone ( also in this case thanks to a weakening of the central government on account of an internal upheaval<sup>36</sup>).

On June 29, 2014 (the first day of Ramadan) the “Islamic state” was founded on the occupied territory with Al-Baghdadi at its head (successor to al- Zarqawi killed in battle), proclaiming himself the new Caliph and therefore the leader of Muslims all over the world.

Since then a real competition has begun between Al-Qaeda and IS on whom is entitled to represent and lead the Islamic world in its fight against the West and moderate forces: this war is waged on the double track of the search for the most blatant terrorist attack<sup>37</sup> and of a continuous propaganda where ideological declarations alternate with propaganda oriented videos a sort of terror commercials, like the ones on the “executions” of presumed Western spies<sup>38</sup>.

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<sup>36</sup> (Plebani,2016)

<sup>37</sup> Orsini (2016) calls it the “bloody regularity”: “Whenever ISIL monopolizes the public scene, Al-Qaeda tries to organize a massacre to recover the lost visibility”,

<sup>38</sup> The first shooting of a Westerner’s beheading (the American journalist James Foley) dates back to 8/19/2014 and it appeared on YouTube.

# Chapter 2. Terrorists and New Media

## 2.1 Internet Deep Web and Dark Web

### 2.1.1. Definition

When we talk about illegal operations connected with the utilization of Internet or, to be more precise, with the resort to Internet by criminal organizations we often refer in a more or less explicit way to the Deep Web, that is to the invisible part of the World wide Web.

To define the concept of Deep Web we have to remember that the Web as such is made up of a multitude of documents (the so-called pages) which are located in an enormous number of computers distributed across the world. In this condition of multitude and spatial dispersion of the information it is almost impossible to find the document we are interested in (and whose content we know only in its very broad lines) if not through the intermediation of web sites whose specific task is precisely to search documents on the basis of a number of “key words”. These sites are the well-known “research engines”, like Google<sup>39</sup> daily used by all the web users for their own searches in order to accede to the Internet sites of their interest. We could therefore assume that all the web pages can be accessible but this is not true: there are in fact pages which are not registered in the “research engines” and are therefore in a way “secret”; these pages constitute, surprisingly, the largest part of the volume of the pages hosted by the World Wide Web (according to quite reliable<sup>40</sup> estimates around 99%). This is one of the reasons why the “nomenclature” of Deep Web was created referring

at the same time to the fact that this part of the Web is “below the surface” and therefore undetectable and to the analogy with the iceberg whose larger part is below water level.

In fact, identifying the Deep Web with the part containing illegal or crime-related information is excessive and in a number of ways misleading; there are very good and legal reasons why a number of web pages is not published on the “search engines”. Let us consider, for instance, the pages of a given industry web site which can be acceded to only by the latter’s employees or those generated more or less automatically by the apps (the so-called dynamic pages<sup>41</sup>).

Within the Deep Web there is however a part which is deliberately hidden, anonymous and secret only in order to be able to avoid police controls regularly taking place in the “emerged” part of the web.

This small (in terms of dimension) part of the Deep Web constitutes the “Darknet”.

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<sup>39</sup> Google alone covers around 92% of the searches carried out in the world. If we add to this share those of Bing Yahoo and Baidu (relatively unknown in Europe but absolute leader in China) we reach only with these four sites almost 98% of the searches carried out the world over (STAT counter, 2020)

<sup>40</sup> (Brightplaner, 2012)

<sup>41</sup> (Florindi, 2016)

Access to this network is only possible through specific software's (such as TOR<sup>42</sup>). These soft wares, on the one hand, make it possible to accede to the darknet; on the other hand, implement very sophisticated net protocols which make it particularly difficult (if no altogether impossible) to trace conversations and exchanges of files guaranteeing the users a good level of anonymity. It is precisely for this guarantee of anonymity that the darknet is used for actions against the law<sup>43</sup>: from a simple exchange of files protected by a copyright (films, music, video games, commercials..) to the sale of forbidden material such as weapons, explosives, drugs, to the sale of information essential for the realization of informatics related crimes (lists of users ID or passwords for the access to personal sites, to shared resources or even to banks).

### *2.1.2. Use by the organized crime*

It is obvious that the possibility to have non-traceable world-wide contacts represents a great opportunity for criminal organizations to increment and internationalize their business. In particular there are evidences<sup>44</sup> of resort to darknet for the implementation of all the different phases of international trade in arms: from the discovery of illegally owned arms (stolen, transformed from toy weapons or collected in non-conventional war theaters such as the Middle East or the Balkans) to their intermediation (almost exclusively carried out by organizations connected to local criminality

(such as Mafia, Camorra or Ndrangheta in Italy), to their retail sale (with real shops with pictures, descriptions and special offers) accessible from special platforms such as TOR.

Even economic transactions connected with this market are often totally handled by electronic means resorting to cryptocurrencies<sup>45</sup> which offer the considerable advantage of generating financial movements non-traceable via the standard procedures utilized by the Judiciary Police (e.g. bank investigations, control of credit card fluxes, control of cash flows through the signaling of o the serial numbers of the banknotes higher in value).

A more thorough analysis of the use of darknet by organized crime has been conducted by the British criminologist McGuire<sup>46</sup>: He divided the organized crime utilizing darknet in three groups:

- Criminal hubs operating “exclusively on line” made up by informatics experts (often defined as “crackers” or “malicious hackers<sup>47</sup>” using their expertise to commit crimes typical of the cyberspace: from the stealing of digital identities to the violations of reserved sites, to the stealing

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<sup>42</sup> Some parts of darknet possess other security levels allowing access only from specific computers which serve as a bridge (server proxy) between the emerged net and the “deep “one

<sup>43</sup> In fact, the concept “contrary to the laws” does not necessarily possess a negative meaning. Since it refers to the technical meaning of the sentence: there are for instance examples of use of darknet for communication among victims of political persecution in countries with authoritarian regimes. In this case resort to darknet is certainly against those country's laws but not necessarily to be blamed from a moral or ideological point of view.

<sup>44</sup> (Nunzi, 2016)

<sup>45</sup> “Digital instrument used to buy and sell through cryptography, in order to make transactions secure, verify them and control the creation of new liquidity; money, virtual currency” (Treccani, Neologisms 2018)

<sup>46</sup> (Mc Guire, 2012)

<sup>47</sup> The adjective “malicious” is to specify that the action aims at committing a criminal act. This is not implicit in the word “hacker” since the latter might carry out his activities for neutral goals or even noble ones.

of passwords, to “informatics blackmailing” activities implemented through the so called ransomware<sup>48</sup>

- “Hybrid” groups operating both online and offline feeding one activity with the other. A typical example of these groups are those stealing on line codes and credit card passwords, subsequently proceeding to their duplication in order to use them in normal ATMs for cash withdrawal.
- Criminal groups mostly operating offline, therefore in real life, but resorting to darknet for some marginal aspects of their activities. A case in point is the typical organized crime dealing with narcotics import and trafficking and resorting to darknet in order to widen so to say its horizon and reach customers preferring this “protected” channel to an open-air interaction with a pusher.

This last group includes the different terrorist organizations. It is in fact evident that their activity takes place entirely in the real world where their typical actions occur with bombs, weapons but also via less usual but equally murderous instruments<sup>49</sup>. However, in order to organize these actions a “backstage” action is needed for the definition of the objectives, the coordination of different people involved and the availability of the offensive instruments.

The communications and commercial transactions (such as the acquisition of explosives) making up this “support logistics” to the terrorist activities if carried out via the usual channels of communication, such as the telephone, may quite easily be intercepted by national or international security forces through their intelligence operations (such as the so called “Echelon network”<sup>50</sup>).

These forms of control are equally efficient, and may be even more, on private communications carried out through the emerged part of the web (such as e-mails or via WhatsApp) but prove highly problematic when they have to monitor darknet. For this reason, terrorist’s logistic communications (as well as those of organized crime) may conveniently migrate from the emerged part to the submerged part of the web in a search for the highest possible anonymity.

There are however two major differences in the way organized crime and terrorism use Internet: the first one concerns the capacity to use directly the informatics instrument in its different aspects. This capacity is quite low in the case of so to say “traditional” organized crime as mafias, drug cartels, which therefore generally resorts to specialists in the illegal informatics sphere recruited by the organization for this specific task<sup>51</sup>; on the contrary, terrorist organizations, in particular the Islamic ones, also thanks to the quite low

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<sup>48</sup> The most known typology of these softwares is the one which renders personal (files, films, pictures) data on a PC inaccessible by encoding them. The unfortunate utilizer is solicited for money (through cryptocurrencies or even via credit cards) in order to get the password to recover his data which would be otherwise definitely lost with a huge damage in moral and/or economic terms.

<sup>49</sup> Let us remember for instance the terror attacks to murder innocent citizens which started with the carnage in Nice of 7/14/2016 (86 victims), and the following ones in Germany (Berlin 12/19 2016, 12 victims) and Spain Barcelona, 8/17/2017, (14 victims)

<sup>50</sup> Even if the name Echelon is widely utilized by media it is not a real network. It has in fact more to do with the systematic intercepting of all private transmissions through automatized systems searching for “tell-tales” to define the possible dangerousness of messages. The most worrisome ones are then verified through a human control, because containing a higher frequency of tell-tales.

<sup>51</sup> (Anselmi, 2019)

average age of their members, tend to show a great capacity to operate with informatics in general (and in particular with social networks, as I will later illustrate).

The other huge difference resides in terrorism's desire to show up, in sharp contrast to organized crime which the more powerful it is, the more tends to hide. Ideological extremism, and even the terrorist act, has a meaning only if it is public, accompanied by the identification of the author be it a person or an organization. So much so that it has always made of claiming responsibility for the act (in general via the press or through Internet) as well as for its objectives and ideological meaning one of its distinguishing features. Therefore, if the essence of terrorism is "propaganda", before and after the act, resort to the web cannot be limited to the hidden or also simply submerged part of it but it must concern also, and in particular, the part which is above the water: that is, the public one. With a view to being able to so to say hit everybody with the force of its message and the infinite multiplication of the terror generated by its acts. As we have seen in the first chapter when an ideology gets structured to the point of dominating a state or becoming a state (as it happened at the beginning of the twentieth century with Nazism or at the beginning of the twenty-first with the Islamic state) public propaganda becomes a primary function, and the person in charge of it becomes one of the main assistants of the supreme leader. Since propaganda in the twentieth century mostly means presence on the web (on the emerged Web) this is the approach adopted by terrorists as we will see in the following sections.

## 2.2 The visible web for mass communication

### 2.2.1. Global recruiting

The structuring of a terrorist project, and even more of a whole extremist “Islamic state”, needs the active involvement of many actors. On the other hand, any pervasive ideal needs to recruit proselytes and this need in modern times, as we have seen, may mostly be met thanks to mass communication media.

That said, terrorist organizations cannot obviously resort to instruments such as televisions, radio channels or even the press. They can on the contrary easily accede to the new media mostly Internet-based and operating through different forms of exchange and broadcasting of messages, such as social networks (Facebook, Twitter) and the audio-video systems of exchange (YouTube).

In fact, the possibility offered by the new media to terrorists of acquiring thus a new propaganda channel is definitely a development deserving all our attention for its many dangerous implications.

Biased information conveyed through these media by terrorist organizations can in fact prove a multiplier effect in terms of recruiting and spreading of false news. Media of this nature do not present in fact that centralized control of contents which permits an incisive action of repressive nature: in other words while it is possible to sanction (to the point of a forced closure or a prohibition of broadcasting) TV or radio networks broadcasting terrorist or armed Jihad propaganda, or also simply being “soft” on international terrorist organizations<sup>52</sup>, it is technically impossible to do the same for contents posted on a social network or on a “sharing” system. Even when a particular content or a whole account is held to be one of “terrorist propaganda” one can at best remove that specific account: something which does not prevent the author from opening another one with the same content in a few minutes<sup>53</sup>.

It is therefore in the fragmented world of Internet that the propaganda actions take place: from the ones aimed at recruiting to those calling to the armed struggle which can occur in two distinct, but not necessarily separate, forms:

- Direct and personal affiliation to the IS “army”, which implies moving to IS controlled territories. It is the so called “Foreign fighters” phenomenon which has involved no less than 28.000 people coming from 80 different states (among which at least 5000 from Europe) for active service in IS<sup>54</sup>. It is the so called “Hijrah”. that is “emigration” to the land of Islam. But, as observed by some scholars, the new media – for their easy access and outreach capacity, can give any young Westerner

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<sup>52</sup> It is not by chance that the TV network Al Jazeera (which certainly does not have a pro- terrorist orientation) has been accused, for the simple fact of diffusing videos produced by IS and of being somehow implicated in terrorist propaganda. This is also why other Arab countries (led by Saudi Arabia) have made pressures for it to be closed down.

<sup>53</sup> (Lieberman, 2017, p.195)

<sup>54</sup> (Abdullah bin Khaled, 2019); on the participation of Italian citizens to the IS army see for instance the judgment pronounced by the Milan’s Tribunal condemning Maria Giulia Sergio, alias “Fathima Zahara”, for association for terrorist purposes (“associazione con finalità di terrorismo”) on the basis of art 270bis of the Italian Penal Code.

for one or the other reason attracted by ISI propaganda the opportunity to join the “cause” , to the extreme ( in some cases of really committing a terrorist action in any Western country and simply wait for the IS to claim responsibility. It is the phenomenon of the so called “lone wolves”, structurally different from the one which will be examined in the following paragraph of the “peripheral cells” but animated by the same feelings of hatred toward Western culture and values.

- The creation of “peripheral cells”, often with declared terrorist objectives in their respective states (Europe, USA, moderate Arab countries) under more or less direct IS (or even Al-Qaeda) control; these cells are often at least animated by foreign fighters: in other words, by personnel on the one hand experienced in the use of weapons; on the other, characterized by a fanatical determination forged in a real fight.

The leaders of the most sophisticated Islamist movements always had a clear perception of the importance of propaganda for the success of their ideas and recruiting activities: for instance Ayman al- Zawahiri, at that time second in command in Al-Qaeda, has allegedly said the following: “ *We are in a battle , and more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media*<sup>55</sup>”. It is moreover evident that these movements have demonstrated to know how to utilize the new media and all their potentialities in a surprisingly professional and accurate way. In particular these organizations draw the maximum advantages from:

- The simplicity and low cost of the use of Internet as compared to any other “traditional” means of communication. In particular, as already mentioned, this entails the possibility to create (or recreate, should any erasing occur) new groups, accounts or channels in a few minutes, with minor expenses and with an almost unlimited potentiality of reach.
- Differentiation and personalization of the message; this may be achieved in a “natural” way in messages conveyed through social networks whereby groups of friends tend to shape up on the basis of socio-economic and cultural common parameters. It is in other words possible (as it has in fact happened) to engage a change in the style of language, or in the very content of the message according to the public the message wants to reach: for instance, a public of very young people or a bit more mature; convinced Islamists or people still to be converted; of people of Westerner or Middle-Eastern origin. It is worth noticing that the content of the video may bring Western young people potentially open to the “fundamentalist message” in a very subtle but at the beginning not necessarily violent way. A potential “lone wolf” could for instance find interest in videos broadcasted on YouTube on the use of fire arms: (for instance on how to autonomously clean a rifle) so that he/she may be properly trained at least in this respect should the moment come to pass to violent action. But even when the message is directed to a larger and apparently undifferentiated audience as it happens for the videos on YouTube, it has been observed that the

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<sup>55</sup> (Cottee, 2015)



comment in English tends to present Jihad mostly as a personal realization whereas those in Arabic emphasize the idea of an “appeal to a legitimate war” for the Muslims<sup>56</sup>.

- Overcoming of the “entry barriers” that the same people (or their social environment) oppose to propaganda. While a book or a newspaper have to be bought and a declaredly Pro-IS TV network (should it exist) has to be voluntarily selected, you may end up in a jihadist forum simply by following the “sharing” procedures on a friend’s social media<sup>57</sup>.
- Amplification of the conveyed message simply thanks to the multiplication of the “relaunches” not so much by a real public but, more precisely, by computerized transaction generators (the so-called bots). In other words, the terrorist have proven able to gain positions in the ranking of consent in Facebook and, even more, Twitter, gaining in this way a great popularity and real followers<sup>58</sup>.
- Privileged communication vis-à-vis people who are highly vulnerable to “radical” propaganda. It is well known that situations of social alienation, such as the difficult living conditions in Western cities peripheries, the difficulty of integrating into the host nation coupled with the existential malaise typical of the adolescence represent a privileged ground for extremist propaganda. The selection of the “friendship groups”, the “tailoring” of the message and also the techniques to so to say “camouflage” for instance through especially produced videogames represent forms of communication directly aimed at this public and its vulnerabilities.

Naturally the propaganda broadcasting represents only the first phase of the complex psychological mechanism leading, from a sharing of the IS (or any other movement) vision, to the decision to put one’s life at the service of the concerned extremist organization and of its goals. The following steps are activated by small groups, or even by one-on-one confidences, till the final decision and its operational phase (which often implies moving from the country of origin to the territory of the so-called Islamic State). Also, in this phase the use of Internet represents a precious asset for the terrorists since it offers the possibility to create, first, discussion groups (for instance on Facebook) where the more radical elements manage to consolidate the “beliefs” of the newcomers and of the still hesitant ones. Communication systems, mostly one-on-one like WhatsApp, provide then the support needed for the last theoretical phase (the one of indoctrination) as well as of the following ones: logistics preparation and eventual displacement to the terrorist attack location. It is worth noticing in this context that some apps of the “emerged” part of Internet, more particularly the messages via WhatsApp, offer a considerable protection against the possibility of being intercepted thanks to presence of powerful cryptographic systems: this is why communications via WhatsApp almost always manage to escape control by law enforcement authorities or intelligence Agencies<sup>59</sup>.

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<sup>56</sup> (Lieberman 2017, p.102)

<sup>57</sup> Ibidem

<sup>58</sup> Ibidem, page 103

<sup>59</sup> This is why the US government (through the Attorney General W. Barr) has in 2019 requested the WhatsApp producer (Zuckerberg) to provide the system with a “backdoor” allowing investigators, in given circumstances, to force the security of the system: a very high security also for the powerful CIA and FBI systems.

### 2.2.2. *Creation of a network of accomplices*

As observed by a number of scholars, “recruiting” by the Islamic state does not exclusively address the potential “fighters”. In fact the “logical” leap required for the transition from a terrorist movement (such as Al-Qaeda<sup>60</sup>) to a “state” also, if not mostly, implies a complete structure of support in terms of logistics, economy, social organization absolutely needed for the stable control of a territory and therefore its organization in some kind of social structure/form. It is a message clearly received by its followers as shown by the fact that one of the first US nationals, intercepted in Denver in 2014 while trying to reach the Islamic state, has publicly and repeatedly declared that she wanted to serve IS as a baby-sitter<sup>61</sup>.

But in order to support this kind of involvement of “non-fighters”, the propaganda message has to be adjusted and cannot be limited to the images of weapons, fights, executions. It is necessary in other words to present a “normal” Islamic state where families live with their daily occupations and concerns, with the acts of normal care and affection between parents and children. Is more than anything else necessary to offer the image of a place where young people, in addition to fighting, have fun, take a bath in the pool, spend their days in a joyful mood.

In this way, the IS experience is presented as some sort of “romantic utopia” full of sensations of real freedom as opposed to the daily dull life one can live in a Western metropole. From this point of view IS



**Figure 4 - Picture from a propagandistic IS video (YouTube Italy)**

propaganda presenting the Islamic state as a kind of “glamorous<sup>62</sup>” and romantic experience is less shocking than the violent images but, precisely for this, it can prove more dangerous (at the public opinion level) in terms of recruiting, of diffusion of IS vision, of weaker rejection by society of terrorism and related methods of action<sup>63</sup>.

And if proselytism does not have to necessarily generate a fighter, it can at the same time facilitate the enrolment of a new “IS citizen” with tasks related to logistics, support, assistance.

<sup>60</sup> Even though Al Qaeda did not manage to reach a state-like structure like the one achieved by IS, this objective has repeatedly surfaced in public speeches both by Osama Bin Laden and Ayman Al Zawahiri. It could therefore be inappropriate to consider Al Qaeda solely as a terrorist group.

<sup>61</sup> It is the nineteen years old Shannon Maureen Conley of Denver (Colorado), as reported for instance by Stapleton & Almasry, 2014.

<sup>62</sup> The expression “glamorous lifestyle” referred to how IS presents itself mostly to teen-agers was used for the first time by Secretary of State John Kerry in a summit at the White House on 3/10/ 2015. He wanted in this way give an alert on how young American people, not necessarily belonging the poorest strata of society, could be influenced and conditioned by extremist propaganda.

