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## Threats of modern terrorist organizations and state sponsored terrorism - the case of islamic state

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THREATS OF MODERN TERRORIST  
ORGANIZATIONS AND STATE  
SPONSORED TERRORISM -  
THE CASE OF ISLAMIC STATE

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**ABSTRACT**

Since the appearance of the so-called Islamic State, the world is encountering a terrorist organization with an outreach and operational model never before witnessed. With its unprecedented financial power, the theme of state-sponsored terrorism is resurfacing taking into consideration its possible correlation to the inexplicable domination of IS to the theatre of modern terrorism. In light of the existing threat posed by IS, and its expected proliferation in the foreseeable future, discussions on means to combat this phenomenon should attract more attention on academic, political, and social levels, with the hope of finding a comprehensive long-lasting remedy for this highly contagious plague.

**KEY WORDS**

terrorism, Jihadist, Islamic State, state-sponsored terrorism, threat, security



## INTRODUCTION

Terrorism as a phenomenon can be analyzed from two different angles, first of which is a literal approach by identifying specific cases which fall under the umbrella of terrorist activities based on the prevailing definitions, and focusing on the major cases, in this paper the Islamic State. The second angle, a propagandistic approach deals with terrorism as an illegitimate tool with which a certain power, whether a state or non-state actor, whereby terrorist activities are exploited to serve state's interests and achieve certain goals<sup>1</sup>.

To begin with, I will refer to an American definition of terrorism which considers it as a violent act meant to intimidate or coerce a civilian population or attempt to influence the policy of a government through assassination or kidnapping<sup>2</sup>. Other definitions are more precise, as for example in the U.S. Army manual on counter terrorism which sees it as the calculated use of violence or threat of its use to achieve political, religious or ideological goals. In his research, Robert Kupperman, expert on terrorism studies, terrorism is defined as the "threat or use of force to achieve political objectives without the full-scale commitment of resources". Another expert sees that "state-sponsored terrorism is a form of low-intensity conflict that states undertake when they find it convenient to engage in war without being held accountable for their actions"<sup>3</sup>.

## STATE SPONSORED TERRORISM

The above-definitions lead us to the theme of "State sponsored terrorism" which is considered among the most controversial forms of international terrorism. This form of terrorism can be divided in several classifications and sub-categories, spanning from a state's direct domination of terrorist-related activities to its incapacity to obstruct terrorist groups operating from within its territories. In other words, there are active and passive forms of state-sponsored terrorism<sup>4</sup>. This type of terrorism in its active type is the intentional action taken by a certain regime to harbor terrorist

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1 Chomsky, N. *International Terrorism: Image and Reality*, in A. George (ed.). Western State Terrorism. Routledge, 1991, p.1.

2 Ibidem, p.2.

3 Ibidem.

4 Byman, D., 2008. *The Changing Nature of State Sponsorship of Terrorism*. Brookings Institute. Washington D.C, p.1.

groups, either in the form of weapons' supply, financial support or provision of safe haven or other logistic support. In some rare cases, states go as far as coordinating the operations of terrorist cells in the event that such behavior serves the state's national and strategic interests. On the other hand, passive state-sponsored terrorism emerges when the deliberate negligence, regardless of the reasons, whether a) incapacity or b) tolerance or c) lack of concern, of a certain regime leads to terrorist groups active within the territory of a given state, which results in an increased operational capacity by such terrorist groups<sup>5</sup>.

In this context, it is important to identify the different types of states and their behavior that either a) does not affect, b) inhibits, or c) supports the terrorist activities within their territories. First of all, it directly applies to a legally recognized leadership or government, whether democratically elected or not, but with whom other sovereign states interact on a somewhat regular basis stemming from their de-facto control over a certain country's territory. Second of all, some countries witness the emergence of self-proclaimed independent regions that tend to support terrorism either against the mother state or towards foreign states, which the central government has no control over. This behavior by separatist regions poses a terrorist threat on both domestic and external levels. In this case, there is a passivity by the mother state as opposed to an active engagement in terrorist activity by breakaway regions<sup>6</sup>.

