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ΚΕΝΤΡΟ ΔΙΕΘΝΩΝ ΣΤΡΑΤΗΓΙΚΩΝ ΑΝΑΛΥΣΕΩΝ
CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL STRATEGIC ANALYSES

A Strategic Analysis of the “Islamic State”

Giouli Lykoura

Research Paper No. 15

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A Strategic Analysis of the “Islamic State”

By Giouli Lykoura*, Junior Analyst KEDISA

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Introduction

The Islamic State is an unrecognized jihadist state and militant group in the region of Iraq and Syria, also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL). Syria and Lebanon were called Levant after World War I when the French controlled these territories. ISIS started from a Jordanian militant Islamist, Abu Musab al – Zaraqawi, who first founded al – Tawhid wal – Jihad and in 2004 pledged allegiance to al – Qaeda, a militant Sunni Islamist organization founded by Osama bin Laden. Zaraqawi’s group adopted the name al – Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). During the 2000s, and especially after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 at the United States, Zaraqawi’s group started a series of attacks and violations towards the Iraqi people, creating a divide between Sunni and Shia.

After Zaraqawi’s death in 2006, the leadership of AQI came to Abu Ayyub al – Masri who named the group the Islamic State of Iraq, which was the first time that the group proclaimed itself as a state. After 2013, the Islamic State started a new jihadist era. Since then, it has gained world expansion and attention by conducting several terrorist attacks in the region of Middle East, in Africa and especially in the European Continent, as for example the attacks in Paris in November 2015, where 130 people were killed.

Ideology

The Islamic State’s extremist – as been called by many – ideology revolves around its commitment to Sunni Islam and the Islamic history, while it belongs to the Islamic political thought of Jihadi – Salafism¹. It is stated that the Islamic State aims to restore the glory early days of Islam through *jihad*, which refers to the religious duty of every Muslim to maintain and spread their religion. In order to do that, the Islamic State aims to establish a Caliphate State which will have as core the state of Syria and will expand to the countries of the Middle East, to Africa as well as other European countries. Most of the state actors that are trying to fight against the Islamic State have pointed out the importance of understanding the group’s ideology behind their actions and their attacks.

¹ Religious – political ideology movement based on a supposed returning to the true Sunni Islam

Goals and aims

First of all, since its worldwide expansion, Islamic State's first and foremost goal has been the establishing of a caliphate by the monopolization of violence, not only in Iraq and Syria but also in the whole world. It supports nationalism, which can be pointed out by making a Muslim community under the group's leadership, and rejects any other national or political identity. As stated by the group itself in 2014, the core of their aim is the so-named "lasting and expanding" caliphate. To make this more accurate, according to the Institute for the Study of War² the Islamic State aims to a "three-ring domination" which includes the interior of Iraq and Syria, the region of Middle East and North Africa, and last but not least parts of Europe, Asia and furthermore the United States.

Main Body

Strategy

Islamic State's strategy is emphasized on pragmatism and its goals are driven by socioeconomic resources, military and media power in order to establish a caliphate as stated in June 2014, and acquire global influence. The main goal of their strategy is first to establish a state with the basic institutional structures and social services. In order to achieve this, the group exploits areas of land, rich in resources like gas, oil and water, while in the cities they impose high taxes and try to form a governmental structure. Also, because of these activities and other external funding, the Islamic State has managed to recruit increasingly more soldiers who find themselves desperate due to the economic problems of the region. They convert people who will be loyal to their decisions and orders, while at the same time, those who retreat from that, are killed. The new soldiers can either fight as individuals without becoming official members, or can pledge allegiance to the group.

It is necessary to point out the fact that in some way one can argue that the strategy that the Islamic State uses can be related with the principles of war that Carl von Clausewitz – Prussian general and military theorist – had pointed out. More specifically, the aforementioned principles are: objective, mass, economy of force, maneuver, unity of command, security, surprise, simplicity. For example, ISIS has placed together all its military forces to achieve massing effects, has directed every military operation towards a clearly defined objective and has used all this power in the most effective way possible for the group itself.

² Dr. Kimberly Kagan founded ISW in May 2007

Conventional Warfare

Moreover, in order for the Islamic State to expand beyond its periphery it uses the strategy of the conventional warfare³. The conventional warfare comes from the study of Clausewitz who first stated that war can only take place between state actors, but later on he concluded the importance that also non-state actors have in the theory of war. The way that the Islamic State fights in order to expand its geographic and power presence, is a combination of attacks by non – state militant groups and conventional armies which has as allies. For example, in June 2014 the Islamic State started a conflict with the Iraqi army in Mosul which ended with ISIS capturing the city, which is the second largest city in Iraq.