<sup>63</sup> (Hater, 2015)

This is all truer for the different “terrorist cells” generated in the territory of Western countries. Also, within these units, a network has to be set up of support to the terrorist “fighters”: that is those who perpetrate the attack including a suicidal one. A support network to be utilized inter alia for the finding of weapons, in the preparation of the attack and, more than anything, in the preservation of anonymity vis-à-vis the continuous search of terrorists by the national and international police forces. It is therefore essential that a relatively high number of people (if compared with the very reduced dimension of many terrorist cells) be, in some way, sympathetic to the fight carried out by the fighters or at least to the terrorist’s ideals; that these people show a level of “sharing” of the terrorists vision that, while not leading to active involvement, implies at least some sort of benign indifference or equal distance as though the terrorist emergency were such as to allow a half measure: not siding with the terrorists but at the same time not denouncing them<sup>64</sup>. This is another and maybe the most dangerous effect of the “supporting propaganda”: a weakening of the social response to the terrorist phenomenon.

### 2.2.3. *Message to the world: Black flag on Rome*

If the recruiting messages and their communication operations are, at least partially, something new emerged in the twenty-first century what has always characterized terrorism is communication to the largest possible of violent actions carried out as well as of the latter’s practical and symbolic objectives. At the same time since the semantic root of the word terrorist is terror it is evident that in order to terrorize a population carrying out brutal actions is not enough being no less important that these actions are made public in the most evident and pervasive way. One could even say, a bit paradoxically, that the violent act, as far from being the terrorist’s ultimate goal, is the instrument through which a “message of terror<sup>65</sup>” can be sent to a very large public.

This communication of terror can be divided in an implicit (and sometimes explicit way) in a number of messages classified according to the different groups to which the message is addressed, for instance:

- Towards declared enemies (as for example Heads of state/government or military leaders) the message is of the kind: “this is just the beginning of the apocalypse we can unleash on you, and we’ll do it unless you do what we tell you<sup>66</sup>”.
- Towards those under the rule of the adversaries, for instance the citizens of an enemy state who do not in general take part in actions against the organization, nor contribute to the organization’s political battle the message is of the kind: “overturn your leaders or you are going to suffer from the consequences of their infamies<sup>67</sup>”.

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<sup>64</sup> Italy, in the years of Red Brigades terrorism (the so called “anni di piombo”), has gone through a similar experience with many groups of non-terrorist “avant-garde” declaring to be “neither with the State nor with the Red Brigades”

<sup>65</sup> (Schmid, 2005)

<sup>66</sup> (Mc Allister & Schmid, 2011, p.246)

<sup>67</sup> Ibidem

- Towards those sympathetic to the organization the message is the following: “we are showing you that we are the future and that we are strong enough to build it, therefore join us in an explicit way<sup>68</sup>”.

In terms of diffusion techniques, historically the only instruments at the terrorist’s disposal to make their acts of violence known have been the traditional communication tools (newspapers, radio, television); the method employed has been to “claim” the act (that is the communiqué sent to one (or more) of these communication tools immediately after the implementation of an act of violence: a communiqué which, on the one hand, would attribute the responsibility of the act to a specific group and, on the other hand, would in a more or less rational way explain its reasons. The aforesaid media, while firmly condemning the violent



**Figure 5 - 9-11, II plain’s arrival towards the Twin Towers (CNN News)**

gestures and stating their strong opposition to their alleged motivations, did in fact provide an amplifying effect to the act of violence bringing, in some cases, local and quite limited acts to the world’s attention. This simple sequence based on the triangle terrorist act/vindication of the same act/diffusion to the media, has been substantially followed all through the twentieth century by all the terrorist organizations whatever their nature: from those of ethnic/irredentist character such as the IRA in the UK or ETA in Spain) to those of more “political” nature (Baader – Meinhof in Germany or the Red Brigades in Italy).

With the 9/11 event a much more sophisticated technique of communicating a terrorist attack comes to the forefront. A technique based on the very logic and timing of the action: the resort to two distinct planes separated in time proves the clear intent to make the second impact a TV event of an unheard emotional force.

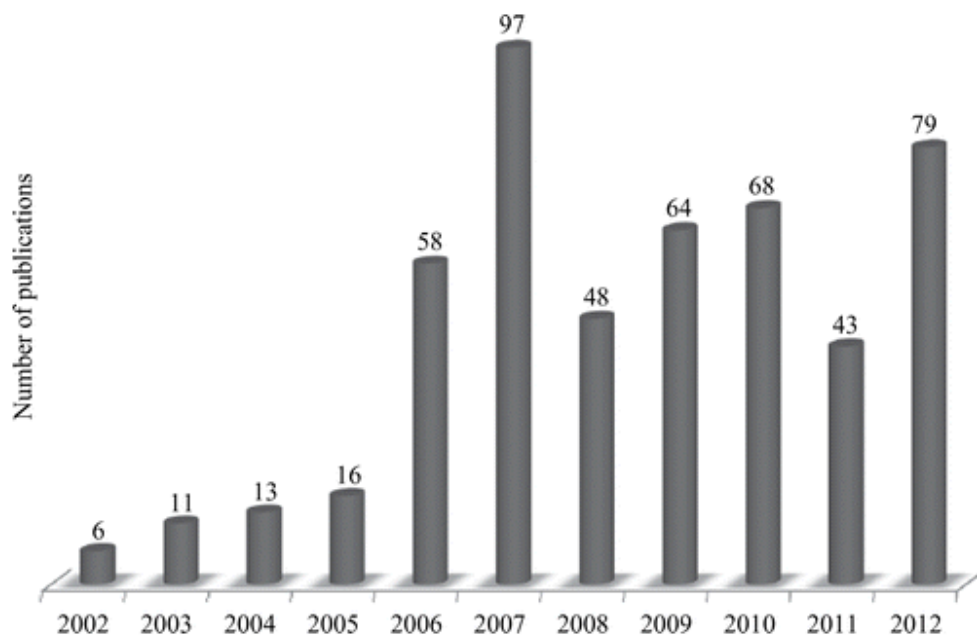
This kind of choice reveals, on the one hand, a deep knowledge of the “media system” in order to be reasonably sure that TV networks would “cover” almost in real time the news of the first plane’s impact and of the following fire; on the other hand, a “submission” of the logics of the action to its propaganda. It would have in fact been technically much easier and more secure from a “military” point of view to envisage an action in parallel by the two planes in order to avoid that the status of alert triggered by the first emergency compromise the positive outcome of the second attack<sup>69</sup>. Osama Bin Laden has however accepted to run this risk in order to achieve the desired result in terms of communication.

<sup>68</sup> Ibidem

<sup>69</sup> In fact one of the four planes the terrorist wanted to utilize for their attacks (the one destined for the White House) was blocked, by its very passengers, just because they had been made aware of the first impact against the Twin Towers: a reaction which might not have occurred in the case of a contemporary attacks on the four objectives (Twin Towers; Pentagon; White House)

The terror attack of 9/11, and the irruption of Al-Qaeda as an important player in the world agenda, represents a watershed in terrorist communication also for another reason: the tool utilized to claim responsibility for the act was not the traditional communiqué but a video message. As a corollary to the choice of the image instead of a letter, the video was not delivered to a newspaper but to a TV station. On the one hand, this may represent a choice of a purely “technical” nature (a TV network can, and in a way, has to directly broadcast in its news a video so received, whereas a newspaper can do it only indirectly); on the other hand, this states the superiority of TV over newspapers in all the dimensions of modern communication, including the one diffused by terrorists.

It has however to be noted that the decision to communicate via images, to privilege audio-visual communication to all the other possible choices does not originate with the 9/11 events: Al-Qaeda has been systematically using this method since the last decade of last century with an impressive progression. It is however in 2001 (and therefore with 9/11) that this kind of communications becomes more structured, so much so that it evolves into a real audio-video production company called As-Sahab<sup>70</sup>, thanks “inter alia” to the collaboration of young people having attended Western media production schools<sup>71</sup>, with rich production activity as shown by the graphic in figure number 3.



**Figure 6 - number of annual products of the As-Sahab, Al-Qaeda's audio-video production company(Cetorelli 2019)**

The graphic clearly shows a quantitative growth of the multimedia presence of terrorism, accompanied by at least two other trends: a “disintermediation” of the publication/s and the growth of the content in violence (and therefore of terror generated) of the different videos. The first trend marks a clear separation with Al-Qaeda's original pattern of adhesion to “traditional media” techniques: in fact if Al-Qaeda's first videos or

<sup>70</sup> (Holbrook, 2011)

<sup>71</sup> A case in point is that of the US citizen Adam Pearlman, converted to Islam in 1997 and joining Al Qaeda in 2001. He is most likely one of the most important Al Qaeda's video producers on account of his good knowledge of US cultural world.

films were mostly interviews carried out by big TV networks (such as for instance the interviews to Osama Bin Laden by the Independent on 7/10/1996 or by CNN in 1997<sup>72</sup>), already in the second phase films are home-made (that is produced by the already mentioned As-Sahab company) and conveyed anonymously to the great TV networks, with a preference for AL Jazeera in Arabic which, may be for this reason, has often been labeled may be unfairly as so to say as “sympathizing with terrorism”. A third phase begins around the end of last decade of this century bringing to a total independence from traditional media: at the beginning Al- Qaeda’s and then IS’s videos are diffused directly on broadcasting sites (YouTube in the first place) with no possibility this time of “cultural mediation”. Quite paradoxically this decision leads to a greater visibility conferred to the above said terrorist acts by the traditional media fearing to be overrun by the terrorist videos in “real time”. So much so that these traditional media often decide to broadcast the file or video on their main channels and/or also during their news programs.

The other visible trend by the above-mentioned terrorist organizations is the greater amount of violence contained in their message and its more articulate explanation. If the typical message of Osama Bin Laden or of Ayman al-Zawahiri is awful in its contents but at the same type very formal, almost so to say “politically correct”, based as it is on a foreground image of the protagonist, the format undergoes a major transformation and discontinuity when IS appears on the media scene. The main message is no more entrusted to words but to the image. This is why IS’s message is from the start characterized by a continuous search for the greatest possible emotional impact; a key element to correctly appraise this increase in the emotional involvement and at the same time the complete overturning of codified “war rules”, those so laboriously and progressively finalized through international agreements such as the Geneva Convention, is offered by treatment of the image of prisoners. If already during the first Iraq War propaganda videos (at the time by Saddam Hussein’s regime) used to show prisoners and often oblige them to pronounce messages (in violation of all international rules), we witnessed in 2014 the execution by IS of “war prisoners”, such as the American journalist James Wright Foley beheaded live on YouTube, by a “converted<sup>73</sup>” Western citizen on 8/19/2014. This execution transmitted “live” was followed in a very short time-span by those of another American journalist (Steven Sotloff, 9/2/14) and two UK aid-workers (David Haines 9/13/2014 and Alan Henning /10/3/2014), of a US aid-worker, executed despite his conversion to Islamism (Peter Edward Kassig, 11/16/2014). All these executions, in addition to the direct and explicit violence of the act (shown in all its cruelty), possess powerful emotional multipliers such as the clothing imitating the one reserved to those sentenced to death or the words full of contempt pronounced in an excellent English by the executioner, to emphasize so to say the historical “nemesis” of the converted and “good “ Westerner executing the “non-converted and invading” Westerners (and it does not really matter that many among the latter were not soldiers but media professionals or even aid- workers). When a Western executioner is no more available (the latter having been killed in an aerial attack), new strategies are devised to increase the

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<sup>72</sup> (Holbrook, 2011 page 283)

<sup>73</sup> Mohamed Emzawi, born in Kuwait but British citizen since 1994 (when he was 6 years old) and living almost always in London where he graduated in 2010. His excellent English made him known with the pseudonym of Jihadi John.

emotional impact of the videos. For example: having the death of a Japanese prisoner (Haruna Yukawa, 1/24/2015) announced by a fellow citizen equally an IS prisoner later also publicly executed (Kenji Goto, 1/30 /2015). Finally when even the scene of a beheading is considered by the terrorists no more sufficient to provoke strong emotions and terrorize, a decision is taken to go a step further in horror by burning alive a Jordan citizen, that is an Arab brother even if may be not wholly siding with the West, the fighter pilot Mu'adh Al-Kasasbeh.

When the threat only to the “invading crusaders”, that is to the Western citizens “having invaded the Islamic lands”, appears too limited in scope an even darker message is sent: we will bring war and our conquest into the very heart of your empire and since, in the wrong vision of the Caliphate, the war under way is a religious one the very heart of the Western world is Rome.

As observed in a detailed study<sup>74</sup> by the Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI) the topic of Rome and, sometimes, of Vatican's Italy occupies surprisingly a central place in IS's communication products (be it in the newspapers Dabiq and Rumlyah, in e-books, in its leader's speeches and in in video and films).



**Figure 7 - References to Rome or to Italy in IS communications (source Marone & Olimpo 2018, p.10)**

In fact, even though none of these texts is published in Italian (not even as an option among subtitles), they contain 432 mentions of Rome or Italy as it emerges from figure n.4, with a clear majority of references to Rome (almost 300) as compared to Italy or other Italian cities or even the Vatican. Moreover, of these mentions more than 106 can be classified as real threats, in general of an incoming conquest. And since in modern communication images do quite often possess a value stronger than words we can consider a symbol of this continuous threat to Rome the picture of the photomontage of an IS fighter with his flag marching towards Saint Peter's dome with two symbols: one trying to create the perception of a state-like reality of IS and another one with the center of Christianity, Saint Peter, presented together with a view to suggest the superiority of the first symbol over the second one.

<sup>74</sup> (Marone & Olimpo, 20189)





**Figure 8 - Black flag on Rome (Marone & Olimpo, 2018, p.1)**

### **2.3. Home-made propaganda videos**

Propaganda through video images represent, since the inception of contemporary world, one of the best ways to convey information and, at the same time, obtain consensus. The reasons behind this phenomenon have to be searched more in the past than in the present: since the moment in which the goal of politics has become the search for consensus among the masses and not anymore within the élite, the way of communicating has radically changed. If in the past, the public of potential recipients of the political message was largely homogeneous, given that they belonged to the same social class globally sharing the same interests and vision, things started to change at the beginning of the twentieth century. With the arrival of totalitarian regimes and, later, of universal suffrage political leaders have adjusted gradually to a different communication directed to a new typology of public: the mass or the people whatever the name. It seems a bit paradoxical that one of the less democratic moments in the history of mankind appears to be the one in which political communication decides to take a more popular turn: it looks like if the more a form of government coincides with absolute power the more it needs the consent of the masses. Together with the change in communication the way of conveying the message changes thanks also to important innovations occurred during the last century. Precisely because not only the public has become more heterogeneous, but it is also larger it becomes of paramount importance to be able to reach each and every person with one and only communication tool.

The first instrument is the word and therefore, as a direct consequence, the speech coupled with the invention of radio and radiofrequencies. All this makes it possible that the ideas, opinions and communication of the politicians reach every single citizen at home. Such a development did naturally bring about a great revolution both in terms of communication and search for consensus.

The successive evolution had to do with the visual component: in other words seeing who is talking and not only listening to what he has to tell us. From a purely formal angle this revolution may appear less



momentous than the previous one and might appear as a superfluous duplication of a phenomenon already seen and analyzed. In fact, we reach here the heart of the matter: with the advent of television and the conveying of the different political messages as videos produced by the teams of the different political leaders, propaganda takes a further step forward in terms of acquisition of consent within the masses.

Actually the attention of human beings is more focused when the message is conveyed in the form of a video as compared to a situation in which the two components of the communication tool (audio and video) are kept distinct; the explanation of the above has to be found in the basic principles of communication which define how interlocutors result to be more or less interested to what the source is communicating. When we talk of verbal communication, we have to remember that it is made up of three different components:

1. The verbal component which comprises the information we wish to convey (which we can perceive also in a written message)
2. The co-verbal component: that is the more or less accurate selection of words, the logical structure of the sentence; the voice intonation aimed at making the message clearer for the listener (this component needs recording or an audio transmission)
3. The para-verbal component used in order to accompany words with a series of gestures, sonorous elements, pauses, facial mimics aimed at retaining the listener's attention in order to convey it towards the basic information (this para-verbal component needs a simultaneous transmission of words and image)

This classification helps us to better understand both the evolution of communication and the innovative shift which has accompanied it over centuries, in a continuous effort to unify the three messages within a single message ensuring at the same time the latter's conveyance to the largest possible public. This why today, in modern times, a large number of communication professionals utilizes vide-messages to communicate with their public. The home-made production element arrives in a second historical moment, at the beginning of our historical phase: the reason has to be found in innovation as well as in the evolution of the technological paradigm: an aspect which will be examined in the following paragraphs.

### *2.3.1 Sophistication of the instrument and techniques*

The technological paradigm plays a key role in the realization of a perfect mass communication video. No matter whether it aims at diffusing knowledge or at convincing the recipients of a given thesis, the need for high quality remains the same. More in detail, we have now to specify what we mean when we talk of realization of home-made high-level video.

To this end a little bit of history of cinematography, and more in general of the media world, can help us. Towards the end of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth the above-mentioned technology made it possible to crystalize moving images (video) on a physical support integrating notions

of chemistry, electrostatics and electrodynamics: the camera<sup>75</sup>. The instrument having been found it has to be however observed that all through the twentieth century its use was a privilege detained by big movie production companies (the so-called cinema and, later on, TV “majors”).

The reason why this instrument could be utilized only by a privileged élite has to be found once again in its sophistication and in technique at that time of “image capturing”: the first cameras in fact were not only delicate and essentially static but also very expensive, since, as already said, they had to integrate different processes which had to be so to say “miniaturized” within a single instrument. This implied, on the one hand, that the first “shootings” had to be very efficient and incisive in terms of performance; on the other hand, that a great amount of care and attention was needed both in the utilization and maintenance phases. The cost of the film inside the camera was also very high, being made up of chemical products containing silver.

In other words, for almost half of a century the art of realizing a video pertained to a restricted professional élite connected first with cinema and, later on, with the television world. Cameras gradually became smaller and portable devices maintaining however their intrinsic degree of technological sophistication. The arrival on the market of portable cameras (most recently of the digital ones) as well as of very advanced audio and light capturing systems has introduced a new dimension as far as video-making is concerned: not only in a studio but also so to say at home. It should also be considered that these innovations allowing for a better image capturing in an open space have also greatly contributed to the producers’ and screenwriters’ creativity.

The world of video-makers and of those having ideas are in fact connected: it happens in fact quite often that, in this world, those who have good ideas do not possess the instruments to put them into practice at least at a low cost. One could say that the arrival on the market of YouTube<sup>76</sup> and of private video-making has achieved the following: making it much easier and cheaper to transpose good ideas on a digital support and make them accessible to a multitude of people. If we take a step backward and go back to the great film companies (the “majors”) it is easy to see, by contrast, what kind of a machine, in terms both of people and resources required, was needed to simply get a project started. In this way the number of people, professionals and equipment needed tends to be the same no matter whether I am doing something very simple in technical terms like shooting a “commercial” which can be done in a closed space and with reduced playing time<sup>77</sup> or a movie full of scenes of action requiring many open air shootings. In other words, we can start talking of “personal video-making” only when innovation makes it finally possible to combine

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<sup>75</sup> In this context, we consider substantially less important the passage from the chemical technology of images reproduction (typical of traditional photography and cinema) to the electronic one typical of television first and of video- recording and digital picture later.

<sup>76</sup> In this thesis, we refer almost exclusively to YouTube as a video-sharing platform: not only because it was the first one but also because of its popularity bot in absolute and relative terms. The same logical and factual analysis should however be extended, with minor differences, to the other platforms.

<sup>77</sup> The traditional “Carosello commercials”, which were considered very long ones, lasted around two minutes; today’s commercial last in general 15 o 30 seconds.

within a very restricted team figures as different as the one of the video (or movie) director, of the producer, of the screen-player and of the actor.

Were we to stop at this point, we could think that should YouTube or other platforms making it possible to broadcast home, made videos not exist, the “art” of movie- making or TV-making would not have greatly suffered. In fact, we have not tackled yet the issue of the quality of the final product which remains one of the key variables as far as the public’s satisfaction is concerned: in fact the attention and care for details is an element well present in both typologies. What would have been lost had the YouTube world not taken off is essentially the free circulation of ideas and of experimental texts (with the expression experimental texts we refer to original scree-plays or stories or to the so-called spin offs of products already finalized for the public at large).

To be more precise: like in television we have formats which have multiplied over time, also in YouTube we assist to an almost spontaneous migration of almost the same typology of programs and video structures. The major difference between these two worlds is in fact in the case of You Tube and similar programs, the absence of constraints both at the level of text and language employed. Suffice it to consider the set of regulations and codified written rules shared by the movie or TV “majors” on the topics which cannot be tackled in some specific timeframes in order to protect the most vulnerable strata of society. These limitations do not even exist in the case of private video-making because the platform itself recalls the civil jurisprudence according to which the person who is talking and conveys a message in the forms he has selected, takes upon himself the full responsibility of his remarks and statements. If these remarks/ statements hurt someone’s sensitivities or are not in line with the standards set by public networks, it will be up to the relevant Court to take eventually up the case if so, required by a claimant. Freedom of content and expression has more than once guaranteed to self-made videos not only the possibility to explore topics never before explored but also reach remarkable levels of popularity in all strata of society. Problems have however occurred at the level of correcting actions. There are many possible examples in this regard, and they will be examined in the following paragraphs.