#### THE EMERGENCE OF ISLAMIC STATE

The so-called Islamic State (IS), was formed by Abu-Musab AlZarqawi in Iraq in 2003, which in fact is neither a state nor is in any way affiliated to real Islam, sometimes called Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) or Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and in fact is the successor of Al-Qa-eda in Iraq (AQI). This newly formed terrorist group is currently not only posing a security threat to the Middle East but to international peace and security as well. Islamic State is constituting a global security threat by capitalizing on its large human resources, also known as Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTF's), and financial capability. The main goal of Islamic State is to achieve a political change in the Middle East and beyond by establishing a so-called Islamic Caliphate. What makes Islamic State stand out as

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5 Ibidem, p.3.

6 Ibidem, p.4.

compared to other well known terrorist organizations, such as Al-Qaeda or the so-called 'Al-Nusra Front' is its individual and distinctive model of operation and unique financing scheme. Different from Al-Qaeda and its affiliates, Islamic State financial model is not designed on donations from states, but in fact generates its income from diversified sources from within the territories falling under its sphere of influence<sup>7</sup>.

As a general rule, terrorist groups, had in the past avoided to exercise control and establish presence and associate themselves to a specific geographic area. This stems from the fact that terrorist's prefer to function in a covert and undetected manner, and in isolation avoiding direct contacts or interaction with the general population. With the emergence of Islamic State, a revolutionary change has been witnessed in the stereotypic perception of a terrorism organization. IS has exhibited uniqueness in the sense that it attaches itself to a fixed territory spanning over an area reaching 240 thousand square kilometers, roughly the size of the United Kingdom, and operates in a relatively overt style and is keen to publicize its presence and the violent actions of its thousands of foreign fighters, unlike the methods adopted by Al-Qaeda over many years<sup>8</sup>.

The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) predicted that the manpower of IS has already exceeded thirty thousand fighters, which places this terrorist group in a category more advanced, and far beyond Al-Qaeda in light of the latter's narrow mobilization capacity. In other words, IS with its army-like military strength, presents a degree of threat not encountered before, and despite the impacts of coalition air strikes on their operational ability, analysts believe that relying on this kind of military strategy will not result in the defeat of IS, as it will manage to adapt its own strategies to minimize its losses<sup>9</sup>.

The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, which have not come even close to reaching their strategic goals, have proven the impossibility of achieving a military victory over terrorist groups by military means alone, and especially when relying only on air strikes. Though it is believed that such strikes might eliminate the organization's main figures, yet lessons learnt

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7 FATF (2015), Financing of the terrorist organisation Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Financial Action Task Force, p.9.

8 Meyerle, J. The Is the Islamic State a Terrorist Group or an Insurgency?. Defense One, 2014, p.1.

9 Ibidem, p.1.

show that the fallen terrorist leaders are quickly replaced, which sometimes leads to internal fragmentation and the emergence of more radical groups, and thus a widened terrorist threat<sup>10</sup>.

In all cases, exerting coordinated international efforts to track and dismantle financial networks of Islamic State, as with other terrorist organizations, is the primary challenge to eliminate the threats posed by it since the lack of resources will directly inhibit the operational capability and thus terrorist activities of such groups<sup>11</sup>. Achieving this goal necessitates the sharing of intelligence information between states in order to track financial movements by those involved in facilitating the flow of money to Islamic State, especially through international bank transfers related to the sales of oil and gas from resources within Iraq and Syria in particular<sup>12</sup>. Furthermore, closer coordination is needed between security agencies in different countries to obstruct the travel of potential foreign terrorist fighters (FTF's) to join Islamic State in different countries, especially in the Middle East with a focus on the ongoing conflict zones in Iraq, Syria, Libya and Yemen<sup>13</sup>.

#### STATE SPONSORED TERRORISM AND THE RISE OF TERRORIST ORGANIZATIONS

State-sponsored terrorism has been subject to controversy by major powers towards other countries who are actively or passively supporting terrorism based on their individual interests. Yet many scholars believe there is an urgent need to incorporate state actions into the studies on terrorism in order to be able to formulate a comprehensive and efficient approach to combat this international threat, especially that the narrow focus on terrorism by non-state actors results in an incomplete understanding of this phenomenon<sup>14</sup>.