### 2.3.2. *An extreme and completely new choice*

International terrorism is not a phenomenon born in modern times nor is it a given historical fact: if we go back in history terrorist phenomena are ancient and well rooted in territory. However, if we consider our recent history, if not contemporary history, the new feature of terrorism which is by now so to say part of our daily lives is not only its common geographical imprint, which might mislead us, but more than anything else its “international” denomination: international being the adjective coupled with the word terrorism since the 9/11 dramatic attack.

The terrorist cells, since ancient times, are isolated and characterized by independence: and this on the basis of a precise intelligence strategy. Disposing only of the information needed guarantees to the leader of each terrorist cell the possibility to handle only those pieces of information required for its plans: were he to be captured or killed the damage would therefore be limited to his operations. This “modus operandi” has been followed until 2001, when the West has witnessed to a complex and coordinated attack aimed at destabilizing a “status quo” in place since the end of WWII: American imperialism. The attack on the Twin Towers, on the Pentagon and the attempt to destroy the White House were in fact the signal of a structural change in the balance of power within the terrorist galaxy (a change completed by the setting up by IS of a new state-like reality, as examined in the first part of this thesis).

Going back to the topic of communication the message conveyed by the new leader of international terrorism, Osama Bin Laden, was that the West from that moment on would have to defend itself from a new entity fighting with new rules. The immediate US reaction to the attack was to invade Afghanistan and later on Iraq with the objective of destroying the main positions from which the order to attack was launched.

The point is that while it is true that international terrorism had sent out a communiqué and designated its leader, it had said nothing on its territory nor on its Capital. In other words, the Middle East of Islamic faith affirmed that it was at war with the West but there was not a specific city, an installation a structure to hit. A decade later and one Administration later the US have not only cleared a large part of the Middle East from the terrorist presence but also captured and then killed the ones responsible for the events of 2001. At this point it does not take long for a new reality to take form and come in to fill the social, political and in many ways, ideological vacuum created by the US determined action. IS comes to the forefront and since its first communications it proves able to join to the usual concepts of a holy war against the imperialist and capitalist West a very innovative communicative strategy. In the first place, IS identifies as recipients of its messages both its opponents and its followers. A difference which had not been fully appreciated by the previous leader of Islamic terrorism (Osama Bin Laden): the propaganda material of the so-called Islamic State is in fact characterized by a deep and pervasive communication aimed not only to the West but also to its allies. In addition to this distinctive feature, other elements are worth noticing. Elements, which also draw upon concepts typical of marketing strategies but implemented in the light of IS objectives. All the above is complemented by a reference to “values” easy to understand and of immediate impact. More in detail IS propaganda is articulated around several key messages:

1. Brutality, so to gratify its followers and intimidate its opponents<sup>78</sup>.
2. Mercy, keeping therefore the religious reference to a benevolent God vis-à-vis those who commit sin but merciless towards those who betray him<sup>79</sup>.

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<sup>78</sup> In this it links up with the most ancient warrior’s traditions which used to utilize chants and cries with the double objective of scaring the enemies and encouraging their own fighters.

<sup>79</sup> In this respect the tradition of the “Muslim Brotherhood” is particularly strong since they do not only implement acts of terrorism but also social assistance initiatives in favor of the populations they want to protect, such as the Palestinians in the West Bank.

3. Revenge against the West and creation of a global war based on terror
4. War: creation of a military structure well trained, armed and ready to fight with last generation weapons to which clear training videos are provided
5. A sense of belonging: when one enters IS, he loses his previous nationality and acquires the global one of IS fighter
6. The Islamic state is a political and social “utopia” where propaganda tries to shape up the form of government

If one analyzes more in detail the above-mentioned topics there are no special surprises. Given its nature of terrorist cartel, its resort to brutal and primary images and instincts should not come as a surprise. What represents the real news as far as a terrorist group is concerned is the distorted utopian vision and the “sense of belonging”.

We have already observed that IS has adopted some concepts typical of marketing and economic communications “techniques”: among these the one of a State not submitted to “Western imperialism” is one of the main examples. If we analyze it in its main components, we will discover that international terrorism, simply wants to find a “community” in which the product or service at the center of the community’s discussion is precisely “terrorism”. Seen in this new light the first condition to achieve in order to build a cohesive society is to maximize the sense of belonging of each individual, if needed through acts or tangible rituals marking the passage or ascent of the concerned person to his new status of member of the “community”.

The promotional videos produced by the terrorists showing them in the act of burning their passports once members of the Islamic State are no more than a tangible manifestation of the above said principle.

Going back to the topic of home-made videos, let us now concentrate on the real accuracy of the details implemented in the confectioning of the different videos and propaganda images. In particular, let’s take as an example the highly debated and morally controversial theme of the executions in differed transmission. This case was accompanied by many controversies in addition to a natural indignation due to the following: if it is true that international terrorism has repeatedly broadcasted images of the execution of Western citizens considered enemies of the terrorist ideology, it is also true that never before, a confectioned video accurate in all its details, had been produced to this end. Since the very first IS videos we can observe an obsessive attention to details both in terms of scene lighting and of sound and image quality. All these elements made IS propaganda particularly incisive giving substance to the perception that a new form of international terrorism modality had surfaced on the international scene. One should not underestimate the importance of esthetics and of content accuracy both in the video and audio parts: a good image in terms of photography, a clear sound and a high quality “montage” can only increase the incisiveness and communicative impact of the product. If we add to all this the fact that the message as such, conveyed moreover through the “global network” is absolutely simple, we can affirm that IS has brought to a new conception and understanding of the word” terror”.

## **2.4. The case of the YouTube platform**

In many cases, when we analyzed video-making, we have referred more or less explicitly to the YouTube platform, since it detains the most popular system of online streaming for home-made videos. It is precisely its popularity within the web recognized both by the utilizers and the producers that made it possible for YouTube to become one of the main references for the world of propaganda video-making and beyond. It would be unfair to attribute YouTube's notoriety only to the fact that it is sponsored by Google, given that also from technical and informatics standpoint YouTube has introduced a number of important innovations. The main innovations are the result of the informatics and technological fusion of the "business model" responsible for the fruition of contents present on the web and the handing over of video-making instruments to the producers of the above said videos. In other words, YouTube has managed to make efficient a sector which, by its very nature, of self-production of video contents had to be based on services provided "freely". But precisely in order to confection at best its products, the platform had to get some financial returns from the video-diffusion without charging them on the utilizers or the producers since this would have been a deterrent for both categories. The solution was found when it was decided to have "commercials" at the beginning and the end of each video produced. This mechanism became afterwards more sophisticated with the introduction of "commercials" in specific segments of the video without interrupting its enjoyableness. This is the so called "monetization" of the videos. The idea as such was quite traditional but innovative at the same time. In fact, on the one hand, the basic concepts of TV commercial exploitation were adhered to since the same known "majors" and "brands" were involved; on the other hand, to come to the innovative side, the broadcasting of commercials took place through a special algorithm which guaranteed the necessary commercial pressure. To make it simple, when we visualize a video, we observe an interruption of the said video to the benefit of a commercial lasting between 15 and 30 seconds (which can be interrupted generally after 5 seconds). The sequence of the commercials is calculated with a special attention to the need that their presence in the video is not excessive and damaging to the video's fruition. With the creation and implementation of a single algorithm the platform had managed to satisfy all the parties concerned without any negative impact on the product's enjoyableness. Part of the financial returns is in fact most likely earmarked to the platform self-financing so as to make the above said mechanism even more sophisticated.

It is precisely at this moment that the propaganda messages international terrorism and IS in particular, intervene. In fact, the presence of commercials within a terrorist's propaganda video, in particular an execution, has brought to such a sequencing of events that it has already been baptized as "the apocalypse of YouTube", a high-sounding name created by the same ones responsible for the platform's content. A name however which well identifies a phenomenon which could have destroyed from within YouTube's sophisticated mechanism.

#### 2.4.1. The filters which do not work: “The apocalypse”

After this short introduction to the phenomenon let's see more in detail what really happened. As always, when one discusses topics which have received a good amount of media exposure it is difficult to separate rumors from facts and truth. We will therefore limit ourselves to list facts in their succession putting a special emphasis on the information more strictly related to the issues we are analyzing.

The above mentioned algorithm of monetization of the YouTube platform had been provided by an exclusion philter: in other words the system was able to recognize in a more or less accurate way whether the contents included elements likely to hurt the consumer's sensitivity; were the video to be found unfit for vision it would have been included in a blacklist and therefore could not benefit from commercials and the ensuing monetization. In fact, the program, be it for insufficient sophistication or lack of computing power by the hardware, could not materially analyze each and every minute of every single video charged in the platform, also because the data uploaded every second the world over is really imposing<sup>80</sup>. This is the reason why the filtering system had been devised as a large-mesh one so as to avoid a bottleneck in the uploading by the content's producers. The latter could in fact see in the bottle neck a flaw of the platform and look for a new interlocutor to intermediate and diffuse their product.

Within this complex legal and informatics-related problem find their place the videos produced by IS. For yet unknown reasons the organization managed to monetize the video of the execution of Western prisoners: at this point the damage was done and the implications were not late in coming to the surface. It seemed, in the eyes of the world and public opinion, that the commercials broadcasted during the video, had in a way encouraged or even sponsored international terrorism: among them there also known global brands such as Coca Cola and McDonald's. These brands in order to avoid some of the most ignominious accusations in the light of American and in effect international jurisprudence, that is that of sponsoring international terrorism, unilaterally decided to interrupt all forms of cooperation with the YouTube platform.

Other consequences were to come for the content producers: the quite emotional reaction of the above cited brands was in fact followed by a similar one by the platform itself through the decision to make the filter much tighter until the extreme consequences. In other words, the system did not allow the “monetization” of videos presenting even slang or friendly expressions identified by the system as offensive. As time went by, thanks also to an intense cooperation between the different players, the platform could in the end regain control even though the social and economic damages inflicted to its credibility by international terrorism were deep and huge in number.

It is also worth noticing that many videos produced by IS, even though not monetized (meaning that they cannot lead to paid advertising) are in any case present on YouTube both in direct and indirect way. A case

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<sup>80</sup> The estimates are that daily more than 500.000 hours of new videos/movies are uploaded worldwide.

of indirect presence is the short film “Flames of War” even today<sup>81</sup> present on YouTube, being incorporated in a number of “reportages”, such as the American “The Rubin report” or the Italian “Piazza Pulita”. It is therefore important to underline that the novelty introduced by IS in our way of life has been much more sneaky, precise and surgical if compared to the mere explosion of devices within meeting places which made up the “modus operandi” of IS predecessors. If the attack on the Twin Towers has changed the Western perception of boarding a plane, we can in some degree assert that the new terrorism has made also the virtual world of web much less secure.



**Figure 9 - Final image of IS Flames of War video (YouTube Italy)**

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<sup>81</sup> Verified on 4/5/2020



# Chapter 3. The case study: the Yazidi community

## 3.1 Foreword

Among terrorist and war-like actions carried out by Islamic state (IS) an operation should be mentioned, which does not belong properly speaking, neither to the first nor to second kind of action; in fact the action directed against the Yazidis initiated in 2014 is not related to a war under way (the territory occupied through the action does not have a real strategic importance and its inhabitants had not really resisted the occupation) nor can it be considered part of a larger strategy aimed at countering Western presence or the Arab “traitors”: both categories in which the Yazidis do not fit neither from an ethnic point of view nor from a religious one.

As we’ll see later on more in detail, the techniques employed by the IS seem to aim more than anything else to the systematic, almost scientific, elimination of a community accidentally occupying a part of the IS territory: a territory which, in IS view, should therefore be purified from this “unacceptable” presence, no matter how peaceful, on the basis of procedures seen already at work in the recent history of “ethnic cleansing”.

If this action differs in a number of ways from the approach adopted by the IS towards other opponents, not leaving for instance the opportunity (offered to other religions including the Christian one) to accept submission through the payment of a specific tax or, alternatively, to convert to Islam this is largely due in the case of Yazidis (but the same applies to the Jews) to the difficulty of separating the religious aspect from the “ethnic” one. This different approach stems also from a lower consideration of the Yazidi as a person not only in comparison to the “believer” but also to the average “nonbeliever” no matter if Christian or Shia. The recognition of the dignity of “enemies” which the latter deserve does not apply, in fact, to Yazidis which are considered substantially as “objects” as it we’ll see later in the present thesis with special reference to the condition of the abducted women.

Alike every action conducted by the IS, also this genocide attempt has a component of message to the world, in particular to the IS foes: if we so desire this is the awful destiny, we can reserve to each and every one among our enemies. What we did in Kojo (located in historically Yazidi inhabited territory) we can repeat tomorrow in Dubai, New York or Rome, we can not only kill and conquer but also erase the memory of a given people, its traditions, its very desire to exist. As always, these messages are conveyed not only through actions but also through different medias: from newspapers to videos. It is precisely for this reason that the horror of any “ethnic cleansing is compounded, in the case of the one carried out by the IS, by the fact that it is not implemented in a secret way and denied to the extreme (as it happened for the genocide of the Jewish by the Nazis or for the “ethnic cleansing” by the Serbian military and militias in former Yugoslavia). The IS “ethnic cleansing” is, on the contrary, made public by its perpetrators, defended, and proclaimed as a right.

## 3.2 The Yazidis an ancient, peaceful and persecuted people

### 3.2.1. *Yazidism*

The Yazidis represent an ethnic and religious minority restricted in number but with a very long history. From an ethnic point of view, it is a Kurdish population, but their main identity is the religious one, that is the practice of Yazidism. This religion would derive, according to some scholars<sup>82</sup> from a very ancient creed called Yazdanism which would be the original religion of the Kurds, based on a transcendent God. A God manifesting himself through seven “Angels” whence the denomination of “worshippers of Angels” which would be the etymological origin both of the term Yazdanism and of the more modern one Yazidism. Even though it took shape in a pre-Islamic context, Yazdanism has evolved over the last 1500 years in close contact with Islam giving rise to three still existing currents all characterized by a certain degree religious syncretism:

- Yarsanism or Ahl-e Haqq (present mostly among Iranian Kurds), considered a fraction of Shia Islam sharing with the latter an allegiance to the fourth Well Guided Caliph (Ali, belonging to the Prophet’s family). It maintains however at the same time strong bonds with the original faith of Yazdanism so much so that it identifies Ali (but also Jesus) with two of the seven Angels
- Alevism (present among the Kurds of Turkey and Anatolia), practicing basically a Muslim and Shia religion (so much so that it was admitted by Khomeini himself as an integral part of the Shia religion<sup>83</sup>:but is open to other creeds and recognizes equal dignity to men and women in line with Yazidism
- Yazidism, being among the three aforesaid branches, the one maintaining the strongest links with the pre-Islamic origins so much so that its character as one of the Islamic sects is substantially inappropriate, and mostly due to the Yazidis desire not to go to a confrontation with other, much less tolerant, Islamic neighbors.

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<sup>82</sup> In particular (Izady,1993); the debate is quite lively among scholars on the existence of a “common religion of the Kurds” and on whether the latter is more ancient than Islam. Izady, (who supports this thesis) has been strongly criticized for instance by Foltz (2013) but has received a substantial support by Mohammad Mokri, one of the most respected experts of history and religions of the Middle East.

<sup>83</sup> (Nasr,2006);

More in detail, Yazidism presents itself as a monotheistic religion making reference to an absolutely transcendent God coupled with a fallen Angel. The latter is to be seen however not as a rebel Satan but as a mediator between the divine and human nature (not unlike the Christ: real God and real man), even though its nature is profoundly divine. The “peacock Angel” is accompanied by six lesser Angels. The religious practice is reserved to the believers: they are divided into the “secular” ones (“murîds”) and into a priestly caste at the highest levels (sheikhs and pîrs); the almost secret character of the religious practices (mostly in order to avoid persecutions) has made the direct observation of the latter definitely difficult: it is sure however, that prayers take place at least twice a day (dawn and sunset) always in the direction of the sun (which plays a central role, even though not well defined, in the Yazidi religious context). The sacred day is Wednesday, but the resting day is often Saturday.

The family organization is more similar to the Jewish model than to the Islamic one, being based on monogamy and the obligation to marry only someone belonging to the same religion. Given the fact that only those born of two Yazidi parents can be recognized the status of a “good” believer, the Yazidi community is a substantially a closed one, with the religious bond going hand in hand with the one of familiar descent.

Despite all this, the Yazidi creed is characterized by a very high degree of religious tolerance<sup>84</sup> and Yazidis have a practice of paying visits (may be, in some cases, also for instrumental reasons) both to some Christian churches and Islamic or Arab pre-Islamic Mosques. One should also remember the assistance provided by the Yazidis, during the dark years of WWI and their immediate aftermath, to the Armenian refugees (Christians) fleeing Turkey<sup>85</sup>.

### 3.2.2. *Persecutions*

Unfortunately, tolerance by the Yazidis towards all other creeds has not been reciprocated through centuries by a similar attitude, and the Yazidis have been repeatedly violently criticized with this criticism ending up in most cases in violent discrimination. The origin of the above said criticism is most likely to be found in a wrong interpretation of the figure of the “Peacock Angel” which many, both in the Christian and Islamic



**Figure 10 Peacock god of the Yazidi (Report of Yazidi genocide 2014)**

<sup>84</sup> Paradoxically the fact of not accepting as co-religionist people of a different ethnic group, which makes in fact conversion impossible, has given origin to a large tolerance because it is taken for granted by the Yazidis that they have to live and cooperate with people who cannot share their religion;

<sup>85</sup> (Yazidi Truth organization, 2020)

communities, have tended to identify with the Devil (Satan in the Judaic/Christian tradition and Iblis in the Islamic one). Therefore, the Yazidis have, over centuries, often been seen as the “Devil’s worshippers”<sup>86</sup>.

Another feature of Yazidism, deeply differentiating it from other religions of “oriental” origin, is the absence of a “sacred” reference Book<sup>87</sup>. This has proven particularly prejudicial to the relationship between the Yazidis and the Muslim world. And it is most likely the reason why Islam never extended to the Yazidis the protection and authorization to celebrate their own rituals traditionally recognized (at a given price) to the Jewish and the Christians considered as akin to Islam being like Islam “religions of the Book” (with some sacred books being the same for the three religions).

This religious motivation is compounded, making it even stronger, by an ethnic one. From this angle it should be remembered that the Yazidis are Kurds, that is, belonging to the largest ethnic group today still deprived of a country: the more than 30 millions ethnic Kurds are essentially divided between Turkey, Iraq and Iran and in each of these nations they have been over time victims of violent discriminations ending up quite often in acts of real civil war, which acts were characterized in a number of cases by clear contradictions<sup>88</sup> and intertwined with the wars repeatedly taking place in its most troubled part of the world. In practice, the Yazidis on the one hand Kurds and on the other the “Devil’s worshippers”, become the privileged target of the different forms of tyranny bloodying the Middle East since the second half of last century.