It is undoubted that terrorist groups such as IS and AQ rely to a certain degree on state support, whether active or passive, in order to enhance their presence and activities. In this context, state sponsorship of terrorist groups can take the shape of ideological, financial, operational or even military support as mentioned earlier. Nevertheless, the chances

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10 Ibidem, p.2.

11 FATF (2015), *Financing of the terrorist organisation Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)*. Financial Action Task Force, p.32.

12 Ibidem, pp.33-34.

13 Ibidem, p.36.

14 Jackson, R. *The Ghosts of State Terror: Knowledge, Politics and Terrorism Studies*. Aberystwyth University. San Francisco, 2008, p.17.

of sponsoring terrorism is more common in weak, failed or rogue-states who tend to exhibit high levels of disrespect towards international law and the principle of non-intervention in domestic affairs and violation of other countries' sovereignty. Naturally, the majority of academic and scientific literature dealing with the ideas of state-sponsored terrorism focuses on these types of states as the main sponsors of terrorism. As mentioned by Daniel Byman in his paper "Confronting Passive Sponsors of Terrorism", the highest form of passive contribution to terrorism by any given state is its negligence to exercise control over its national borders, or ignore terrorists' fundraising. This means that although a certain state is not always directly partaking in terrorist activities, its indirect passive support of a non-state actor within its borders holds it equally accountable to the impacts of such terrorist activities on domestic, regional and international levels<sup>15</sup>.

It is important in this regard to recall a definition of terrorism that focuses on state's resorting to violence against certain domestic groups as a means of preventing political changes (as was the case with the policies of the Muslim Brotherhood during their brief rule in Egypt against the moderates and opposition). Applying this definition reveals that some state's policies of violent repression can be classified as terrorism. An example in this case would be torture, social discrimination and selective justice by a state in order to divide and conquer its opposition by means of intimidation and spreading fear, thus terrorism becomes a tool for ensuring a regimes stability albeit at the expense of its popularity and constituency<sup>16</sup>.

Some analysts view that the intentional marginalization of the concept of state terrorism by academic scholars serves the interests of such states. These analysts believe that silence on state-sponsored terrorism justifies certain states' policies of resorting to violence against their rivals without fear of accountability. In other words not attaching adequate attention to analyzing state behavior in actively or passively supporting terrorism grants these states more flexibility in implementing their terrorist policies domestically. Thus, deliberately neglecting to devote academic attention to terrorism on the state level indirectly undermines efforts to protect human rights. It is therefore noteworthy to mention that powerful states have

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15 Ibidem, pp.6-7.

16 Jackson, R. *The Ghosts of State Terror: Knowledge, Politics and Terrorism Studies*. Aberystwyth University. San Francisco, 2008, p.9.

constantly opposed attempts, especially within international organizations and the civil society, to establish an internationally recognized definition of violent state actions against civilians that would eventually fall within the realm of state terrorism<sup>17</sup>.

#### ISLAMIC STATE- A SOPHISTICATED AND COMPLEX FINANCING MODEL

Analysts nowadays compare the financial operational model of IS as that of business entities, where it needs to fund its internal structure and planning strategy, and thus requires diversified sources of income to guarantee a steady monetary flow and thus ensure its ability to accomplish its targets<sup>18</sup>.

Islamic State relies on several main and secondary sources of financing, such as exploiting the natural and monetary resources in its territory of influence (banks, oil and gas fields, extortion, illegal taxation). It also relies on ransom obtained for liberating hostages, donations from sympathizers, whether individuals or organizations, and fundraising programs. As clear from such resources, this terrorist organization depends on the threat and or use of force to achieve financial gains and thus enhance its operational capacity. What also distinguishes IS from others is that it has a structured financial management model whereby it provides receipts for services rendered to it, though this is viewed by many analysts as a weakness in its model as it leaves behind a trail of evidence. Recent estimates by the United States reveal that Islamic State has built up a cash flow reaching 500 million U.S. dollars in Iraq by the end of the year 2014<sup>19</sup>. On the other hand, at the peak of its international presence, Al-Qaeda's financial assets were estimated at around \$300 million dollars, relying on limited financing options, mainly donations not exceeding \$30 million per year, in addition to marginal revenues from kidnapping and drug-trafficking<sup>20</sup>.

Islamic State has managed in a relatively short period of time to gather considerable power and financial leverage in order to seize control of a territory equivalent to the size of the United Kingdom enforcing its laws and hegemony over a population of over ten million people by intimidation and

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17 Ibidem, p.15.

18 Brisard, J.C., Martinez, D. *Islamic State: The economy-based terrorist funding*. Thomson Reuters, 2014, pp.4-5.

19 FATF (2015), Financing of the terrorist organisation Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Financial Action Task Force, pp. 13-14.

20 Saltman, E.M, Winter, C. *Islamic State: The Changing Face of Modern Jihadism*. Quilliam Foundation, 2014, p.24.



coercion. The type and degree of influence of this organization or self-proclaimed state is unprecedented in modern history of international studies. Since its emergence as a successor of AQI as mentioned above, Islamic State has gained full authority over many Iraqi and Syrian provinces. It is also estimated that the financial assets of Islamic State exceed two trillion U.S. dollars, with an annual income reaching 2.9 billion dollars, which also reflects a level of threat that is one of a kind compared to terrorist organizations of the past, including Al-Qaeda even at the peak of its power, in 2001<sup>21</sup>.

Islamic State was keen to take over the oilfields in Syria and Iraq, and it is estimated that it controls seven oilfields in Syria and thirteen oilfields in Iraq, with a total production capacity of 120 K barrels per day, or in other terms it controls 60 % of Syrian and 10 % of Iraq's oil resources. Based on these estimates, IS ensures a regular daily income ranging between 2-4 million U.S dollars depending on the prevailing energy prices. In addition, this terrorist group has also taken over gas fields in these two countries, which gives it the potential to generate an additional amount of 980 million U.S dollars per year<sup>22</sup>.

In order to impede the growing financial capacity of IS, it is crucial for governments to coordinate efforts to prevent the smuggling networks and illegal sale of natural resources exploited by this group. Accordingly, by outreaching to local population that IS targets as customers of this illegal trade, and by possibly offering them incentives, such as security guarantees, that can outweigh the cheap oil provided to them by IS, the latter can soon find itself unable to market its illegitimate stockpile of oil and gas. In addition, if there is international political consensus to refuse to negotiate with IS for the freeing of hostages, then such terrorist group might eventually find no real incentive to kidnap or threaten to behead innocent hostages.

The eventual outcome of such a strategy would be to undermine IS authority on the ground, and challenge the image it tries to portray as a defender of Islam, while highlighting its brutal and violent character, which might lead to 1) depletion of its financial resources, 2) corrosion of support, 3) gradual loss of its followers<sup>23</sup>.

21 Brisard, J.C., Martinez, D. *Islamic State: The economy-based terrorist funding*. Thomson Reuters, 2014, p.3.

22 Ibidem, pp.6-8.

23 Saltman, E.M., Winter, C. *Islamic State: The Changing Face of Modern Jihadism*. Quilliam Foundation, 2014, pp.54-56.

### THE STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF IS AS COMPARED TO AL-QAEDA

As outlined above, Islamic state derives its influence, and sustainability as a terrorist group from its combined capability to engage in military confrontation and its institution-building capacity. The idea of behaving as a state-like actor and its associated methods of governance are of crucial importance to IS leadership. Yet despite aiming to establish a so-called Islamic Caliphate, it by no means seeks to become part of the Westphalian system, since it does not consider itself a state based on the prevailing international norms. On the contrary, from the radical IS prism, all members of the international community lack legitimacy and thus are merely potential subordinates to the aspired caliphate<sup>24</sup>.

This IS strategy relies on overtaking and exercising control over a specific territory and establishing its own governing institutions, as was the case with AQI under the rule of Zarqawi, former mentor and predecessor of current IS leader, Abu-Bakr Al-Baghdadi.

The overall strategic objectives of Islamic State can be summarized in the following points:-

- Permanently remove borders between Iraq and Syria, by creating an unstable environment leading to the emergence of failed states and instigating civil wars.
- the establishment of an Islamic Caliphate in these two countries.
- to identify and recruit fighters and workers to sustain this so-called Islamic Caliphate.
- widen the territorial scope of its caliphate to reach other Muslim and European states<sup>25</sup>.