Among the actions of real war against the Yazidis, preceding the one conducted by IS we can recall<sup>89</sup>:

- 1892: the action carried out by the Ottoman General Omer Wahbi Pasha with the murder or forced conversion of no less than 15.000 Yazidis and the transformation of the Lalish sanctuary (a traditional pilgrimage destination) in a Muslim school
- Persecution campaign in 1957 by King Faysall II of Iraq (to be soon after deposed by the pro-Nasser revolution)
- 1969 and 1975 campaign by the then Iraqi President Ahmed Hasan al- Bakr (predecessor of his cousin Saddam Hussein);

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<sup>86</sup> It is enough, to understand the untruthfulness of this thesis, to bear in mind that it is strictly forbidden for the “good Yazidi” not only to pronounce Satan’s name but also any term with even a vague resemblance with this name (Acikyildiz, 2010 p.112-113)

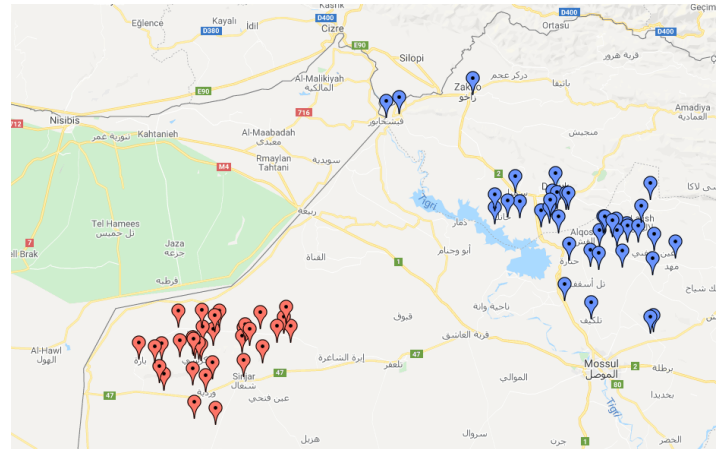
<sup>87</sup> Even though many scholars (in particular Christian ones) have mentioned the existence for the Yazidis of texts of reference and especially of a “Black book” (or “Revelation”), it should be noted that these texts (of which copies are said to exist) are either apocryphal as affirmed by some scholars (Allison, 1993) or have a very relative importance in the Yazidi tradition which is mostly an oral one;

<sup>88</sup> One can recall in particular the action carried out by the Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein who at home has persecuted, imprisoned and deported the Kurds living in the Northern part of Iraq no less than 250.000 deported Kurds and 8000 dead in just one year, according to Human right Watch 1991); while financing in Iran the Kurdish rebellion first against the Shah Reza Pahlavi and later on against the Shia Islamic state. Even more contradictory the behavior of the Turkish government: a government in the front-line, as a NATO member, in the fight against the IS but which, at the same time, has not hesitated to openly support the IS in the Kobane (2014-2015) battle: when the forces countering the Islamic state in this Kurdish province of Syria were mostly Kurdish paramilitary units (YPG, YPJ and Peshmergas);

<sup>89</sup> The following mentions cover only part of the long history of massacres known by the Yazidi people. Massacres which according to non-official sources (Yazidi Truth organization 2020) would reach a total of 23 million victims over 700 years;

- 1987-1988 campaign at the hands of Saddam Hussein in the frame of the larger offensive against the Iraqi Kurds called “Anfal”<sup>90</sup>. In addition to the death of an unknown number of Yazidis (on account inter alia of a resort by Saddam to chemical weapons and other weapons of mass destruction, this operation caused their deportation and concentration in the historical site of Sinjar, a desert area surrounding and including Mount Sinjar.

At the end of the campaign almost all the Iraqi Yazidis were concentrated in this area and distributed in around a hundred villages where they represented basically the prevailing ethnic group even though populations of Arab origin and Sunni religion were also present in a climate of peaceful coexistence<sup>91</sup>. In addition to being very poor in natural resources, the area also presented major drawbacks from a medical point of view: on account of its distance from medical centers, including for the assistance to birth-giving, and of the long standing habit of sending to this area patients with infective diseases like tuberculosis (in the hope that the dry and uncontaminated air would prove beneficial: the result being in fact an almost endemic diffusion of tuberculosis among the Yazidis<sup>92</sup>.



**Figure 11 - Yazidi expanse before Anfal (red + blue) and their concentration area (red) after deportations (Report 2014)**

<sup>90</sup> Three Western Parliaments: the Norwegian one, (Resolution of November 21 2012), the Swedish one, (Resolution of December 5 2012); the British one, (House of Commons, June 13 2013) recognize the “Anfal” action as a genocide;

<sup>91</sup> (Human rights council, 2016, p.6)

<sup>92</sup> Osso & Mural, 2020

### 3.3. Ethnic cleansing by Daesh

#### 3.3.1. *The facts*

The departure of US troops from Iraq, initiated with the vote of the Iraqi Parliament and ended with the departure of the last contingent in 2011, leaves a country in state of civil war with Sunni populations going from a leading role to a marginal one, the Shia which seize power and Kurds and Christians taking advantage to accentuate their autonomy. In this overheated atmosphere ethnic and religious divides explode. The Yazidis are also the object of a smear campaign as a consequence of a regrettable episode<sup>93</sup> which ends up in a terrible terror attack in Jazeera with almost 1000 dead and more than 1500 wounded (August 14, 2007). Meanwhile Daesh gets stronger also in neighboring Syria, launching a series of victorious campaigns beyond the Syrian border towards Northern Iraq.

In 2014 the expansion of Daesh from Syria to Iraq is in full swing, taking advantage of the withdrawal of US forces and from the ensuing instability of the Iraqi government. On the sideline of the main invasion route, pointing towards Mosul (being Iraq's second largest city), is located the region of Sinjar mostly inhabited by Yazidis. The region has no strategic significance and the limited natural resources (two oil wells) are handed over with no resistance to Daesh fighters. Most likely in the belief that this deep poverty would protect the area and the only forces able to resist and protect the population (Kurdish fighters, the Peshmergas) withdraw to the south leaving the area of Sinjar and neighboring villages totally unprotected. The reasons behind Daesh military actions of August 4 and following days are not therefore of a military/strategic nature. The reasons behind them are more profound and have to do with fanaticism: the need to eliminate a different and not compatible ethnic and religious group, a group of "Devil's worshippers", of heathens more than simply non-believers, devoid of the dignity to be recognized to the people of the Book ("ahl alkitab") like the Jewish and the Christians. For this inferior people, the Yazidis, there can be no mercy or coexistence, there is no form of taxation allowing them to live an autonomous albeit segregated life; there is more than anything else no recognition of dignity as a person but only the perception of them as an object or a prey of war to be treated as appropriate. The cruel systematic approach adopted by Daesh against the Yazidis stems largely from the above and is the result of a strategy planned coolly and over time.

In the night between August 3 and 4 2014, a coordinated movement of IS units from the planes and the mountains of Sinjar closes in on around 81 villages, obtaining in only 72 hours their complete evacuation. Almost only civilians were present in the villages, as proven by the absence of an armed response to the attack with the exception of the small garrison of Peshmergas deployed in Kocho which manages to resist

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<sup>93</sup> A Yazidi girl engaged to a young Sunni is lapidated by the crowd to prevent her marriage with a "foreigner". The episode is captured by the cell phones and broadcasted via internet. It gives rise to a powerful campaign of hatred against the Yazidis.

until August 15 thus allowing quite an important number of civilians<sup>94</sup> to find shelter on Mount Sinjar. However, the very harsh conditions (in particular a temperature of more than 50 degrees and the lack of water) will make hundreds of victims<sup>95</sup> before a battalion of Peshmergas (YPG), with the support of the US Air Force, managed around the end of the month to open a humanitarian corridor allowing them to find refuge in Iraqi Kurdistan.

All the inhabitants of the villages who do not manage to escape (and they are the vast majority) are gathered in great spaces and separated in distinct categories according to age and religion. We have testimonies of what happened in the village of Kocho (but this is most likely only the prototype of what has taken place in all the centers where civilian prisoners are concentrated): the local school is selected as the space of detention but families are separated; women and children are located in the first floor whereas men and military-age boys are gathered at the ground floor. They are firstly asked whether they are ready to convert; almost all refuse. They are then asked to hand over whatever they have/wear in gold, cell phones, watches with a hint by their captors that these “riches” may be the price to be paid for their liberation. Then they are in different groups hoarded into trucks and taken not far from the school (so much so that the women in the school manage to hear shots from firearms) and killed each one with a single shot. The bodies are then covered with earth removed by bulldozers. Once the operation is over, the trucks go back to the school to embark another group for the same kind of treatment<sup>96</sup>.

Once the treatment of adult and able men was over, Daesh moved to operate on women and children; the first operation being the stripping of any material good (jewels, gold, cell phones, watches) accompanied by the threat to kill whoever would pretend not to have goods to hand over. Once all this was over, Daesh fighters moved to find out unmarried girls (between 13 and 16 years of age) taking away from their families or of what was left of them<sup>97</sup>. It is worth noticing that the forced separation of families, in particular for a tightly knit community based on values (like marriage) such as the Yazidi one, is an essential part of the disarticulation of a people, of its elimination as an ethnic and cultural identity and therefore of the technique of genocide. A confirmation of the systematic and deliberate character of the elimination of the Yazidi people are the testimonies on the fate reserved to pregnant women which were systematically induced to abort (with different and violent methods) in order to avoid the birth of other children with both parents Yazidi<sup>98</sup>.

A further separation takes also place between women who are not young anymore and children. The first ones are moved to territories controlled by the IS (mostly in areas surrounding Mosul and Tel Afar) but distant from their villages of origin. Children are dispatched to camps of military training to be later employed, after conversion to Islamism, as young soldiers and /or as human bombs<sup>99</sup>.

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<sup>94</sup> According to official sources (OCHHR, 2014) around 200.000 civilians (of whom no less than 40.000 Yazidis) ventured onto this extreme escape route

<sup>95</sup> According to estimates (Cetorelli & Ashraf, 2019) more than 90% of these victims of environmental factors were children;

<sup>96</sup> (Cetorelli & Ashraf 2019, p.10-11)

<sup>97</sup> Ibidem

<sup>98</sup> Syrian accountability Project, 2017, p.14

<sup>99</sup> Cetorelli & Ashraf, 2019 p. 12-13

We can reasonably affirm therefore that two weeks after the attack, in other words not much later than August 15, the entire Yazidi community of the Sinjar region (in fact the largest one in Iraq and in the world) had been almost completely dispersed<sup>100</sup> still in August 2016, that is two years after the devastating action by the IS, one could estimate present in the different villages in Sinjar only 3000 Yazidis out of the around 600.000 estimated at the beginning of 2014<sup>101</sup>.

### *3.3.2. The size of the massacre*

If the eradication from the territory has been virtually absolute, it is not easy to evaluate which percentage of the population has endured the worst consequences (death or abduction) and which has “simply” moved away by escaping or through mass deportation to other places.

This indetermination is due to a number of factors among which the following: 1) the scarcity of official sources even before the war (also on account of the fact that populations are rarely divided even in official documents by ethnic group or religion); 2) the devastation of the territory and of demographic archives (when existing) during the presence and then withdrawal of Daesh ; 3) the technique put in place by the terrorist group to proceed to executions in different localities with the ensuing multiplication of mass graves and the further difficulty of their analysis ex-post: 4) mass graves have been discovered (but only partially examined, most of them with Yazidi victims)<sup>102</sup>.

A remarkably precise analysis, although based on the testimonies and oral descriptions of the survivors<sup>103</sup>, has been conducted for the population of the village of Kocho providing detailed information which can be projected, with some approximation, onto the entire Yazidi population of Sinjar.

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<sup>100</sup> It is worth mentioning that the second largest Yazidi community in the world is the one based in Germany which settled there in most cases after the “Anfal”;

<sup>101</sup> Cetorelli & Ashraf, p. 97.

<sup>102</sup> Ibidem, pag.98

<sup>103</sup> The methodology adopted was to proceed with a double separated list of interviews: (1) of the victim’s relatives gathered in the different refugee camps, (2) of the survived civilian administrators of the involved villages. There was then a comparison between the results of the two sets of interviews which brought to a satisfactory degree of precision given the considerable level of matching between the two lists.



The first, and may be more surprising result, is that 1161 victims were ascertained including dead people, dispersed<sup>104</sup> and abducted ones, (considering as such those who were later found in former IS territories or those who escaped when the Daesh fighters started to withdraw). Since the Yazidi population in Kocho amounted to around 1200 inhabitants, we have an almost complete ethnic cleansing; unfortunately, this data can be transposed to the entire area with an almost total annihilation of the Yazidi community in region by 2016.

The following data has to do with the repartition of the victims in the two large categories of the disappeared ones (dead and dispersed people) and of those who were later found, mostly at IS structures. Around 533 people (amounting to 46% of the victims and to more of 40% of the Yazidis residing in Kocho) resulting disappeared as a consequence of the events of August 2014.

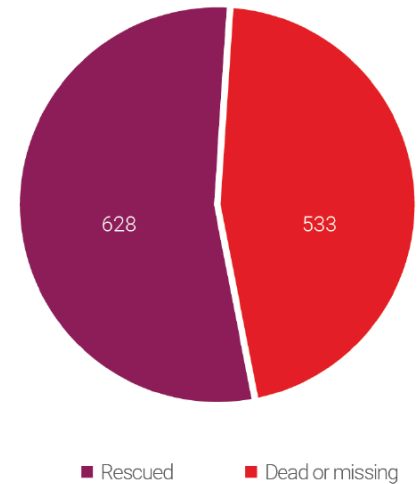
If we transpose this percentage to the entire population of the area, we would have an estimate of around 250.000 dead: a very high figure which gives however a hint of the fact that the estimates of 20.000 victims (estimates based on punctual but dispersed testimonies) might be in fact too prudential.

What maybe gives even more the perception of the awful systematic nature of the operation of ethnic cleansing conducted by the IS, is

the selective choice of the fate to be reserved to each of the poor victims. In fact, a comparative analysis of the of the total of the population divided by gender and age and of what percentage has been kidnapped provides us with the precise criteria on the basis of which the latter have been selected.

If we start from a substantially symmetrical distribution by gender and age ranges, we can achieve an identification of the profile of the abducted Yazidis cumulatively summarized in figure 12. It is first of all evident a gender unbalance: while, as far as men are concerned, only the younger age ranges are in fact represented (in general until the age of 14) women are represented in almost all the age ranges. It is evident also from the above that one of the objectives of the IS actions was to recruit potential young fighters (kids could in fact more easily be indoctrinated and enrolled in the army of the “Islamic emirate”) and, even more, more or less young women to be enslaved, sexually exploited, and systematically abused. These data fully confirm the construction of the selective and organized machine of ethnic cleansing whose action has been described in the previous pages on the basis of evidences provided by the survivors.

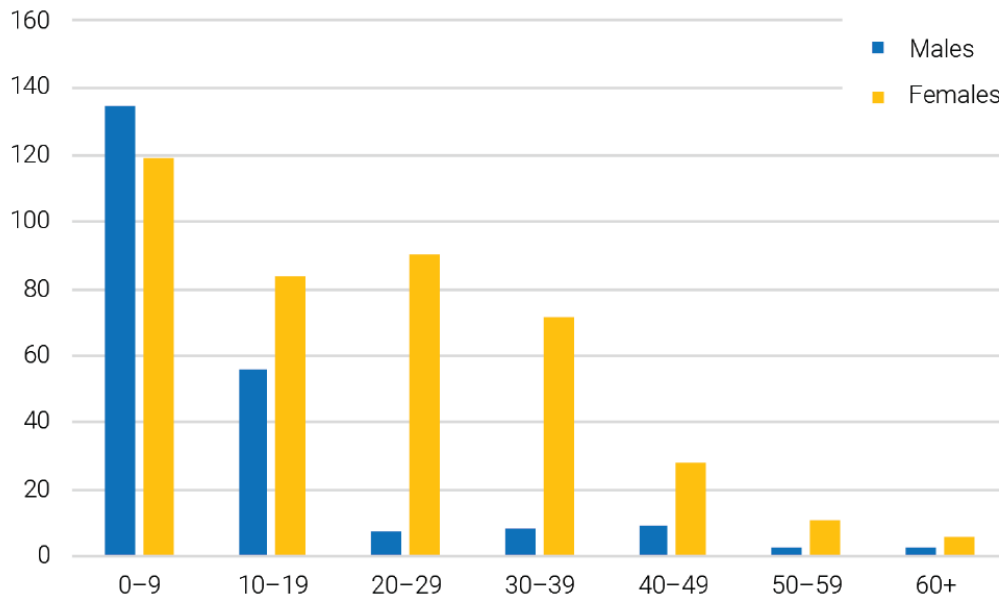
The abducted Yazidis were not even given the assurance that their life would be saved: if we analyze the group of children aged less then 10, it is highly likely all those belonging to this category (easy to identify on the basis of the physical parameters of height and weight) were kidnapped and not killed during the



**Figure 12 - repartitions between disappeared and kidnaped from Kocho Victims (Cetorelli & Ashraf, 2019, p. 15)**

<sup>104</sup> As it often happens in war zones, there is a high number of disappeared people with no physical evidence of their death. They are officially listed as missing but are most likely dead.

operation; since the percentage of those who were later found and rescued is of around 85%, almost equally divided between the two sexes, one can imagine that that the 15% not found died during the imprisonment period. A situation confirmed by a number of testimonies on the violence perpetrated by the “masters” of the prisoners as well as on their use as human shields of Daesh military installations. It should also be mentioned (especially for males) their use in fighting actions, often in suicide attacks (human bombs).



**Figure 13 - distribution by gender and age of the inhabitants of Kocho kidnapped by Daesh during the operation and later found alive (Cetorelli & Asraf, 2019, p. 20)**

### *3.3.3. The treatment of prisoners*

As shown by Figure n.12, the kidnapped were essentially children and even more women. The special cruelty on women has a number of reasons: on the one hand there is the traditional submissive role of the woman in the Islamic world and especially in the fanatic fundamentalist one of the IS members (hence the qualification of the woman as the one who should serve as opposed to the “fighting” men). When this misogynist culture is compounded by the “racial” contempt of the Yazidi woman a situation emerges where it is absolutely licit to enslave, imprison, torture and abuse these feminine bodies to which no form of dignity or protection should be recognized.

These sociological elements of interpretation are compounded by others relating to the ethnic factor and to the determination to erase a whole people: genocide, as history shows, always runs on the two parallel tracks of physical elimination of men in military age and on the elimination of the very possibility to give birth to a new people: a possibility which is inherent in the biological situation of women: to achieve the complete eradication of an ethnic group nothing is more helpful than making reproduction impossible. For this reason the women made pregnant by Yazidi men have to abort, for the same reason they have to be

treated as slaves and prostitutes so that no Yazidi man can approach them without feeling revulsion, for this reason they have to be deprived of any dignity and respect also by others, even belonging to the same community.

If we start therefore from the absurd assumption that Yazidi prisoners are not human beings, are not even “non-believers” but simple objects, it is possible to understand the destiny reserved to them by their captors: the first testimony of a real slaves market comes up less than a month after the attack on Sinjar<sup>105</sup> with the mention of the sale of 300 women to Yazidi fighters at the price of 1000\$ each<sup>106</sup>. It is not unfortunately the only news of this kind: a few days later (on September 10) international media<sup>107</sup> are informed that at Mosul’s market they are sold 150\$ each<sup>108</sup>. Prison camps only for women are set up to with the only objective of allowing IS fighters to receive sexual satisfaction and the surveillance of these camps is entrusted to a brigade of IS fighters made up only by women among whom at least a “foreign fighter” of British nationality<sup>109</sup>.

These terrible news go together with a number of apparently better ones (at least in their outcome) but at the same time offering evidence of a dramatically suffering world; on September 11 2016 number of independent sources (both Arab and Kurds) report that an unknown businessman has bought 45 Yazidi slaves at the Mosul marketplace in order to take them away from hell and make them free again. The simple and direct reason given by the businessman (most likely a Sunni) is the desire to do a “good action”, even though the liberation costed him around 30.000\$<sup>110</sup>. At the same time there are news of a number of escape attempts by prisoners (mostly but not only women): a first group of 23 women tries to escape through the Sinjar mountains on September 7 taking advantage of a Peshmerga attack but two of them are killed during the fight; another group of twenty-seven people (men and women) tries to escape from Kasr al-Mihrab but seven of them are recaptured<sup>111</sup>.

At this point, a reflection is needed: it is certainly good news that a businessman mobilizes part of his resources to set free imprisoned girls (and that he does it on the symbolic date of September 11); it is also good news that some prisoners manage to escape. At the same time, however, we should ask ourselves what systematic violation of basic rights, what kind of violence has been perpetrated on girls barely beyond childhood to make preferable for them an escape attempt under the fire of their captors, and through a desert, rather than imprisonment; and finally what kind of organization is one which sees the buying of

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<sup>105</sup> Lynch, 2014

<sup>106</sup> The price of this indecent deal is not a variable devoid of meaning. In particular this relatively high price leads to believe that the objects of the exchange were in most cases young virgins, in other words the most asked for category.

<sup>107</sup> (Rudaw, 2014). Rudaw is the main press agency in Iraqi Kurdistan

<sup>108</sup> The sudden drop in price in a few days bears testimony, on the one hand, to the fact that were being sold at that point less asked for female “slaves” (such as women aged more than 20); on the other, that the offer was abundant in number: a factor which was reducing prices but at the same time a proof of the very high number of Yazidi women going through this awful ordeal;

<sup>109</sup> (8 Mirror, 2014)

<sup>110</sup> (Ezidi Press, 2014)

<sup>111</sup> Syrian accountability project 2017, p.26-27

“slaves”, being one of the most perverted actions in history which we had reason to believe by now remote in time, but that we instead find nowadays on newspapers.

### 3.4 Daesh media towards the Yazidis

#### 3.4.1. *A revendicated genocide*

If we analyze the guiding lines of the action of the Islamic state towards the Yazidis it is not too difficult to recognize the main features characterizing, since its theoretical formulation<sup>112</sup> the practice of genocide: a systematic and merciless action, the objective of violent actions defined exclusively on the basis of the victim's belonging to an ethnic or religious group, the declared goal to erase the community object of the violent action, the use of methods such as the physical elimination of its members, the imposition of rules aimed at preventing the birth of new members of the group, the forced transfer of the group's children to other social groups. It is quite impressive to observe that the features of the above said action can all be detected in the case of the Yazidi genocide: men are killed, women obliged to abort and transformed into prostitutes so that no one, from husband to relatives, can anymore consider them as members of the group thereby preventing reproduction, children are deported and integrated into a totally different and opposite reality which sees them as “fighters” against any “non believer” including and starting with those belonging to their “former” community.