The gradual transformation from a splinter group emerging from Al-Qaeda in Iraq, to a full-fledged state-like terrorist organization with a strong military capacity has undoubtedly imposed certain restraints on Islamic State. Establishing state-like institutions and providing services for millions of civilians over a large area of land, results in the creation of a bureaucratic organizational structure. Activities related to such a wide-scale overt presence thus lead to the creation of administrative and financial trails in territories falling under IS hegemony. These weaknesses are further obvious as Islamic State seeks to gain control over more territory and

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24 Lewis, D.J. *The Islamic State: A Counter-Strategy for a Counter-State*. Middle East Security Report 21. Institute for the Study of War (ISW). Washington, 2014, p.9.

25 Ibidem, pp.10-11.

exploit more of its natural resources and religious institutions to spread its extreme ideology. In this sense, the same foundations that IS relies on, might eventually be the same factors that the international community use as part of a strategy to eliminate IS<sup>26</sup>.

Another fact that can be considered as both a strength and weakness for IS is its highly organized operational model based on which it seeks to maintain power over its subordinates and over the territories it controls. This model to some extent resembles normal governmental jurisdiction over a given territory, especially that it imposes taxes on the local population and renders services as mentioned above. These characteristics thus pose a degree of vulnerability on IS in the sense that it involves immense administrative and logistic documentation through which its past, present and future can be tracked<sup>27</sup>.

The general perception is that the main threat posed by a dormant Al-Qaeda, amid an omnipresent IS, lies in the formers' affiliated cells, such as Al-Nusra Front and the Muslim Brotherhood, and not necessarily Al-Qaeda per se. This means, that following the shift in the hierarchical structure of Al-Qaeda, where it has become divided into so called splinter groups, the latter tend to act more independently and in an increasingly unpredictable. In simple terms, whereas Al-Qaeda's presence on the international stage of terrorist groups is currently diminished, the role of its affiliates is gradually becoming more tangible as they organize more terrorist activities particularly in conflict zones and countries witnessing a security vacuum, especially many post Arab-Spring countries. In this regard, Al-Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula (AQAP) and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) have managed to cause serious damage in the recent months and have even coordinated with the Houthi rebels seeking to take over Yemen, as well as played a role in attempts to destabilize the situation in Tunisia and instigate further tensions in Libya which is already suffering from a chronic civil war<sup>28</sup>.

Among factors that IS gains its strength from, unlike the case of Al-Qaeda, is its high degree of internal economic independency which

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26 Ibidem, p.21.

27 Shapiro, J., Jung, Danielle. *The terrorist bureaucracy: Inside the files of the Islamic State in Iraq*. The Boston Globe, 2014, p.1.

28 Saltman, E.M, Winter, C. *Islamic State: The Changing Face of Modern Jihadism*. Quilliam Foundation, 2014, pp.22-23.

does not compel it to be subject to pressure or influence from its external donors<sup>29</sup>. While the focus is currently on the threats posed by IS and its persistence to destabilize the Middle-East and spread fear in Europe, Al-Qaeda and its affiliates surely espouse the same violent doctrine as does IS. Al-Qaeda's activities have receded due to logistic, financial and organizational factors mainly since the death of its leader Bin Laden and the division within its ranks. Nonetheless, its recent expansion eastwards into the Indian subcontinent via the formation of AQIS is a clear indication that this terrorist group, currently sidelined by IS, intends to maintain its presence in the future<sup>30</sup>.

The establishment of the so called Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) by the Al-Qaeda terrorist groups once again substantiates the assumption that these organizations tend to readapt to the pressure by the international community to suppress their capacity. This also shows Al-Qaeda's resilience and ongoing state of competition with Islamic State for more international recognition as the dominant terrorist organization. In other words, though currently in a so-called dormant state, Al-Qaeda will surely attempt to seize any given chance, if granted one, to reactivate its activities. Accordingly, despite the current threat posed by IS vis-à-vis a limited presence of AQ on the international scene, it is crucial that counter-terrorism agencies maintain Al-Qaeda on top of the list of active terrorist organizations regardless of the fact that the current focus is on the threat of IS proliferation in Libya, Syria, Iraq and Yemen as opposed to a limited degree of threat presented by AQ<sup>31</sup>.

The main feature that places IS in a category of its own as compared to traditional terrorist groups is the simple fact that its associates itself to a certain territory which it considers the basis for a wider Caliphate or an Islamic State with increasing boundaries depending on its military accomplishments. Unlike other Jihadist groups who despite having operated from within certain countries, such as Afghanistan (Taliban) and Pakistan (Al-Qaeda), yet their activities were mainly covert in nature. As opposed to this, Islamic State functions overtly to the degree that some observers label it as a de facto state, albeit a terrorist one by all standards. Thus in a short period of time, IS has managed to develop its reputation to

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29 Ibidem, p.9.

30 Ibidem, p.24.

31 Saltman, E.M, Winter, C. *Islamic State: The Changing Face of Modern Jihadism*. Quilliam Foundation, 2014, pp.9-10.

be a self-proclaimed state sponsoring terrorism rather than a traditional terrorist group functioning within the boundaries of a state<sup>32</sup>.

Nevertheless, without its loyal followers and sympathizers in both Iraq, Syria and elsewhere, IS profile would not exceed that of a typical terrorist group and surely not a de-facto terrorist state. In this regard, IS uses a different ideological approach based on its target. In Iraq for example, IS provokes anti-Shiite sentiments within the Sunni local population to garner support against the Shiite-dominated government. This means that its politically motivated behavior has deep ideological roots. This is also clear in Syria where IS exploits ethnic factors to turn the locals against one another in a divide and conquer approach<sup>33</sup>.

#### THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN SUPPORTING MODERN TERRORISM

Social networking plays a crucial role and is being strongly abused in supporting the activities of IS and in helping it gather more followers from all over the world. Nowadays, it has become a fashion for terrorist groups, IS being the best case study, to use social media platforms such as YouTube and Twitter to spread information and try to promote its image and goals. Though Al-Qaeda was the pioneer of terrorist organizations in this matter, it was IS that set a new benchmark on the utilization of internet tools to disseminate propaganda and garner support, in an unprecedented manner and efficiency, way beyond Al-Qaeda's outreach at its peak. In general, IS has managed to excel in four primary areas of innovative information technology being a) circulation of threats, b) development of mobile-based networking applications, c) outreach techniques and d) decentralized messaging. To further elaborate, IS resorts to social networking platforms like Instagram, Facebook and Twitter, to deliver high quality audio-visual messages about its activities in Iraq, Syria and Libya and other conflict zones to an international audience of hundreds of millions of viewers. Such a propaganda based approach aims to achieve to main goals. First is to recruit followers specially targeting teenagers who show tendency to sympathize with the humanitarian situations in Syria and Iraq while IS deceptively portrays itself as the savior of the suffering populations. The campaign's second goal is to intimidate opponents and spread fear among

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32 Ibidem, pp.31-32.

33 Ibidem, pp.34-35.

rivals, whether state or non-state actors, or any player who displays hostility towards it<sup>34</sup>.

In addition, the rather advanced media strategy adopted by IS, lies in its obvious mastering of internet-based communication platforms to disseminate information to its sympathizers and potential supporters. This method of modern-outreaching has not been observed by any other terrorist organization till this day. and thus traditional methods to combat and defeat IS will be inadequate and inefficient in content and end results. Accordingly, a modern-age tailored strategy exclusively designed for confronting the threat of IS needs to be adopted for the international community to gradually defeat this new-era well structured terrorist organization<sup>35</sup>.

Accordingly, any strategy to counter Islamic State needs to be based on an in-depth understanding of the channels and means with which IS has acquired its capabilities. Of equal importance is preventing IS from exploiting the internet to achieve support in different countries. In this context, information sharing between internet regulatory bodies is crucial in order to exert more control regarding the content of terrorist-related information distributed over the internet. It is also imperative to analyze the reasons and motives encouraging civilians, especially teenagers, to become radicalized into puppets of terrorist organizations. This process of radicalization takes place online through social media networks, or offline through local terrorist recruitment cells. Governments thus need to outline comprehensive strategies to identify potential terrorist recruits in and prevent their deployment to join such organizations. Another important factor is to guarantee that former foreign terrorist fighters undergo compulsory psychological rehabilitation to ensure they are fully de-radicalized and not dormant sleeper cells waiting to be once again activated by terrorist groups<sup>36</sup>.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

Confronting and eradicating IS threat requires a bi-tracked approach focusing on both counter-extremism, i.e. soft power (education-media, eradicating poverty, rehabilitation) as well as counter-terrorism (military assaults, intelligence cooperation, information sharing). It is also highly

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34 Saltman, E.M, Winter, C. *Islamic State: The Changing Face of Modern Jihadism*. Quilliam Foundation, 2014, pp.37-38.