But, if the techniques, the principles and methodology adopted appear in a terrible continuity with the massacres of Armenians, Jews, of Ruanda and former Yugoslavia ethnic communities a new feature appears however in the Yazidi case: the almost immediate claim by the IS of responsibility for the action. The October 2014 issue of the Dibiaq magazine (the first one after the attack on Sinjar), one of the propaganda sources of the Islamic state, does not only clearly state that the action has been carried out to eliminate the Yazidis considered an “heathen” community but adds that:

“Their continual existence to this day is a matter that Muslims should question as they will be asked about it on Judgment Day”<sup>113</sup>.

Thus, the massacre, destruction, genocide of the Yazidis is therefore, more than a right, a precise duty of any “good” Muslim.

This is the distinguishing feature of the Yazidi genocide when compared to those preceding it in the previous century: if we take as a reference the two cases of the first half of last century<sup>114</sup>, the Jewish

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<sup>112</sup> The term “genocide” was created relatively late (Lemkin, 1944) to indicate the common factors between the Nazi Germany's action against the °Jews and of Ottoman Turkey against Armenians;

<sup>113</sup> In English in the original text published on Dibiaq, a multilingual magazine

<sup>114</sup> Unfortunately, the history of massacres of entire peoples is much more ancient than a century, as proven by the case of the Etruscan and the Carthaginian. The time limit of only one century derives, on the one hand, from the fact that the term “genocide” was created only in 1944 with reference to the Armenians (1919) and to the Jewish people (1939-1945); on the other, from the reference to “modern” propaganda techniques which constitute the “leitmotif” of the present work

genocide was always denied by Nazis<sup>115</sup> so much so that the its full evidence was acquired when the extermination camps were finally liberated by the Allied forces; as to the Armenian genocide as of today the Turkish government does not recognize it and takes strong diplomatic action vis-à-vis the countries commemorating this tragic event<sup>116</sup>.

None of this happens with the IS fighters who admit, claim responsibility for, take pride on being the first Muslims to accomplish God's will by trying to erase the Yazidi's "continuous existence".

Even the modality through which the operation is carried out is openly assumed and not even "justified" as the inevitable means to achieve the desired objective: it is simply proudly presented as the correct approach: in the same issue of Dibiaq we can find an accurate description of how Yazidi women and children are brought into slavery after conceding a fifth of them to Daesh fighters as "spoils of war" ("khums" in the Arab language) as prescribed by Koran and of the sale of the remaining part to finance the Islamic state<sup>117</sup>. Both operations, the reduction into slavery of kidnapped women and the sale of slaves are to be considered a basic tenet of "sharia", so much so that not abiding by it would be tantamount to denying the very foundations of Islam<sup>118</sup>.

But IS claims go well beyond the case of Dibiaq or the written form: in fact, in coherence with the multimedia communication strategy adopted by Daesh, we can also find videos extolling at least some aspects of the operations of "ethnic cleansing". In particular a video broadcasted on February 2017 by the press office of the Ninive province, therefore by a Caliphate official source, shows two Yazidi kids, Amjad and Asaad (aged apparently thirteen and fourteen and kidnapped the age of around ten) declaring to the interviewer that they were from the village of Tal Kasba, in the district of Sinjar, and were later trained to commit "with the help of God" suicidal actions (all this while a voiceover reminds that kids have already been employed for this kind of missions in Mosul)<sup>119</sup>. It is a visual and clear testimony to Daesh announcements to have converted (one can easily guess how spontaneously) Yazidi children to the Islamic faith and even more to the ideal of martyrdom, for instance to bring the maximum possible damage to other Yazidis.



**Figure 14 - example of an announcement on Daesh online website ("The Great Mall of the Islamic State") offering a 12 years old "slave" presented as "beautiful" and extolling her "low price" (FIDH, 2018, p. 24)**

<sup>115</sup> Despite careful searches in Nazi archives an evidence of Hitler's order to move on to the "Final Solution" was never found

<sup>116</sup> This happened for instance on December 13 2001 with the withdrawal of the Turkish Ambassador to France on account of the law on the "Armenian genocide" being adopted in those days by the French Parliament; on April 3 2015 with the withdrawal of the Turkish Ambassador at the Holy See to protest against Pope Francis' words on the occasion of the centenary of the same event. More recently Turkish diplomatic action has managed to block (November 2019) a resolution by the American Senate recognizing the "Armenian genocide" (it is worth noticing that not even Obama, in his two mandates, was able to obtain the adoption of a resolution of this kind which he had repeatedly promise during the election campaign);

<sup>117</sup> (Zoppellaro 2017, p.100)

<sup>118</sup> Ibidem, p. 101

<sup>119</sup> Geronico, 2017

Finally, to confirm the role of technologies in the life as well as in the communication of the “fighters” of the Islamic State, it is worth observing the following: mobile applications such as Telegraph were used to organize “markets” open to all the fighters, allowing the interested person to find, by paying the “right” price a car, a weapon , a woman or a child<sup>120</sup>.

### *3.4.2. The ideological reasons*

One can wonder what the ideological reasons behind this systematic persecution of the Yazidi community are: religious differences are in fact not sufficient to explain it. Especially if we consider that through its thousand years old experience the Arab empire, in its expansion from Spain to India, was brought to confront itself with many communities made up by “unbelievers” : from Christians to Jews to Hindus under no circumstances proceeding to operations of ethnic cleansing or to impose conversion (as demonstrated by the quite high number of “enclaves” of different religions located even within the most ancient caliphates).

The reasons for this dramatically different approach towards the Yazidis are two to be searched having in mind the two aspects of the problem: they have to do in fact both with the Yazidi’s (real or perceived) differences vis-à-vis other religions and with the different interpretation given to the Koran and Sharia by the fighters of the “Islamic State”.

As to the perception of the Yazidis and their religion by Daesh members, we have already observed that it has all through history been perceived as “different” from other creeds practiced in the Middle East (or even in Europe): despite being monotheists, the Yazidis venerate in fact the 7 Angels and do not refrain from representing them visually. All this brought the IS fundamentalists to consider the Yazidis as “heathen”. If we put side by side the figure of the “peacock angel” with the one of Satan (for its history of rebel angel) one can in a way understand why in certain periods both Christians and Muslims have considered the Yazidis as “devil’s worshippers”, and therefore as apostates not only from the Muslim religion but also from all the “religions of the Book”; that is the religions sharing, albeit in very different forms, the reference to sacred texts with a common basis, in fact the Bible of the Jews is considered a “Holy book” also by Christians and at least partially by Muslims; and the Gospel of the Christians is an important text also for the Muslims even though it does not reach the clarity of the Koran. None of this can be applied to the Yazidis which constitute therefore in the IS perception, a separate closed body and, therefore, dangerous.

This Yazidi “specificity” goes together with the one of the IS fanatics who proclaim a literal and compulsory reading of the Koran and identify the “devil’s worshippers” with the “heathen”: a category deserving no tolerance, with which no coexistence is possible but only a blunt alternative: conversion or death. The majority of the massacres of August 2014 was preceded, according to converging testimonies of the

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<sup>120</sup> FIDH, 2018

survivors, by (we don't know how formal) request to convert almost always rejected by the proud Yazidis. A rejection implying a certain death.

Women in particular were not even offered this alternative, and if it was offered it was a purely formal alternative devoid of any substance. Whether they or not they converted their destiny was in any case to be the slaves of men (no matter if husbands or masters), to be systematically raped by these men and to be charged with the harshest and most humiliating tasks. This also explains these women's will to escape, playing thus a last desperate card in order to avoid an inhuman fate.

But it's the literal and acritical application of the Koran and Sharia the feature which really makes fanatical the Islamism of the IS: only this kind of reading makes it possible for the IS fighters to give so to say a "contemporary" and real value to the actions narrated by Koran on Mohammed and his war against "heathens" of the very ancient Mecca when the worshippers of the idols were reduced to slavery: only a fanatical reading makes it possible to identify as part of the "spoils of war" not only the material goods seized during a war action but also the human beings (mostly women) kidnapped and, like objects, in part handed over to the fighters as a reward and in part sold on the slaves market.

And finally, these "sacred" (although aberrant) reasons are accompanied by more prosaic ones: the territory of Sinjar (no matter how poor) had proven able to accommodate a population. And the IS, by expanding to this territory in its successful southward ride of 2014, could well conceive of populating it exclusively with Sunni Arabs: that is the part of the population ideologically closer to the IS<sup>121</sup>. But in order to achieve this it was essential to chase its current inhabitants and therefore to proceed to an "ethnic cleansing" of the Yazidis<sup>122</sup>. All this, keeping in mind that the enslavement of the women (in particular of the young ones), in addition to being an act functional to the disarticulation over time of a people's identity, represents also a real business which sees most likely implicated side by side with the IS (as asserted by the NGO Yazda) a number of middle eastern states starting with the UAE and Saudi Arabia<sup>123</sup>.

### *3.4.3. The dualism of the woman's role in the IS view*

The analysis of the fate reserved to Yazidi women, both of the few ones who converted and were later on obliged to marry IS fighters (in most cases much older than them) and of the vast majority reduced to slavery at the service, even sexual one, of their masters opens up a larger reflection on the relationship entertained with the feminine universe by the Islamic state as a social and organization.

Paradoxically the fact of proceeding in a differentiated way towards men and women of the sect of the "heathen devil's worshippers" is a further demonstration of the contempt of the IS fanatics vis-à-vis women:

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<sup>121</sup> The proximity of Iraqi Sunnis to the Islamic state stems not only from the same religious belonging but also to the fact of being reduced to a much lower position in the post-Saddam's Iraq given the open US support to the two other ethnic and religious factions: The Arab Shia component and the Kurdish component

<sup>122</sup> Zoppellaro 2017, p.89

<sup>123</sup> Ibidem, p.90

if apparently not to have proceeded to mass executions (unlike the case of men) and have preferred instead kidnapping may appear at first sight as a sort of privileged treatment the reality is quite different.

The choice of resorting to kidnapping is in fact the product of an aberrant logic whereby the woman is not a person, and therefore has no possibility to choose (even her “conversion” when it takes place does not change her destiny), but can only be an object, a prey of war subject to the will of the conquering and winning warrior. In this sense we may say that a form of “intersectional violence” concentrates on the Yazidi woman meaning with that the convergence of the different vectors of hatred and submission: the religious one (the “heathen” Yazidis versus the devote Muslims but also, more in general, the adepts of “the religions of the Book”); the ethnic one (Kurds versus Arabs occupying “in their full right” the Syrian and Iraqi territory); and the one of “gender” (women have to be submitted to the masculine power and will no matter whether they are wives or slaves<sup>124</sup>).

All the above would lead to the conclusion of a male chauvinist and misogynist Islamic State practicing the highest degree of violence on female Yazidi slaves but with a more general negative and punishing approach towards the feminine universe: in an obsessive identification of the woman with Satan, the bearer of temptation and evil. Such an interpretation is not however the correct one or, to say it better, does not fully capture the factual approach of fundamentalists in general and in particular of the IS.

For a fighter, and even more for one with a leading position, the woman is also and may be more than anything else the pillar of the family, the instrument to multiply children and to give life, raise and educate new fighters. But this too could appear as an “embellishment” of the anyway subordinate role of the woman, in a world where all the public activity is handled by men while the feminine component is relegated to household tasks and condemned to social irrelevance. But also this is not true: in fact, in the IS world women are important players of many public processes: from propaganda to feminine recruiting, from the participation to that form of “Vice Squad<sup>125</sup>” called “hisba” to participation in the front line to combats through the organization of exclusively feminine brigades such as Raqqa’s al-Khansaa brigade and Al-Ambar Umm l-Rayan brigade<sup>126</sup>. These units, and this is something totally new in the Islamic world, were authorized to participate also in “offensive jihad” and therefore to fight in any war theater<sup>127</sup>.

This form of feminine front-role is most likely largely at the origin of the success known by the IS propaganda among large groups of young Western women, leading in some cases to the extreme gesture (as in the case of no less than 500 mostly British, French and German women) to join the Islamic State<sup>128</sup>. The double face of the IS towards women is therefore evident: against the background of an organized and formal systems with rigid rules of behavior the attitude may go from one of extreme contempt for women

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<sup>124</sup> De Vido, 2018.

<sup>125</sup> One of the main tasks of this “police” is to impose to all women the wearing of the veil; this task is accomplished with such a fanatical dedication that also during the imprisonment periods in the camps where they were detained after the defeats undergone in these last years, the women belonging to the “hisba” have brought forward their task making it sure that the fellow prisoners women kept wearing the veil and punishing them were this no to be the case.

<sup>126</sup> Palladini, 2020

<sup>127</sup> Winter & Margolin, 2017.

<sup>128</sup> Mazza, 2015



considered as objects (mostly Yazidi ones) to one of maximum respect for the “muhajirat”, those who have followed the path to conversion clearly represented by their so to say “physical” union with the Islamic state. These are the real Muslim women, to be extolled also through propaganda videos, charged with preserving Islamic virtue both in its private dimension (educating children) and in the public one (participating in the Hisba police), while slaves are deprived of rights, even and more than anything else the one to the integrity of their body and the potentiality to procreate<sup>129</sup>.

The most extreme and significant testimony of the dichotomy of the woman’s role operated by IS fanaticism comes up when the possession of female slaves for the warrior’s satisfaction is considered by Daesh propaganda machine not only as a practice authorized by the Koran (on the basis of the principle that as “absolute” sinners, like the idols worshippers defeated by Mohammed, they are not human beings but simply possessed objects) but also a way to safeguard the virtue of the “good believer”. A believer who, in the absence of a wife or slave, could fall into the sin of fornication<sup>130</sup>.

It’s of course not easy to understand how a line of thought so paradoxical and distant from Western culture managed to find supporters among young Westerners: in particular young Western women who have in quite large numbers joined the IS in some cases only through an ideological identification, in others through an active involvement in organizational activities and/or war actions. To understand this one could resort to a number of interpretations of psychological (the challenges and self-affirmation rituals of the young age) and sociological (the comparison between the fragmented and disarticulate western system of values and the one, much more linear and simple of the fundamentalists even its most aberrant forms) nature. But this kind of analysis goes well beyond the perimeter and goals of the present research.

#### *3.4.4. The difficult return*

The history of the IS actions and its immediate effects, both on killed men and on abducted women and children, is only a part of the contemporary drama of the Yazidis. Precisely because the action of IS had the explicit aim of erasing the identity of the Yazidi community it is important to understand how successful this action was; one of the main parameters to assess this may be represented by the concrete possibility for the Yazidis to return to their homes, after IS retreat from the Iraqi border and its regrouping in territories quite far away from Mount Sinjar.

It may be useful to remember that if the action against the Yazidis may be characterized as a genocide attempt, the best possible answer to this attempt would be to reconstruct a solid Yazidi reality, possibly in a physical location most likely in the area recognized by the Yazidi population as its historical “home”: a place which,

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<sup>129</sup> OHCHR and Yazida have ascertained that sexual slaves were systematically made to abort and submitted to heavy contraceptive treatments, most likely in order to preserve at all times their market value (one of the few precepts of sharia, respected also in the case of these most unfortunate women, being the prohibition to sell them if pregnant);

<sup>130</sup> Zoppellaro, 2017 p.102.

no matter how much ravaged by war and fanatic ideologies, still keeps the physical traces and the memory of the Yazidi's community way of life and social interaction.

It is not by chance if, after the tragedy of the Shoah (being the greatest and most paradigmatic genocide of modern times) the answer by the UN at the attempt to eliminate a whole people was to provide it with a territory (which the Jewish people had not had for about 2000 years: that is after the fall of Jerusalem and Masada at the hands of the Roman emperor Titus); and once again, it is not a chance if the selected territory (on the basis of an agreement between the US and the URSS, despite the first signals of the "cold war" which were emerging also in the Middle East) was the "historical" territory of Israel, precisely to symbolize on the one hand the "continuity" of a people and, on the other, the need for the Jewish community to find an identity and a common denominator also, and especially, in a geographical shared area and in a physical place capable of constituting a major, centuries-old human and cultural reference.

The return of the Yazidis to Sinjar, their historical place of residence and since the most remote past the place of greatest concentration of the followers of the Peacock God, appears therefore as the final and most complete answer to the attempts to eliminate them and their cultural roots as well as most complete and final recognition of their existence and of their right to live and co-exist peacefully.

But this return at the moment has not taken place, if not in a minimal part, even though the current geo-political and military conditions could in principle make it possible; IS has in fact over the last few years undergone a number of military defeats. Military defeats which, while not implying the total disappearance of the Caliphate, are certainly at the origin of a retreat of the front-line to an area far away from Sinjar and have thus liberated the area of "historical settlement" of the Yazidis and made it technically impossible for the IS to repeat actions similar to those carried out in the summer of 2014.

The situation of the refugees is quite differentiated, and also very difficult to ascertain (as it always happens in war scenarios): it is likely that the majority of the Yazidi refugees has temporarily settled in refugee camps Iraq and Syria but more may be in Iraq given a further distance from IS current structures); other important groups have moved away from the Middle East to reach Europe or the US (in particular Nebraska where a Yazidi community has been visible, active and well-integrated for many years) and only a minimum part has returned to Sinjar where it has found a reality ravaged by war<sup>131</sup>.

The majority of the Yazidis lives however at present in refugee camps. Even though these camps operate under the supervision (and thanks, in many cases, to the organization) of the international structures such as the UNHCR, the living conditions are absolutely critical, especially from the point of view of the health conditions with a clear inadequacy of the medical structures and the frequent outburst of epidemics<sup>132</sup>. The return of these refugees to their original settlements is hindered by a number of factors having to do with their personal safety, the deterioration of the structures, the moral and social cohesion of the community.

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<sup>131</sup> Fortis, 2020

<sup>132</sup> As reported by Lynn Zovighian in (Fortis, 2020) refugees have considered the living conditions within the UNHCR camps even worse than the one they had as prisoners of ISIL, despite the condition of enslavement characterizing that situation

From the “safety” point of view one should bear in mind that IS does not represent the only movement which considers the Yazidis as “heathens”; and therefore, a community to reject if not to totally erase. A tragic example was provided by the Syria based, Islamic extremist movement Al-Nusra which has threatened the Yazidis with reserving them the same treatment already inflicted upon the community by IS. A threat which has caused the fleeing out of the Mediterranean area of many of the refugees who had found shelter in Syria in the region of Aleppo, close to the Iraqi border. On the other hand, a positive development is certainly represented by the Baghdad conference of the summer 2019. A conference in which it was clearly stated that the Yazidis with their monotheistic (and not “heathen”) religion are part of the complex texture of the Iraqi population and have therefore to be considered as “brothers” and, as such, not to be isolated and, even worse, persecuted. The terrible state of the Sinjar province also plays against an easy return.

This is particularly true for the villages which were hosting the largest part of the local Yazidi population and were ravaged by the IS attacks in their infrastructures and, even more, in their religious sites (mostly on Mount Sinjar). The latter were almost completely destroyed with a view at making the return of the “infidels” impossible.

And last, but not least, the disintegration of the Yazidi social texture carried out by IS fanatic fighters through a systematic violence on kidnapped women.

Adopting an approach already implemented by others in Bosnia-Herzegovina<sup>133</sup>, at least partially successful<sup>134</sup>, the assailants have tried to make “ impure” to the eyes of their very relatives the women they had raped so that the latter would be rejected by their family and by the whole Yazidi community ; inflicting therefore, upon the latter, a blow most likely stronger than the one which could derive from a mass-killing. What the Muslim fanatics had not considered is the moral solidity of the Yazidi code and, at the same time, its substantial and non-fanatical adhesion, to the rules of co-existence within the community. While being a substantially closed religion, in the sense that only the family lineage (and mostly the one from both parents) makes it possible to become a member of the community of “believers”, it has a much more open cultural approach in comparison to many other monotheistic religions and in particular to Islam in its most fanatical forms. This openness has made it possible for the Yazidis, unlike what had happened in Bosnian communities, to welcome the return of their women once free again and to recognize that they had nothing to do with the atrocities they had to go through.

This joyful acceptance has taken the form of solemn rites of purification celebrated by Yazidi’s religious leaders in the reconstructed Sinjar communities. Unfortunately this positive welcome (which the aggressors by no means expected) was not matched by a specialized psychological support to individuals who had suffered multiple tragedies and at the same time: such as the killing of the husband or the father, the traumatic separation from their families, enslavement in inhuman conditions, a continued physical and psychological violence, the constant fear of death in the war-torn areas where they were detained.