35 Ibidem, p.9.

36 Ibidem.

imperative to adopt a preventive approach whereby governments ensure that terrorist organizations are not able to recruit and radicalize sympathizers and establish a wide ideological base of sleeper-terrorist cells. Efforts should be exerted to prevent potential foreign fighters from traveling to join terrorist organizations, especially that groups like IS relies on recruiting well-educated yet psychologically unstable persons especially in their field missions requiring engineers, media and mass communication specialists<sup>37</sup>.

Nonetheless, there is no doubt that formulating an effective counter-terrorism strategy to fight IS will be difficult in light of the fact that it has proven to be an atypical group able to morph and readapt quickly to a changing environment. What adds to the challenge, is the current international climate, and the focus on two many crises worldwide, and the recent efforts to reach a nuclear deal with Iran, and the tension between Washington and Moscow over Ukraine. All this has caused the situations in Iraq and Syria to witness deterioration, let alone the emergence of a new crisis in Yemen, which serves the interests of IS as it provides fertile grounds for its operations and thus the possibility of enhanced threats from its side. Analysts believe that the war against IS will be a conventional military confrontation between regular combating armies, especially that IS leaders are progressing towards forming state-like institutions within their so called Islamic Caliphate. It is thus crucial for the international community to coordinate its efforts to closely analyze the sources of strength of IS, its future plans, and weaknesses, without which a coherent and effective strategy cannot be successful<sup>38</sup>.

## CONCLUSION

This sudden rise in the presence of IS, presents a serious and unprecedented threat against the international community especially amid deteriorating security situations in Iraq and Syria, and a failure by security forces to obstruct the Islamic State's proliferation. Islamic State undoubtedly capitalizes on its efficiently designed outreach and communication strategy,

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37 Saltman, E.M, Winter, C. *Islamic State: The Changing Face of Modern Jihadism*. Quilliam Foundation, 2014, p.52.

38 Lewis, D.J. *The Islamic State: A Counter-Strategy for a Counter-State*. Middle East Security Report 21. Institute for the Study of War (ISW). Washington, 2014, p.4

a clearly noticeable mobility capacity and innovative financial methods that are so far untraceable. Once again it is important to highlight that its financial ability is the main driving force behind its inexplicable terrorist potential and serious threat to the international community. Some analysts have therefore labeled IS as the wealthiest and most dangerous terrorist organization in history<sup>39</sup>.

The above reveals that the ongoing air assaults against IS over Iraq and Syria, as was the case with AQ in Afghanistan and Iraq, can lead to undesirable results, unless reformulated and also involves ground troops, as it will force IS to transform its strategy to ensure its long term viability. IS has already displayed an ability to change its operational strategy as a direct reaction to the air-strikes by coalition forces since the summer of 2014, therefore it will take much more than air-strikes to fully eliminate IS and thus for it to cease to exist<sup>40</sup>.

Nevertheless, despite its immense threat and its ability to operate undetected by intelligence agencies, there are certain factors behind its strength that are also viewed as factors that might lead to its defeat in a long-term struggle. In this context, the first factor resides in the ongoing international military campaign to limit the striking capacity of IS, by destroying its military capabilities. Secondly, by obstructing the flow of financing and by regaining control over the natural resources, IS will soon find itself with limited financing to run its large organizational structure or provide the social services it took over from state authorities (schools, hospitals, electricity, water and other services), and thus will find it-self unable to plan and organize terrorist activities especially involving large manpower and weaponry. Lastly, and probably most decisive, is the possibility of an eventual improvement, albeit long-term, in the political and security factors in Iraq and Syria, and the re-establishment of stability. Failure to achieve these goals will provide additional fertile ground for the rise and spread of IS. Such changes will determine the future of IS in this region<sup>41</sup>.

Regardless of the current animosity between IS and AQ, the fact remains that both share the same violent doctrine founded on Jihadism, that

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39 Brisard, J.C., Martinez, D. *Islamic State: The economy-based terrorist funding*. Thomson Reuters, 2014, p.9

40 Saltman, E.M, Winter, C. *Islamic State: The Changing Face of Modern Jihadism*. Quilliam Foundation, 2014, p.21

41 Brisard, J.C., Martinez, D. *Islamic State: The economy-based terrorist funding*. Thomson Reuters, 2014, p.10



reflects an intentionally falsified interpretation of Islam. Whereas Al-Qa-eda's activities were based on a strategy aiming to destabilize the western world as a step towards establishing a Caliphate, IS's approach is the opposite. IS seeks to install a Caliphate which would eventually dominate the Islamic and western worlds. Nevertheless, as the international community attempts to prevent the spread of IS, collaboration between IS and AQ is possible, as a means of sustaining their existence<sup>42</sup>.

In this context, it is noteworthy that IS leaders attempt to promote the military campaigns against them as part of a so-called war on Islam, in order to encourage more supporters and sympathizers to join their ranks from different parts of the world. It is thus imperative that for a comprehensive strategy against Islamic State to acquire credibility and effectiveness, and popular support in the Muslim worlds, military campaigns should be designed and implemented with the involvement of western and Islamic countries, in order to destroy IS presence in the Middle East and prevent its proliferation in Europe and the U.S.<sup>43</sup>.

Without arriving at a comprehensive well founded assessment of all the combined factors that have led to the emergence of Islamic State (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) or what is known as a SWOT analysis, it will not be possible to formulate a strategy for its eradication. In other words, if the threat IS poses is not confronted in a comprehensive and untraditional manner, this terrorist network will manage to grow horizontally and vertically (increase of local support base and numbers of followers, as well as territorial scope) placing more pressure on the coalition forces and challenging their efforts. Another threat, in the event IS succeeds in implementing its strategy, lies in the possibility that other Jihadist cells might be inspired by such achievements and adopt the same operational techniques of IS in regions beyond the Middle East, thus shifting the war on terror to a totally different dimension that the international community might not be ready to address.

Eventually, the current threat of IS necessitates the implementation of a quick strategy to ensure gradual retreat and eventual defeat of IS as means of preventing the quantitative and qualitative proliferation of terrorist

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42 Saltman, E.M, Winter, C. *Islamic State: The Changing Face of Modern Jihadism*. Quilliam Foundation, 2014, pp.7.

43 Saltman, E.M, Winter, C. *Islamic State: The Changing Face of Modern Jihadism*. Quilliam Foundation, 2014, pp.7-8.

threats in different regions of the world<sup>44</sup>. For any strategy to eradicate IS to be successful, it will have to be complex, time-consuming, extremely challenging, and must incorporate not only military or political, but also economic, educational, social equality, promoting religious tolerance and other factors of softpower<sup>45</sup>. Fighting IS necessitates a rigorous offensive that addresses both the strengths and weaknesses of what is described by some analysts as a de-facto terrorist state. The conventional warfare that is adopted by IS militants requires a similar approach by the coalition forces, and naturally this requires ground troops and not only air to ground strikes. As mentioned earlier, it is important that the coalition to fight IS is broadened to encompass not only western forces, i.e. U.S. and Europeans, so that the current struggle does not take the form of a war against Islam. In other words, engaging Islamic countries in the war against this non-Islamic terrorist group is a priority. Eventually, military campaigns will not wipe out Islamic State, bearing in mind that their existence relies mainly on the security vacuum and continuation of regional conflicts. Thus, parallel attention should be attached to the political dimension of the crises in countries like Libya, Syria, Iraq and Yemen, in order to strengthen the capacity of the local authorities and governments and promote democracy, respect for human rights, as well as improve the living standards and promote security and stability in the region<sup>46</sup>.

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45 Ibidem, p.10.

46 Saltman, E.M, Winter, C. *Islamic State: The Changing Face of Modern Jihadism*. Quilliam Foundation, 2014, pp.57-58.

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