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<sup>133</sup> Lombrezzi 1997

<sup>134</sup> Cadalanu, 2020

The mix of these elements and of the very young age of most of the victims (in their vast majority children of the two sexes) has set in motion in the minds of those who had suffered them traumas very difficult to overcome. Traumas for whose overcoming no assistance was, as said above, provided not even by the international Organizations which had brought material aid, nor structures were put in place able to provide this assistance in the “elaboration of pain” at least in the medium term.

A dramatic consequence of the above is the very high number of suicides among those who returned home, with peaks among the youngest women (20 or 21 years old who were just children at the time of their abduction by ISIL<sup>135</sup>.

It is symptomatic that, may in the absence of a specialized external support and in a desperate search for a purification going beyond the “collective “ rites mentioned above, the majority of these suicidal young women decided to resort to suicide by self-burning<sup>136</sup>: one of the most atrocious modalities.

All these remarks lead us to examine in a rather critical light the “path of return” which many former prisoners, being not only Yazidi and mostly women, are undertaking. They are all extremely fragile subjects who have undergone very serious forms of physical and, even more, psychological isolation with and negative impact on their mind. A situation which calls for the utmost attention and care by the specialist as well as for all the possible attention and affection by the victim’s families and community of origin. The path to return of the former prisoners can be associated, at least for so to say a commonality of trauma and the medium-long time span required for recovery, to the return of other women: like the ones who joined IS, attracted by its message, to fight side by side with the IS militants becoming in many cases “the most fanatic among fanatics”. Many of these women live today in a sort of “limbo” from a legal point of view: many countries (including Italy since 2018) may deprive of their nationality, for “terrorist activities”, those who had previously received it through the normal nationalization procedures. These has happened already for a number of “foreign fighters” having fought in the ranks of the IS: it happened recently for example for a 15 years old British girl. These people have seen their “ideal world” collapse for at least three times: the first one when, feeling totally “alien” to the culture and habits of their country of origin, they have decided to move to an inhospitable country to fight a war in unknown territories, with unknown fellow fighters and against an unknown enemy; a second time, when they had to accept (being in many cases disappointed) the cruel reality of a terrible war, certainly far away from the “romantic paradises” announced and described by the IS propaganda; the third when, after the military and political collapse of the “dream of the Caliphate”, they were rejected by their country of origin or of adoption; a country understandably much more interested in not reimporting potential terrorists than in providing medical and psychological support to emotionally vulnerable individuals.

And since the return from the lands of radical Islam may take different colors and the day to day chronicles quite often prevail over any kind of analysis, it is difficult not to mention another painful “path of return” brought to our attention recently by the return to Italy of a former Italian humanitarian operator coming back

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<sup>135</sup> Ibidem

<sup>136</sup> Ronzitti

from Kenia converted to radical Islam; without entering into easy and most likely misleading analysis of a psychological or sociological nature it is reasonable to assume that this conversion, symbolized by her wearing a “chador” on her journey home and by the adoption a different and “Islamic” name, is not the expression of a personal (and as such always to be respected) path towards a different creed but more likely of an unresolved personal drama. And of a dynamic, both in terms of thought and action, in which the first loss is that of one’s identity. The hope is that in this specific case, as in many others, the old affections, expressed by the hug of the found again parents, may be the main pillar of the way to recovery together the appropriate therapies for a retrieval of an autonomous capacity of choice.

The same should be wished to the Yazidi women: that they never again be deprived of the fraternal acceptance of their families and of the community as well as of specialized assistance for the overcoming of their internal conflicts and dramas.

## **Chapter 4: The international community policies for the Yazidis**

We have illustrated up to now developments with two main players: on the one hand, the IS fanatics, and on the other, a community harassed, tortured and threatened (not for the 1<sup>st</sup> time in its long history) of physical and cultural annihilation. The reality however is that the above said events have taken place in front of a multitude of international players.

These players have had an important role in the aforementioned chain of events even when they simply let them occur without interfering for reasons of international balances. It is evident therefore that this conflict has to be analyzed in its larger geo-political dimension: in particular Western nations would have had all the reasons to intervene since its inception much more decidedly under the principle of “humanitarian interference”.

But that belongs to the past: it is nowadays that a concrete action by the international community is needed to prevent the success, despite IS’s defeat on the ground, of the terrorist’s heinous attempt to eliminate the Yazidis as a community, as a religion, and as a people.

The actions to this end should follow two main tracks: the first one of a legal nature and based on international policies capable of ensuring an exemplary conviction and punishment of the crimes perpetrated by the terrorists and their instigators, with special attention to those who have voluntarily transformed war actions in crimes against humanity; the second track should be centered on helping the Yazidi community in its attempts at achieving a new beginning with no preclusions in principle on the ways and, even more, places where this reconstruction could peacefully occur.

We could take as an example what happened immediately after WWII: a period in which many Jewish communities managed to start a new life in Europe or the US while at the same time, after 2000 years, the State of Israel was being rebuilt in Palestine. The same scenario can and may be should take place for the Yazidi community with a creation of a safe site, protected by the international community, in the area of Mount Sinjar while at the same time Yazidi religious and cultural communities could prosper within other nations (as it is already happening in Germany and the US): communities which should of course be respectful of their traditions and at the same time of the laws and practices of the host nations as any loyal citizen.

### **4.1. Legal prosecution of the actions committed by a Nation**

One of the most complex issues in international law is that of its enforcement with reference to actions committed not by private citizens but by a Nation or a state-like organization. In fact, in this case not only there are no applicable national laws but, quite paradoxically, national laws could impose precisely the kind of behavior considered as criminal by international law.

There is large convergence of views at international level on the fact that some particularly heinous crimes should in any case be persecuted by international tribunal in order to have them appropriately sanctioned. Among these crimes a major relevance has the one of “genocide” defined in its main terms in the “Genocide Convention” of 1948, and even more precisely in the “Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide” of 1951. Actions of “genocide” are considered those aimed at destroying totally or partially a group of people which may be defined by its ethnic, racial religious or simple national characters. The actions which can be included in this category can be of different kind, explicitly mentioned in the two above said Conventions, such as:

1. The killing of a relevant number of members of the aforementioned group;
2. The fact of causing serious physical or psychological damages to a relevant number of the members of the concerned group;
3. To inflict on the concerned people conditions of life clearly aimed at provoking the total or partial destruction of the group;
4. To impose measures blocking the “internal” procreation in the group with the ultimate purpose of provoking a mass extinction;
5. To systematically kidnap the youngest and most vulnerable members and transfer them into another community so as to permanently separate them from the group of origin and thereby put an end to their ethnical and cultural “continuity” with the latter.

Since 1915<sup>137</sup> crimes of this nature are considered “crimes against humanity”: a legal category making reference to a sort of “universal law” which does not need a specific national jurisdiction in order to be implemented.

The above-mentioned concerns are, in fact, the legal categories which were employed to prosecute the Nazi top brass at the Nuremberg Process, the top figures responsible of the massacres in former Yugoslavia and Rwanda and, more recently, Saddam Hussein. The typical Tribunals for this kind of crimes are the permanent ones as the Hague International Court, and those created “ad hoc” for particularly relevant criminal categories such as the already mentioned Tribunal for the crimes committed by the Nazi hierarchy or the one for the massacres in Rwanda.

The possibility to adopt identical or similar forms for the actions perpetrated by IS in 2014 presupposes that the actions are first of all identified as crimes against humanity and in particular as “genocide”.

The following paragraph will deal with this specific point.

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<sup>137</sup> On that occasion the term was employed by France, the UK and Russia to qualify the genocide by the Turks of the Armenian people;

## 4.2. The crime of Genocide in the actions by ISIL against the Yazidis

If we want to analyze correctly, from a legal point of view, the applicability of the typical features of genocide to the operations carried out against the Yazidis, from August 2014, by IS, one has to avoid the unfortunately frequent generalization of the term to encompass “*whatever action appearing particularly heinous and provoking a moral rejection: any action which, in other terms, implies a blatant violation of human rights without considering the issue of whether or not the constitutive elements of genocide are present*”<sup>138</sup>

The first and essential feature which a set of actions has to possess to be defined as genocide, according to current international practices, is the premeditation and absolute will to destroy a community<sup>139</sup>.

In other words, it is not sufficient that these actions have brought a great damage or even the elimination of individuals organized as a community. It is also necessary that these actions are of a voluntary nature and carried with the aim of annihilating totally or partially the above said community.

In the case we are examining, this situation is present beyond any doubt: on account “*inter alia*” of the formal claims made by IS and through the media. Newspapers, internet, and videos not only have permitted to the Islamic State to convey what was being done by its fighters but also to expand on the justifications found in the sacred texts of reference, abundantly forcing their literal content. IS has gone to the extreme declaring that the fact to have “tolerated” heathens (such as the Yazidis) for more than 1000 years was a crime of which the responsible would be asked to respond on Judgment’s Day. Therefore, in an absurd overturn of reality and common sense, the IS fanatics consider a crime not the ethnical elimination but the fact of having waited too long to carry it out, thus purifying the territory.

As already observed, this behavior represents a major difference with similar violations occurred in the XX<sup>th</sup> century: even the Nazis at the peak of their power have kept confidential all the information concerning the extermination camps. So much so that their existence came to the light only after the liberation of Dachau extermination camp by the American forces.

The Nazi defendants have in fact, all through the Nuremberg process, denied the existence of a state project aimed at the systematic eradication of the Jewish people and culture, and no documentary evidence of a planned “Final Solution” has been found.

Another possible defensive argument we may expect from eventual IS defendants, as well as from any other criminal organization operating in war time, is that violent actions, including also terrible ones, have to be considered in the frame of “normal war operations” and, as such, not subject to rulings by International Courts. This argument may appear quite “naïve”. In fact, it tends to emphasize the fact that any soldier or officer in war time executes orders, manages resources and commits violence against individuals or properties which in a non-war situation would be labeled as crime and as such rightly pursued.

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<sup>138</sup> (Marchesi 2020)

<sup>139</sup> Case number ICTR 964 of the Special Tribunal for Rwanda: Prosecutor vs Akayesu, to September 1998



Historically, precisely in order to avoid this so to say “general waiver”, “war rules”<sup>140</sup> were defined at international level.

The most known codification of the above-mentioned rules is the one embodied in the Geneva Convention; given its nature of wide-ranging and universal document suffice it to remember here its main features more strictly related to the topic we are examining:

- Specific rules on the treatment of prisoners of war:
  - Keep them in good health
  - Avoid malnutrition
  - Not assign them to forced labor
  - Avoid physical and/or psychological torture
- Prohibition to use the above said war prisoners to produce propaganda material
- Absolute respect of the civilian population not directly active within the war theater
- Protection of historical and cultural sites and resources

IS actions, in particular those towards the Yazidis, have violated in a systematic and continuous way all the above-mentioned rules, thus proving that these actions had nothing to do with war logics but only with an explicit will to erase a people from an ethnic and cultural point of view.

More in detail, targeted actions by the Islamic State against women and children which are definitely not involved in the war, not even with functions of support to the regular army, violates in a clear way the rules concerning the civilians. The treatment reserved to the prisoners (once again being almost exclusively women and children) has also violated the most basic personal rights.

Particularly humiliating, as detailed in the previous chapters, has been the destiny reserved to Yazidi young women and girls enslaved and offended to the point of having them sold in the slave market. No humiliating action was spared toward these poor people, if deemed useful to convey the IS propaganda message: from showing in public enslaved women or girls, to interviews of “converted” Yazidi children aspiring to become “martyrs” in terrorist suicide actions, to the public execution (with most terrifying techniques such as beheading) of preferably Western prisoners (without sparing typical non-fighting figures such as journalists).

Finally, it is also worth noticing that the prevailing legal interpretation at international level of the crime of genocide goes beyond the distinction between peace law and war law.

Therefore, whenever the essential elements of a crime of genocide can be detected, the “exception” based on the fact that the concerned acts were committed in time of war cannot be accepted<sup>141</sup>.

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<sup>140</sup> The need to provide some kind of regulation to the most extreme form of dispute between human beings, that is the war, was the first form of international legal protection born out of a widespread awareness at international level and to receive some sort of formalization. We could date it back to the founding of the International Red Cross (1849) which by its very nature – having to provide medical and humanitarian support - to the wounded of all the parties in a conflict had to be protected by a precise set of rules. On the other hand, the notion of “crimes against humanity” dates back to 1915 and that of genocide to 1948

<sup>141</sup> (Salerno 2020)

Another constitutive element of the crime of genocide is represented by the possibility to identify the “target” of the operations in a group of ethnical, racial, religious or national nature. International practice has in fact consolidated this “characterization” of the victims (the one included in the 1948 Convention) without any extension of the above said categories, even though it had been proposed to include for instance “politicians” making thus possible, had this proposal been accepted, to pursue under as “genocide” operations of violent and massive repression of political opponents such as, for instance, those carried out in the first part of the XX<sup>th</sup> century by a number of Latin-American dictators<sup>142</sup>.

Even from this point of view, there can be no legitimate doubt as to the identification of the Yazidis as a community not only religious but also ethnic; since it explicitly promotes endogamy (that the decision to marry only with someone belonging to the community) and does not allow persons born outside the community to convert to the Yazidi creed. Therefore, two of the four possible categories legally justifying the notion of genocide (the religious and the ethnic one) appear in the Yazidi case present beyond any reasonable doubt, with the possible extension of the ethnic notion to the larger one of the “Kurdish people”. A people to which the Yazidis doubtlessly belong, even though as a minority component, but this would imply much larger issues which could in the end dilute, instead of reinforcing, the charge of genocide against the Yazidis as such<sup>143</sup>.

Against the above said background (in terms of identification of the essential elements of the crime of genocide: will to erase a people, application of the term of “crime” even in time of war, in presence of the essential features, identification of the target groups) we can move on to an exam of the IS actions and to their “identification” with those contemplated by international jurisprudence on genocide. As already said the list of possible actions falling under the category of genocide has been detailed in the specific Conventions of 1948 and 1951 concerning the topic. It is also to be noted that the presence of only one of the distinguishing features of genocide is sufficient to prove the crime.

The first element is of course the mass killing of people belonging to the community to “erase”. There is no doubt that the specific actions of August 2014 with the irruptions into villages and the roundup of their inhabitants, their separation on the basis of ethnic/religious criteria so as to be sure to identify real Yazidis and the ensuing mass killing of men in military age constitute a direct action of genocide (and also a factual testimony to be used in possible court cases). A poignant symbol of this action of deliberate annihilation is offered also by the huge number of mass graves dug in a few days and discovered after the presence in the area of the international community.

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<sup>142</sup> (Marchesi, 2020); this does not imply obviously that mass killing of groups which are not the expression of a specific ethnic, religious or national identity is not something to be execrated or not be legally prosecuted by the international community. It simply implies that in this case the more generic formulation “crime against humanity” should be employed without the further and no less heavy charge of genocide

<sup>143</sup> One should in fact on the one hand take into consideration all the other forms of violent discrimination and systematic elimination endured by the Kurds in general; on the other, reach a conclusion on the attitude adopted towards the Yazidis by the “non-Yazidi Kurds”. A number of Yazidis have charged “Muslim Kurds” with total lack of support (and in the specific events of the summer 2014 a deliberate absence of the “Peshmerga militias” during the actions of ethnic cleansing by the IS was mentioned)

The second element can be detected in the expulsion from villages and/or in the spontaneous escape of the population on the basis of rumors on what was happening in the neighboring villages. The escape has taken place almost entirely towards and on mount Sinjar always in difficult conditions, particularly critical in the light of the climatic element: mount Sinjar being the hottest point in an awfully hot summer. The IS has not only provoked the escape but also blocked any escape route from this most uncertain shelter: a fact which has caused the death (mostly for dehydration) of hundreds of the most vulnerable people. This element represents a second modality of genocide, envisaged like the previous one by international jurisprudence. The third element has to do with the fate of women, in particular those in fertile age. There is concrete evidence that many of them have suffered from provoked abortions and systematic campaigns of contraceptive therapies pointing at preventing the birth of newborn to the community IS wanted to eliminate. Even these actions aimed at the non-proliferation of a community are explicitly embodied in the 1948 and 1951 Conventions and confirmed by International Tribunals for Human Rights (for instance in relation to the treatment reserved by the Serbs to Bosnian women).

Finally, another practice has been largely proven (never denied by the IS fighters and the object of a number of propaganda videos): that of kidnapping young Yazidis of both sexes breeding and educating them in a totally different environment both from a cultural and religious point of view from the native one. All this with a view at transforming potential opponents looking for revenge in loyal allies ready to fight side by side with ISIL in the crusade against the “infidels”.

We are therefore faced with a situation whereby, even though the presence of only one of the genocide practices would be enough from a legal standpoint to prove the crime, all the typologies characterizing a genocide are present and proven in a detailed way integrating each other to achieve the goal of definitely erasing a community, its memory and its traditions.

A systemic collection of the above said considerations has been commendably implemented by an ONG, such as the Syrian Accountability Project.

The documents and evidences collected may constitute an integral part both of national and international dossiers aimed at explicitly accusing IS of genocide and, consequently, an essential component of the actions required to internationally protect the victims.



**Figure 15 Brand of S. A. P. (Report 2012)**

### 4.3. The actions to “internationalize” the Yazidi issue

#### 4.3.1 *Acknowledgment by the UN*

The formal acknowledgement of the presence of an international crime which can be legally pursued is a formal act in order to allow legal actions both by multilateral organizations and or single States. In fact, the principle of non-interference in a state’s domestic affairs can be overrun only in case of acknowledgement of crimes against humanity and of the specific aggravating form of genocide. This would naturally also set the ground for the pursuance at international level of the crime’s executors and instigators as well as for the protective actions and possible compensation of the victims. The acknowledgement of the above described specific crimes by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights was therefore a crucial development.

With its decision of June 16 2016<sup>144</sup>, the above said UN body, after examining the documents and evidence gathered with reference to the facts occurred starting August 3 2014 at the border between Iraq and Syria, has reached the conclusion that the IS acted to annihilate the Yazidis through mass killings, mostly sexually based enslavement of women , torture, inhuman and humiliating treatments capable of causing relevant physical and mental damages; it has moreover imposed conditioning measures on children forcing their conversion, separating them from their families and, more in general, provoking serious traumas of psychological nature. All this perpetrated against thousands of young women and children of both sexes. Therefore, the UN High Commissioner concludes, the crimes committed perfectly fit into the definition of the crime of genocide and commit the UN and its member states to all the actions deriving from this situation.

The Chair of the Commission, Mr. Pinheiro, who has thus judged IS’s actions, has emphasized that the actions connected with genocide were still (it was as said above 2016) under way and that it was therefore a preventive action by the international community and its control of the territory where a national jurisdiction should have been exerted. In this connection it is important to stress that the application of the principle of humanitarian interference concerns not only the self-proclaimed Caliphate, which obviously is not a member of the UN nor is recognized by a large majority of countries, but also (and even more) Syria and Iraq: territories hosting almost the totality of the Yazidi people and which have not refrained in the past (in particular Saddam Hussein’s Iraq) from different forms of persecution against the Kurds in general and the Yazidis in particular.

It is also worth noticing that even before the important UN decision, few countries, and in particular the US, have considered the need to intervene given the urgency and dramatic nature of the situation, in order to protect as much as possible the targeted community. It is only in this logic that we can interpret President Obama’s decision to

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<sup>144</sup> See the dedicated page on site [news.un.org](http://news.un.org) of the United Nations

Have the US Air Force intervene in order both to drop food aid for the refugees on mount Sinjar and to open a safe corridor on the ground for the “peshmergas” that, all through the war against IS, have been the main allies of the US sponsored by NATO.

#### *4.3.2 The European acknowledgement*

In addition to the acknowledgement by a number of states (including Italy as we’ll see later), the action carried out by the European Court for Human Rights deserves to be noted. Its General Prosecutor, Fatou Bensouda, has in fact in a speech of September 2015 made a point of stressing the Court’s competence also in the absence of an adhesion by Syria and Iraq to the Rome Statute: the constitutive document of the Court. Bensouda’s assertion stems from the consideration that the typology of the crimes perpetrated goes beyond any national jurisdiction as it generally happens when the crime is the one of genocide.

Unfortunately, this statement of principle has not been followed up by an equally clear stance of the European Union as such on the formal attribution of the qualification of international crime to IS operations.

### **4.4 Italy’s interventions**

#### *4.4.1 Official acknowledgement of genocide*

Italy has recognized the Yazidi genocide (exactly in this formulation) through a Resolution of the competent Parliamentary Committee (Third Permanent Committee, Foreign and EU Affairs). It is more precisely Res.80021, approved in the meeting of March 26 2019, on the basis of a bi-partisan agreement among the main forces in Parliament so much so that it was presented by a MP of the Five Stars Movement, and it was backed both by the government at that time in charge and by the parties then at the opposition. The latter have in fact decided to drop their own motion on the same topic to converge on a unitary vote in support of the remaining Resolution which was therefore unanimously approved by the Commission acting as a deliberative body.

In other words, the Italian Parliament in its entirety has found common ground on a shared humanitarian spirit and equally shared rejection of repressive action to the extreme point of genocide perpetrated by the IS and already recognized as such by the competent UN fora. The Resolution, in addition to joining other international players in the request to pursue the instigators and material executors of the crimes and at the same time to protect the victims, commits the government to a number of actions. These actions are in particular the following:

- To step up efforts at international level in order to have the Yazidi genocide officially recognized by as many states as possible;

- To promote at the UN all the initiatives considered appropriate and useful to judge the perpetrators of international crimes;
- To punish those responsible as war crimes, with special emphasis on the category of sexual violence;
- To adopt any initiative, within the government's sphere of competence, able to assist the identification of the bodies found in mass graves, in order inter alia to obtain a clearer picture of the number and names of survivors;

It is evident from the above Italy's will, expressed by all our MP's, to work side by side with the main multilateral bodies in order to bring to justice and punish crimes which for their cruelty go beyond national jurisdictions adding legitimacy to the international community's efforts for a coherent, orderly and determined response to these horrors whenever and wherever they may take place.

#### *4.4.2. Italy's intervention against IS*

A different form of intervention in favor of the victims of IS expansionism, and therefore also of the Yazidi community, was put in place by Italy through its participation to the American-led international operations aimed at the military defeat of the Jihadists, and therefore to the resolution of Iraqi and Syrian civil wars generated by the Caliphate actions.

In a significant way, and in line with the Italian Constitution's principles, the Italian intervention (unlike that of other European nations such as the UK) did not concentrate on the participation to armed actions but on the training of the anti-IS forces put at the disposal of the Iraqi authorities, in particular of the Peshmerga forces of Iraqi Kurdistan. The training was both in the use of the weapons provided by the Italian Army (in particular sub-machine guns and RPG rockets) and of more sophisticated equipment such as remote-control drones for surveillance operations. From August 2014, date of the beginning of the intervention, to the first months of 2015, date of the last detailed Report, the 530 Italian military engaged in the mission trained roughly half of the Kurdish contingent. This contingent has proven crucial both in actions on the ground and in the protection of civilians as well as in pushing back well beyond the Syrian border the Caliphate's Army. These successes have made it possible to completely liberate the Sinjar area and, therefore, to hand back a potentially safe house to the Yazidi people in the areas where they have been living for centuries and which represent the most significant cultural and geographical reference for this homeless community.

It is also worth noticing that the direct intervention of the Italian Armed Forces in support of the international coalition, repeatedly asked for by the allies and in particular by the US, occurred immediately after the operation of ethnic cleansing initiated by IS in August 2014; in other words, the main reason to intervene was not one of geopolitical convenience or of being member of a specific alliance but the result of a

reasoned decision to utilize any possible means to put an end to the massacre and offer a concrete contribution to pacifying the area and to liberating Yazidi's historical homeland.

#### 4.4.3. *The relations with the new Iraq*

The resolution of the political conflict which brought to the creation of the Caliphate and its merciless war against "infidels" and, in particular, against "heathens" cannot and should not be limited to military option, although this cannot be avoided.

If it is true that Iraq's domestic and external crisis has started with the collapse of Saddam Hussein's régime and with the explosion of the so many ethnical and religious divisions running through Iraq's national texture, the same crisis has to find its solution in the stabilization and growth of a new Iraq.

If this new nation really wants to overcome the tragedies of its recent past, it has necessarily to develop through policies of national union bringing together Sunni, Shia, Kurds in the respect of the peculiarities and religious beliefs of each of the three communities.

This is the path on which the new Iraq is actually embarking with many difficulties, also for the interferences of powerful neighbors with different interests and "agendas".

In fact, each of players bordering with Iraq are the expression of specific interests with repercussions on every religious component of the Iraqi population:

- Iran is acting in favor of the Shia component, the largest one in the country, always discriminated by Saddam Hussein;
- Saudi Arabia, on the contrary, supports the Sunni component for the identity of religious beliefs and in order to counter Iran ambitions in Iraq;
- Turkey formally operates in anti- IS optic with its regular Army as well as a NATO member. In fact, Ankara develops at the same time an openly anti-Kurdish policy taking sometimes the form of incursions in Northern Iraq mostly inhabited by Kurds.

Against this complex background, Italy is trying to accelerate Iraq's economic growth, a precondition for any lasting solution, through a number of cooperation and development partnerships. The relations between the two countries are ancient and solid so much so that our transport and logistics sector is particularly appreciated and requested by the Iraqi counterpart. For example, in 2017 two meetings have taken place between the Foreign Ministers of the two countries, one in Rome the other in Baghdad, with two main topics: (1) the new Iraqi plan for transports and the creation of basic infrastructures; (2) the support which to this end may be provided by Italian firms such as ITALFER<sup>145</sup>.

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<sup>145</sup> The strong Italian commitment in the rebuilding of the country's most sensitive infrastructures is confirmed by the reconstruction and consolidation of the Mosul dam by the Italian firm Trevi. Our military were deployed to protect our workers from potential ISIL reprisals

The Italian commitment is not limited to the goods and services sector, but it stretches to the area of finance. In this respect credit lines have been opened in favor of Iraq for an amount of 260 million Euros in addition to the 5 million euros provided as a “grant” to the Iraqi side.

All these initiatives of economic development are in fact part of a larger and differentiated program of humanitarian aid brought forward by Italy, since 2016, through the WHO, WFP and UNHCR (the UN High Commissioner for the Refugees) as well as through UNICEF. Direct donations have also taken place through Italian NGO’s in Iraq. To give an idea only this last kind of intervention was over 4 million euros, whereas the UN assistance to Iraq has been supported by Italy through no less than 6 different flights carrying medical and logistical equipment to be handed over to the civilian population.

#### **4.5. The operational solution to the massacre**

One of the typical instruments of aid to the above said minorities is to allow the latter to leave their territory become unsafe, and to be accepted by nations capable of guaranteeing them personal safety as well as respect for their ethnic and religious identity.

The issue is in other words the one of favoring, through their right to asylum, the victim’s desire to recreate a community abroad. As we have already observed in the introduction, this scenario has to be considered as one which can integrate but in no way replace the possibility for the victims to return to their homeland once freed from the invaders. The choice between these two alternatives has to be left to the each individual. The instrument of asylum has been largely utilized by countries such as the US, the UK, Australia and France which are the main donors of the pertinent programs promoted by the UNHCR. The limit of these programs is that very rarely these refugees manage to apply for asylum in a given country before entering the country of final destination or, at least, of first landing, such as have been over the last years Italy and Greece within the European Union. It ensues from the above that in order to claim his right to be protected by the international community and given asylum by one of the countries ready to host them, the refugee has to go through a difficult and often dramatic “voyage of hope” often taking place under the control of criminal groups managing this very “profitable” business.

In order to avoid a further penalization of individuals already weakened by war and sufferings the idea of “humanitarian corridor” has come to the light. In addition to being a diplomatic term, this idea implies in our specific case the effective transformation of a geographical place in “neutral zone” where the movements of the refugees are facilitated. In other case it takes the form of a huge bureaucratic machine producing as a tangible result:

- The direct acceptance of the asylum request formulated by the refugee and his family;
- The transport of the refugee under diplomatic protection avoiding therefore the risks of attacks or rejection by one or the other state;



- The acceptance in the country of first landing and later a facilitation of the transfer to the country of destination, where in many cases part of the refugee's family already lives or a large community identical or similar to the refugee's one is already settled;
- An effective contrast to the dirty business of transport of refugees by criminal gangs.

Italy has activated a program of "humanitarian corridors" in cooperation with some members of the civil society, among which the "Comunità di Sant'Egidio" and the "Federation of Evangelical Churches in Italy". This cooperation implied the protected admission into Italy of 1000 people in the period 2015-2016. While not primarily directed to the area of Iraq the procedure contemplated control and selection mechanisms which certainly benefited Yazidis fleeing Northern Iraq. The above said operation concerned in fact primarily the area of Lebanon where a number of Syrians fleeing the civil war had found shelter together with Yazidis escaped from IS's persecutions wishing to reach Europe from Lebanon.

Some European nations, particularly France, have envisaged specific humanitarian corridors for Iraqi minorities fleeing the war: Christians and Yazidis have largely benefited from these instruments such as "special visas" delivered by France in a higher number than the rest of the European countries (almost 3000 long-stay or permanent visas delivered by France in 2015).

#### *4.5.1. Protection on the ground*

The other component of the assistance offered to the rebirth of the Yazidi people is that of allowing in the safest way their return to the territories occupied before 2014.

Today those lands are almost completely uninhabited. For this reason, the almost 400.00 Yazidis surviving as refugees (leaving aside the thousands who died) have a real possibility to see again in a free and relaxed manner their home.

An interesting analysis of the preconditions needed for a correct and successful policy of reintegration has been conducted by the Middle East Research Institute (MERI): a nonprofit organization born in 2014 and based in Erbil in the Iraqi Kurdistan. This organization detects three main conditions for a Yazidi rebirth which can be summarized in the concepts of:

1. Justice
2. Safety
3. Reconstruction

MERI refers with the term "justice" on the one hand to the need to prosecute systematically, and on the basis of the national and international law, the ideologues and the material executors of the ethnic cleansing. However, punishing past crimes means something only if the appropriate measures are adopted to ensure, with any available means, that such a tragedy will never again occur in the history of the Yazidi people and, more in general, of mankind. It is therefore essential that Iraqi legal system evolves in a "secular" sense,

avoiding any reference to “sharia” capable of being also in the future misinterpreted and put forward as a justification for a genocide.

Since justice cannot take place without a solid political and representative backing, it is likely that a political representation of the Yazidi minority will be necessary: a representation able to bring the legitimate requests and expectations of the Yazidi to the attention of the relevant national and international fora in case of clear violations of individual liberties.

The parameter of “safety” concerns in the first place the liberation of Mount Sinjar and neighboring villages from the presence of IS fighters, in order to prevent any future attempt of a paramilitary nature. Moreover the possibility should be explored of an “ad hoc” military presence to protect the above said area, made up of Yazidi national elements (or at least approved by the Yazidi leaders) to avoid the absence of a specific protection as it unfortunately occurred in August 2014: many witnesses have mentioned the disengagement on that occasion of the Kurdish military forces (in particular of the KDP) as well as of the Peshmerga units: even though it is still not clear if this happened on account of a tactical underestimation of the danger occurred by the civilian population on that specific occasion or on account of some sort of indifference to the destiny of a community considered “alien” both to the Kurdish and to the Iraqi people.

The creation of a “national militia” or, at least, the active involvement of Yazidi political representatives in the decisions concerning the defense of the territory and foreign policy would certainly allow the Yazidi people to achieve a greater degree of self-determination.

Finally, an aspect followed with special attention by the West: the one of reconstruction of buildings, sites and infrastructures. IS operations of 2014 have not only cruelly targeted individuals but also completely destroyed the main sites of religious importance for the Yazidis. Furthermore, the already limited and fragile energetic and water-transport related infrastructures were also completely destroyed. Hospitals and schools have also to be completely rebuilt: all the more since the very high level of psychological stress suffered by the Yazidis demands increased medical assistance also in relation to the systematic violence, torture and rapes undergone, at the hands of the terrorists, by almost the totality of Yazidi feminine population .

To this end, a direct intervention of qualified Italian NGOs as well as the more structured one based on inter-governmental cooperation (supported by financial instruments) has to and can play a major role in order to give substance to the of solidarity with the Yazidis expressed at all level by Italian politicians and MPs. As already happened in the case of Iraq in general it is essential to move from the emergency phase to the reconstruction phase. In other words it is essential to pass from the typology of grants and distribution on the ground of first-aid goods, to the phase of promotion of the territory : in particular the expertise of Italian firms with special qualification in the field of water treatment and management could prove precious to solve one of the most ancient problems of the population of the Sinjar area: the difficulty to dispose with continuity of clean water: the gift of the water could in fact mean for this population the beginning of a new life.

#### 4.5.2. *International Legal Protection*

Even though at present the Iraqi leadership is giving proof of appropriate attention and concern for the problems of the Yazidi community, hundreds of years of history characterized by a stunning number of persecutions are there to remind us of the almost structural vulnerability of a people, such as the Yazidi one, certainly peaceful but doubtlessly “different” and perceived as such by all its neighbors. It is in fact always possible that a new situation of difficulty, even simply a major economic crisis<sup>146</sup>, may ignite once again an undefined form of hatred towards those perceived as “different” and therefore give origin to new forms of discrimination if not widespread violence.

In order to prevent in a structural way this from happening the following is necessary: on the one hand, that in all the appropriate fora, the moral and legal sanctions for what has happened be confirmed and that the responsible of the crimes be judged and sentenced by international tribunals: as such, not biased or religiously oriented (as is unfortunately often the case in modern states with an Islamic majority such as Iran, Saudi Arabia and even Iraq). It is essential on the other end that the “structural” condition of the Yazidis, minority in a minority (the Kurdish one), expression of a specific culture and religion (and anyway “different”) and peaceful to the extreme be recognized at international level and therefore adequately protected by: “ad hoc” Resolutions, targeted inspections on the ground and anyway by a widespread awareness capable of discouraging any further attempt at new persecutions or violence against the Yazidi community.

In this respect, it is extremely positive that the action of the Italian Parliament and govern is primarily oriented, as it happened through the already mentioned Resolution 80021/19 of the Foreign Affairs Committee, to promoting awareness of the Yazidi plight and to putting pressure on the international bodies (starting with the UN) in order to have the situation of the Yazidi constantly monitored.

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<sup>146</sup> It is easy to remember that the dramatic economic crisis endured between the two wars by the Weimar Republic was one of the main causes of the appearance of strong anti-Jewish movements and, therefore, of the coming to power of Nazism

## 4.6. A symbol of suffering and rebirth

### 4.6.1. *The need for “iconic” individuals in the communication society*

One of the reasons why the history of the Yazidis, and in particular their attempted genocide in such a recent past, although quite well-known, did not receive by the international public opinion the attention it deserved, lies in the fact that it was so to say a “history with no actors”. This does not of course mean that the victims were missing; simply that they were far away and unknown. Both elements which certainly do not favor an attention to the issue and the emotional involvement of international public opinion. We have analyzed in the first part of this thesis the key role of the media (from the traditional to the most modern ones: such as internet and the social media). And we have elaborated on the fact that their capacity to convey attention, to put forward issues and to create the “social” pre-conditions for their solutions is almost always linked to the possibility of identifying an event with a symbol, even better if this symbol is an individual.

To make just one example, the drama of Vietnam was interiorized by the American public opinion in its most awful aspects (giving origin to a widespread movement of rejection of the war) only when the “media”, and in particular the war photographers, were in a condition to associate to the collective drama of the Vietnam war specific symbolic images, capable of capturing the attention and to concentrate it on concrete individuals: on symbols in others words capable of stirring emotions and, therefore, a decision to do something at political level.

In particular even today the well-known photo of children fleeing a burning village hit by Napalm bombs, is considered a symbol of a merciless war not sparing the civilian population. This picture is for everyone (going back to the issue of the iconic figure) the one of the “napalm girl” since the attention of the viewer is captured by the central figure of the naked young girl crying because of her burns. The history of this girl whose name is Kim Phuc, today wife and a mother, has become a symbol of the Vietnam war tragedies and it is also for this that she could create a Foundation for the protection of young victims of all the wars (the Kim Phuc Foundation International).

### 4.6.2. *The history of Nadia Murad*

A living symbol of the Yazidis’ tragedy is easy to identify: a young Yazidi woman living until the age of 21 in the village of Kocho; on the one hand studying and, on other, helping her peasant parents. She was therefore a very normal girl of an almost unknown village when her community, her village, her family suddenly became the object of the fanatic violence of the IS warriors. After assisting to the murder of a number of friends and family members (including brothers and half-brothers) Nadia is carried away from her village on august 15 2014, and taken as a “war slave” to Mosul, the capital of the “Caliphate”. Submitted

to brutal treatments of all kinds, utilized as sexual slave like many of her female fellow prisoners, Nadia had the chance and the courage to escape taking advantage of the door of her prison being left open by mistake by her guardian. Thanks to the help of a family in the area she then manages to reach the Dohuk refugee camp in Iraqi Kurdistan and from there Germany, through a humanitarian corridor.

Unlike many other victims and despite her young age and frail body, she decided from the start to make known, in the slightest details, the awful treatment she had to endure during imprisonment such as the beatings, the burns of cigarettes and, more than anything else, the annihilation of her dignity in the slave markets where potential buyers enter, touch, enquire about the price and the slaves peculiarities not caring at all about their crying and despair.

These continuous and coherent testimonies made her deserve since 2016 (barely two years after her kidnapping by ISIL fanatics) the appointment as “UN Ambassador for the dignity of the survivors to the trafficking of human beings”.

Nadia has expanded in detail about her history not only in her repeated live conferences, always poignant as emphasized by the former UNSG Ban Ki-moon after listening to her for the first the time at the UN General Assembly in 2015, but also through a biography (“The Last Girl: My story of Captivity, and My Fight against the Islamic State”), a biography in which from start describes the terrible things happened to her and to many other Yazidi girls, accompanied by a determination to avoid that these tragedies may occur again: that Nadia may really be “The Last Girl” to undergo sexual violence utilized as an instrument of war. It is also in reply to IS’s activism on the media that Nadia’s history becomes a short movie of 84 minutes “On Her shoulders” narrating how this young woman has taken on her shoulders the responsibility to inform and to engage herself as a living testimony so that the world could not pretend not to know and condemn to irrelevance the tragedy of the Yazidis and more in general of women used as slaves. In order not to forget but, even more, to act, Nadia Murad has set up in 2017 an organization “Nadia’s Initiative” to directly help the so many Yazidis looking for a new beginning and a normal life in the villages around Mount Sinjar.

The organization conveys the funds collected to the benefit of assistance initiatives, humanitarian aid but also reconstruction of important infrastructures such as the building of a new primary school in Bahrava in the Sinjar region replacing the one destroyed by IS fighters in their murderous raids of 2014.

The most important financing of Nadia’s Initiative has come however from the most prestigious civilian acknowledgement awarded to her in 2018: the Nobel Prize for Peace. The related monetary allowance was entirely devoted to the Sinjar action Fund (SAF): in other words, the prize will go to the part of the Association actively engaged for the moral and material reconstruction of the Yazidi people and territory. In fact, the fact that Nadia has received the Nobel Prize does not seem, up to know, to have produced the expected results in terms of support worldwide to the Yazidi cause.

This lack of tangible results derives most likely from the identification of Nadia essentially as a by now well-known victim of the war and of its extreme instruments, without a particular identification with her ethnic group and its cultural and religious features.

Even the motivation of her Nobel Prize brings to this ideological conclusion, so much so that this prestigious acknowledgment was shared with Denis Mukwege: a gynecologist of the Popular Republic of Congo. The explicit motivation by the Swedish Royal Academy has been: “for their efforts to put an end to sexual violence as an instrument of war or armed conflict”. The intention of the world’s cultural élite to move the attention from the persecution of a people (the Yazidi one in this case) to the unacceptably cruel instrument employed seems therefore quite clear. It would be instead important to remember in each appropriate international body that Nadia’s persecution is justified, for its fanatic executors, only by her being an “heathen” with no rights at all. Conversely, her courage in making her persecutions and sufferings known world-wide should be seen as the heroic appeal of a people which does not want to be erased from the face of the earth.

It is possible that the recent closer relationship between Nadia and the Yazda movement (since a long time active in the defense of the Yazidis rights) leads to a more correct identification of Nadia with the Yazidi cause and make it possible to mobilize more international support through a shared symbol.

## **Conclusion**

The IS possesses, among the different typologies of terrorism and fundamentalism, a number of distinguishing features having to do quite surprisingly, both with the past and with the present: the key element of the IS ideology and religious identity (which is also a political one) is doubtlessly an ancient one dating back to the experience of Mohamad and of the “well-guided” Caliphs.

One could even say that, as “authentic fundamentalists”, they want to go back to the purity of Koran and sharia’s message refusing all the successive elaboration. That very elaboration which had nourished the great social and cultural progress of the Islamic empire and its substantially peaceful coexistence with the Jewish and Christian communities in the conquered territories.

The refusal of any mediation (even, and more than anything, of the Shia or of moderate Sunnis), the new impetus given to Jihad as a “holy war” of liberation and conquest, the reassertion of the indispensable union of the religious and civilian power in the figure of the caliph are ancient legacies which project the most extreme convictions on the XX<sup>th</sup> century whose principles are rejected entirely: from religious pluralism to the secular character of the state.

However, coupled with this full contempt of modernity, goes quite paradoxically the Islamic State’s capacity to manage the typical war instruments including the most modern ones: (1) sophisticated weapons, (2) terrorist infiltration “beyond the lines” and, finally, (3) propaganda through mass communication media. From this angle the revolution embodied by the Islamic State appears extraordinarily modern: since it understands like, and sometimes more, the Western organizations or States Internet’s capacity to convey the messages most functional to its cause; alternating in a remarkable way recruitment-oriented propaganda with the will to frighten the western or moderate Arab audiences. Both the audio-visual instrument and the exploitation of its potentialities through the more public component of the web (You Tube more than Facebook or Instagram) denote a considerable skill in terms both of technique and planning. A skill which marks a clear discontinuity not only vis-à-vis the most ancient terrorist organizations but also vis-à-vis the most immediate predecessors such as Al-Qaeda, which had been the first to resort to video messages in order to claim responsibility for terror attacks.

It is not therefore a coincidence if this very strong, almost obsessive, campaign to spread the jihadist views has made its way into the minds of quite a number of young Westerners bringing them to a convergence with the IS not only from an ideological point of view but also to the point of joining the terrorist organisation as “foreign fighters” in the Caliphate’s army.

The fact that a considerable part of these new recruits is made up by women is also quite surprising if one considers the subordinate role of women in Islamic fundamentalist vision; it provides however at the same time a measure of the Islamic State leadership capacity to decline these traditional male-chauvinist categories in modern ways, giving for instance women a role in the feminine brigades (as illustrated more in detail in chapter 3) to be potentially resorted to for any kind of support including war-actions in the front-

line. Once again, the role of media is for the Islamic State is essential to emphasize this dualism: they represent in fact the best instrument (and well utilized) to convey for instance the image of strictly veiled women with a weapon and a fierce look similar to that of the male warriors.

Again, past and present do meet in the massacre of the Yazidis apparently with no contradiction. The ideological support comes from a remote past, from their “original sin” of being not only “non-believers” (as opposed to the devout Muslims) but also worshippers of the devil and, in any case, not a “people of the Book”. All this implies a condemnation without appeal and raises, in the Islamic State’s view, the question of how the “believers” (in other words the “devout Muslims”) could tolerate the existence of the Yazidis for centuries. But, at the same time, the implementation of the project of “ethnic cleansing” is practiced with modern techniques sadly reminding us of merciless organization put in place by the Nazi hierarchy on the one hand and, on the other, of the double fate (already seen in former Yugoslavia) of men being massacred and women (and young girls) reduced to slavery to avoid any possibility of genetic reproduction. At the same time, the same ethnic cleansing condemned these women to being abandoned by all (in their quality of “forced” companions of the enemy) and the species to extinction for the disappearance of the very possibility to procreate.

Once again the resort to new media (newspapers but also videos broadcasted on internet) is done for a totally new action: that is claiming responsibility for the genocide and its extreme consequences as brought to the viewer’s attention in its most dramatic form of women reduced to objects and sold as slaves and children transformed in suicide fighters.

The international reaction to these events should follow two different tracks: on the one hand the judgment of the instigators and perpetrators by international courts, the only ones with a competence for the crime of genocide; on the other, the creation of the largest possible sharing at international level of the tragedy which would be represented by the disappearance of a people (such as the Yazidi one) with a thousand-year-old-tradition, peaceful, cooperative and the expression of an ancient culture. The creation of opinion movements of this kind cannot of course occur without an intelligent use of mass media: a use which should at the same time represent the best answer to the production of terror also via the media carried out by the Islamic State as we have seen in previous chapters. Since each generation and people needs leaders it would be encouraging to think that the symbol of the Yazidi people may be the one of a young woman who never surrendered to violence and keeps fighting for what is right: in other words exactly what Nadia Murad is doing daily.



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# Summary

## **ISIL and new digital communication**

World's history has always been characterized by a series of conflicts or, more in general, by the prevalence of the strong over the weak through the use of violence.

This state of things has been historically and socially accepted in a number of forms and so to say inscribed within a number of contexts, since the appearance of the first hominoids on earth till the bloody more recent world wars. As though the war, and the related determination to of one of the sides to expel from the theatre of human life a more or less considerable part of the world's population could be the key to interpret at best human history. Precisely when we had reason to believe that the repetition of the cycles of violence was to be forever more or less the same in nature, a new player comes to the forefront of history. A player which was due to change dramatically the art of war as we had known it until then.

9/11 2001 has marked in fact a watershed between the way the world used to consider battles and the art of war and the radically new way in which violence was perpetrated: the absence of any diversification between military and civilian targets, the resort to unprecedented military and propaganda techniques, the complete disregard for human life are only some of the features distinguishing the new faction which likes to define itself as "international terrorism".

The industrialized West appears to be unprepared more from a psychological than from a technological perspective to this new challenge. As though this new enemy instead of leading to a new war concept was in fact leading to a new "war ideology": in short to the very concrete fear that bombs, death, destruction, blood and desolation have to be considered no more elements to be relegated to the battle field, as it happened in ancient times, but part instead of our daily life.

The majority of historians would probably observe that this scenario is not after all so different from the one experienced by mankind during the first world war or even WWII. The post 9/11 scenario presents however clear features pointing to an evolution of the age-old term of "war". For instance, the targets of the terrorist's attacks, as declared in the home-made communiqués, are not relevant from a tactical or strategical point of view but are instead selected in order to provoke the largest possible media impact and the deepest sensation of terror within Western public opinion.

In the course of our recent history we have been repeatedly put in front of more or less devastating terror attacks in Europe or in a large part of northern America having, as a target, the symbols of the "rich and corrupt" west if we base ourselves on the above said home-made communiqués: from schools to office buildings, monuments, churches, fairs and street markets, newspapers main offices, and even nurseries and play grounds. In an attempt to re-establish order within their territories, to guarantee the safety of their citizens and to adequately respond to the cruel message of international terrorism, Western nations have set up a large

coalition aimed at eradicating the world threat of terrorism from the territories in which it saw the light, as well as to maintain global order and guarantee -as much as feasible- each man, woman or child's peace and prosperity. This mission presents many difficulties, also on account in many cases of the absence of visible leaders on the terrorist factions: an element which represents one of the main advantages at the latter's disposal. However, thanks to a very accurate work of intelligence by the West pertinent agencies over the last years the "ideologues" behind the terrorist attacks, if not the instigators of each of them, have been identified depriving the terrorist organizations of a key element for them to be able to continue operating. In a few years Al-Qaida have been dismantled, many of its leaders being judged for crimes against humanity and sentenced to heavy prison terms.

Things seemed therefore to be heading once again towards normality, when a new terrorist movement comes to the surface to replace the defeated one, defining itself as "Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant" (ISIL).

Unlike its predecessor, ISIL presents from the start as a specific organization, both in territorial and practical terms: in fact not only does it define itself, since its first message to the world, as a reborn "Islamic State" but also defines in a very clear way its territories and area of action to the point of identifying the key-centres or the Capitals of its vast territory. The members of this movement wear uniform, have a flag, do behave like a regular army with training camps, hierarchies and tactics more similar to the western way of fighting than to the guerrilla like Al-Qaeda's typical behaviour.

A special mention deserves (as it is largely described in the present work) the Islamic State's new and more advanced technique of communication with the free world: in the first place ISIL operates directly through on-line streaming platforms, You Tube in the first place, without the intermediation of typical newspapers or "media": such as, for instance, Al Jazeera; in the second place, we can observe a complete restyling of the audio and video component of the propaganda message. In other words, the Islamic State produces real feature films with great attention to every detail, with a view aiming only to convey a specific message but also to emphasize each and every element of the feature film in order to maximize the emotional impact on the viewer. The messages accompanying the terrorist attacks in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 were mostly amateur videos, a static camera with no attention on details, and without film editing. All this ended up in a propaganda video, to a king of very cheap self-serving propaganda by the leader of the moment much more than in something able to mobilize the organization's members and terrorize its "enemies". In the case of ISIL, we are instead faced with a new terroristic threat not too different in contents from Al-Qaeda's messages but very different in terms of public presentation and impact.

The resort to streaming platforms in order to convey the message has two main objectives: in the first place, the use of YouTube guarantees anonymity and a "viral" diffusion of the video, so that the competent national authorities are not any more in a condition to block the spreading of the message; in the second place, it offers the possibility to the terrorist movement to reach world's public opinion in a more direct and so to say intimate way than the one permitted by traditional TV and news channels. Every time ISIL has posted a video, it has been seen by a considerable number of people with different motivations: some were looking for a better

understanding of the phenomenon, while others have seen it simply because the very platform was giving it evidence in the “home” section; others because they had heard about it or were simply curious. In other words, the fact of broadcasting via YouTube its videos has provided ISIL with a global platform not only from a mediatic point of view, but also in terms of shaping personal opinions which, for IS goals, are much more relevant. In fact, western nationals appear to be in a way anesthetized vis-à-vis what they hear on “traditional” national media on account inter-alia of the high media pressure they undergo daily; when, on the contrary (as it happens with YouTube), they may choose individually and freely to watch a video showing images put together clearly in order to scare them, then it is absolutely normal that they mature in their brain a very personal opinion on what they see. This opinion will bring each viewer to wonder whether his nation or other nation’s relevant bodies are doing whatever needed to stop these criminals who kill people taking at the same time videos of these awful acts. Parallely, a natural sense of mistrust towards national governments will emerge and even the fear to leave home: being it exactly the objective terrorists want to achieve with their propaganda videos.

The use of streaming platforms does not explain however how ISIL can be constantly provided with a flux of material allowing it to fight its war against the free world. In order to answer this question we need to resort to the concepts of Dark Web and Deep Web: as it happens for videos on YouTube the web pages are also very high in number; and it is very difficult for the site’s managers, if not impossible, to control the content of each and every page constituting the web’s complex architecture. Hiding from the sun light thanks to the confusion generated by the different informatics tools is just one of the camouflage mechanisms employed by terrorists and other criminal organizations to bring forward their illegal activities also in the virtual world.

There are some parts of Internet whose access is limited to very few people and representing the black market, where supply and demand meet for criminal activities. In these specific places one can negotiate, buy and sell almost everything: from light and heavy weapons to drugs, to the hiring of professional killers or kidnappers, to the trafficking of people and organs. Conversations are encrypted and remain anonymous like the payments, which take place through offshore accounts or by resorting to cryptocurrencies such as the Bitcoin. There is one specific action which is so to say non-conventional among the war-like and terrorist acts carried out by the Islamic State. In fact the action against the Yazidis started in 2014 has no military goals (the territory inhabited by the Yazidi community has practically no strategic relevance and its inhabitants had opposed no resistance to the invading ISIL militias) nor can it be considered part of the larger strategy of contrast to the Western powers and to the Arab “traitors”: both categories into which the Yazidis do not fit neither from an ethnic nor a religious point of view. It is on the other hand worth noticing that a territory like the one of Sinjar (where the Yazidis have been living for centuries) presented a considerable interest for an “Islamic State” which was, at that time, gathering more and more followers and needed a physical space to settle them.

The techniques utilized aimed at the systematic, almost scientific, elimination of a community which by coincidence occupies part of territory covered by ISIL: a territory which had moreover to be purified of this “unacceptable”, in IS view, even though totally inoffensive, presence according to a procedure we have

unfortunately already seen in recent history: in other words “ethnic cleansing” or “genocide”. If this action is not in line with traditional ISIL practices towards other opponents, not giving for instance the Yazidis the opportunity offered to other religions, such as the Catholics, to pay a tax or to convert, this is partially due to a certain coincidence within the Yazidi community between the ethnic and religious aspect. But there is also a lesser consideration of the value of the Yazidi as a person, not only if compared to a “believer” but also if compared to a common non believer, such a Shias or Christians.

The recognition of the dignity of “enemies” which apply to latter categories does not apply to the Yazidis who are considered substantially as “objects”, especially with reference to the condition of abducted women. Each ISIL action, as this attempted genocide, has a component of message to the world, enemies in particular: if we so desire this is the horrible destiny, and what we did in Kocho, (being it an area of Mount Sinjar) we can repeat tomorrow in Dubai, New York or Rome; we can not only conquer or kill but also to erase the memory of a people; its traditions; its very desire to exist. As always, these messages are conveyed not only through actions but also through the different media: from newspapers to videos. This is why, in the case of ISIL, the horror of the ethnic cleansing is compounded by the fact that the latter is not kept secret or denied till the end (as it happened for the Nazis in the case of the Jewish genocide or in the case of Serb ethnic cleansing in former Yugoslavia) but, on the contrary, announced, claimed and defended as a legitimate right.

The most incisive way for the Yazidi people to obtain justice and not simply a rapid revenge is to achieve an acknowledgment at the international level of the fact that ISIL did not carry out an action of conquest but a real “genocide”. The actions characterizing the crime of eradicating a people may have different features as listed below:

- the killing of a considerable number of people belonging to the group under attack;
- to cause serious physical or even only mental damages to a number of members of the group;
- to reserve the group specific and severe life conditions expecting that this will lead to a partial or total destruction of the group;
- to impose on the group measures aimed at preventing the internal procreation with a view to provoking in the end its mass extinction;
- to systematically abduct the youngest and most vulnerable components and transfer them to other social groups with the only aim of eradicating them from the group of origin and therefore deprive them of cultural and ethnic continuity.

The above mentioned are the type of crimes employed to prosecute the Nazi top brass at the Nuremberg process, the heads of state responsible of the massacres in former Yugoslavia and Rwanda and more recently Saddam Hussein. The Courts having a competence for this kind of crimes are the permanent ones as The International Criminal Court, and the “ad hoc” ones for particularly relevant crimes as it happened for the above said Nazi crimes or for the mass murders in Rwanda.

The possibility to apply similar or identical forms of judgement for the actions carried out by ISIL in 2014 depends therefore on the possibility to include these actions within those recognized by the International community as crimes against humanity or genocide.

A further evidence of what ISIL has been doing all through these years and symbol of the Yazidi's drama can easily be identified in the case of Nadia Murad. A young Yazidi, born and brought up until the age of 21, in the village of Kocho with a life equally divided between studies in the local school, and support to her peasant parents. She was therefore a very normal girl of an almost unknown village when her people, her village, her family suddenly became the object of the fanatic violence of the ISIL warriors. After witnessing the murder of dozens of friends and relatives from her village, including her six brothers and half-brothers, she was taken away from Kocho in August 15, 2014 and destined to slavery in the city of Mosul, being it the Iraqi capital of the Caliphate. Even though obliged to endure all kinds of violence and to be utilized as a sexual slave like thousands of her friends, Nadia had the chance and the courage to escape, in November 2014, taking advantage of a door of her prison inadvertently left open by her guardian. Thanks to the help of a family of the region she manages to reach the Duhok refugee camp in Iraqi Kurdistan and, from there, Germany via a humanitarian corridor.

Unlike many other victims, and despite her young age and small body, Nadia decided to make known from the start what she had endured during imprisonment, the beatings, the cigarettes burnings, and, more than anything, the annihilation of her dignity in the slaves markets where potential buyers enter, have a look, touch, ask for the price and specificities of each slave paying no attention to the tears and cries of the victims. These continuous and coherent testimonies were at the origin of the appointment of Nadia since 2014 (a bit more than one year after her abduction and successive sufferings till the escape) as "UN Ambassador for the dignity of the survivors to the human beings trafficking". Nadia has made her story known not only through her conferences, always poignant as observed by the UN former Secretary General Ban Ki-moon after listening to her for the first time in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in 2015, but also via a biography (*The Last Girl: My Story of Captivity and My Fight against the Islamic State*). A biography where the denunciation of what happened to her, but also to many other women, goes together with the determination to make sure that these tragedies will not occur again, that Nadia will really be the last woman to undergo sexual violence as utilized as a war weapon.

It is also in reply to ISIL media activism that Nadia's story becomes a feature film of almost 84 minutes, "On Her Shoulders" describing how this young woman took over her the responsibility to inform, to expose herself as a "living testimony" so that the world would not escape its own responsibilities pretending not to know and, in fact, reducing to irrelevance the Yazidi's tragedy and, more in general, the one of the women used as slaves. In order to remember, but even more to act, Nadia Murad founded in 2017 an organization "Nadia's Initiative" to directly help the so many Yazidis trying to restart a "normal" life in Sinjar's villages.

The organization allocates the funds collected to assistance initiatives and humanitarian aid but also to the reconstruction of important infrastructures, such as the building of a new primary school in Bahrava (in the Sinjar area) due to replace the one destroyed by ISIL fighters in their murderous raid of the summer of 2014. The most important financial support to Nadia's Initiative has come however from the Nobel Peace Prize she was awarded in 2018; the related financial allowance has in fact been totally assigned to the Sinjar Action Fund (SAF): in other words the prize will go to the section of "Nadia's Initiative" dealing with moral and material reconstruction of Yazidi territory.

In fact, being at the top of popularity does not seem to have adequately supported the Yazidi cause. It is possible that this is largely due to the identification of Nadia as a "wee-known" victim of the war and of its extreme means, without associating her specifically with her ethnic group and the Yazidi cultural and religious heritage.

The very motivation of the Nobel Prize she received brings to this conclusion, all the more so since this prestigious acknowledgement has been shared with Denis Mukwege, a gynaecologist from the Democratic Republic of Congo. The explicit motivation was: "for their efforts to put an end to sexual violence as a war instrument and of armed conflict". The intention of the world cultural élite to move the attention from a people's persecution to the unacceptable instrument through which it has been carried out seems, therefore, quite clear.

It would be important to remember in each appropriate occasion that Nadia's persecution was exclusively motivated by her ethnic and religious belonging, to her being in the eyes of ISIL fanatics a "heathen" with no right whatsoever.

On the other end, her courage in denouncing what she went through and all her sufferings should be interpreted as the appeal to the world of a people which does not want to be erased from history. It is possible that Nadia's recent rapprochement to the Yazda movement, operating since a long time for the recognition of the rights of the Yazidis, may favour an easier association between Nadia and the Yazidi cause and make it possible to gather international support also thanks to a shared symbol.

Going back to ISIL and to conclude, it is a fact that among the different forms of terrorism, the ISIL has a distinct identity which, surprisingly, has to do both with the past and with the present. The refusal of any mediation, the resort to Jihad as a "holy war" of liberation and conquest, the emphasis on the essential union of the civilian and military power in the person of the "Caliph" are legacies of the past projecting ISIL extremist and fanatical convictions on the twenty-first century. A century whose ideological pillars, from religious pluralism to the principle of a "secular" state, the Islamic State totally rejects.

This orthodoxy is not clearly apparent in the way the new international terrorism communicates with friends and foes: it seems in fact that they have sacrificed their basic principles to achieve a clear and convincing mass communication. One should therefore not be too surprised if this obsessive ideological campaign with modern techniques has brought many young westerners close to the IS ideological positions and, in some cases, even to join as "foreign fighters" the Caliphate's army.



The fact that many of these western followers are women should surprise if we consider the subordinate role of the women in the cultural vision of radical Islam but this state of things gives at the same time a measure of the ISIL capacity to adjust these unchanged male-chauvinist categories to modern modalities. Modalities giving for instance women a role in feminine brigades, called to any kind of support including combat in the front line.

In the case of the Yazidi massacre, the ideological support comes from faraway: from the “original sin” of being not only “infidels” but also worshippers of the Devil and, in any case, not a people “of the Book”. A condemnation without appeal stems from this ancient “original sin” leading radical Islam to wonder how and why such a community was allowed to exist for centuries.

But the implementation of the project of ethnic cleansing takes place with a doubtlessly modern technique which reminds us of the awful organization of the Nazi hierarchy, on the one hand and, on the other, of the parallel destiny (as we have seen in former Yugoslavia) of men massacred and of women and girls reduced to slavery to eliminate any form of genetic prosecution. The enslavement condemned in fact women and girls to being abandoned by all as companions (even though unwillingly) of the enemy, and the community to extinction for lack of reproductive possibility. And once again, the new use of the media as newspapers or videos broadcasted through internet to bring forward a totally new action: to loudly and openly claim responsibility for the genocide and its most extreme consequences, such as women reduced to objects and sold as slaves, and children transformed into “suicidal fighters”.

As illustrated in the final chapters of this work, international reaction to these facts has to follow two different tracks: on the one hand, a judgement by International Courts, the only ones having competence for the crime of genocide; on the other, the creation of opinion movements with the largest possible participation in order to generate a common awareness of the fact that the disappearance of a thousand-years old community, peaceful and cooperative would be a tragedy for mankind.

The creation of these wide-ranging opinion movements cannot occur without an intelligent use of the media able to counter the media production of terror-inspiring messages operated by the Islamic State. Since each generation and each people need leaders it is inspiring to think that the symbol of the Yazidis may be represented by a young woman who suffered a lot but never surrendered and will keep fighting for what is right, as Nadia Murad has been doing and keeps doing daily.