Moreover, the Islamic State also makes use of the guerilla warfare, which is a form of irregular warfare where a group of paramilitary combatants use military tactics to fight a traditional military group. The first one who used the term of guerilla warfare was Sun Tzu – a Chinese general and strategist – in his work *The Art of War*⁴. Among other ways with which guerilla warfare is conducted, terror is one of the most common ones. The Islamic State uses terrorism against its rivals and non, not like the traditional terrorism groups due to the fact that it uses terror as part of war. Within the regions of its power, it uses terrorism in order to gain control over cities and lands, while the international terror attacks have as a motivation the intimidation of enemies so that they might be hesitant to attack the group in the future. The most common practice that the group uses for terrorism is the suicide bombing, which has been stated as a weapon of psychological warfare. Specifically, these attacks aim to spread the fear among the population in center public areas. ISIS methods can be suicide belts, vests or other types of explosives, while their operations are usually filmed first, and after the attacks are released through the internet. Moreover, the recent years have occurred several terrorist attacks⁵ in the European Continent for which the Islamic State has taken the responsibility. For example, on January 7, 2015 a terror attack was carried out on the newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris, while another one occurred again in Paris on November 13, 2015, where 130 innocent people were killed by a suicide bombing at the *Stade de France*. Also, another terrorist attack that shocked not only Europe but the whole world was on March 22, 2016 in Brussels where people were killed by two suicide bombings, one at Brussels Airport and the other one at a Metro station. Last but not least was the terror attack in Nice, on July 14, 2016, which is the Bastille Day, when a lorry killed and injured many people.

³ Conventional warfare is a form of warfare conducted by using conventional weapons and battlefield tactics between two or more states.

⁴ Ancient Chinese military treatise dating from the 5th century BC by the military strategist Sun Tzu

⁵ See <http://www.express.co.uk/news/world/693421/Terror-attacks-timeline-France-Brussels-Europe-ISIS-killings-Germany-dates-terrorism>

Theater level

Furthermore, concerning the war itself, the Islamic State's military strategy revolves around theater – level operations and tactics. To make this point more accurate, the modern military theory divides war into the strategic level, the operational and the tactical. In the operational level, which is thought to be the one that the group uses for their attacks, the forces use a “theater of war”, relying on opportunistic and also underground attacks in order to defeat their opponent. Also, the tactical level of war is concerned with the planning and conduct of battle and is characterized by the application of concentrated force and offensive action to gain objectives. The group uses tactics that it has adapted from groups as the Taliban and Hezbollah.

Propaganda as a Military Tactic

One aspect that is very important in order to understand, on the one hand, how the Islamic State has gained so much power the last few years, and on the other hand, how they have influenced so many people all over the world, is their excessive use of “strategic propaganda”. More particularly, the use of propaganda, especially through the social media by the form of videos and photos with violent acts, aims first to recruit people in its self – proclaimed caliphate, and then to spread the fear among people and control the public and the local authorities throughout the regions of its power. The Islamic State's goal against the western powers is to show them that it is a progressive group with enough military force capable of defeating any enemy that comes in its way. Also, some of their social media propaganda is used to allege the group as a model – organization which performs social services and tries to build up a proper state in order to gain the religious and political the legitimacy it needs. Moreover, it is estimated that more than 4,000⁶ people in the West have joined over the last few years the Islamic State answering its call to arms, basically due to the group's propaganda through the internet. It is claimed that through centralized media

operations, the Islamic State has managed to recruit Muslims teenagers and youth from all over the world, who lack critical thinking and are easily influenced of what the Islamic State promotes. Through its videos, it has succeeded in familiarizing westerners with the fact that its self-proclaimed caliphate is the only place where the Islamic law is practiced according to the religion. Some people are joining ISIS as a religious obligation because they believe that they cannot exercise their faith in the Western countries, while others are doing it because they are afraid of what the Islamic State is capable to do in the future. Last but not least, the fact that ISIS attracts increasingly more foreign fighters is a necessary element for its competition with Al – Qaeda and other jihadist organizations.

⁶ See <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/07/isis-foreign-fighters-political-pilgrims/399209/>

Global expansion

As stated previously, one of the main goals of the Islamic State's is its global expansion. The United Nations has not recognized the self – proclaimed Islamic State as a state in the international community. As declared by the Montevideo Convention⁷, a state in order to be recognized by the international community it needs to have these elements:

- (a) A permanent population,
- (b) A defined territory,
- (c) A government,
- (d) The capacity to enter into relations with other states.

The Islamic State does not meet the conditions, despite the fact they claim exactly the opposite. One of the ways that the Islamic State uses to expand its strength on a global level is the recruitment of foreign fighters. Those are seen as a way to establish an ISIS branch in the countries where they are originated from, as well as making the group's external operations easier.

Moreover, since the Islamic State's exertion to occupy other areas beyond its territory, there have been several groups and areas which have shown loyalty to the group as for example, in Egypt in the northern part of the Sinai peninsula and in provinces in Libya. Also, in north Nigeria the terrorist group Boko Haram has pledged allegiance to the Islamic State since 2015.

Strategy to counter the Islamic State

Firstly, a counter strategy refers to a strategy designed to counter the effectiveness of an opponent's strategy. It is clear that the Islamic State has been a serious threat to all regional and global actors the last decade. State members of the United Nations have highlighted numerous times the dangers that this Islamic group can pose for the national and global security. Policymakers from all over the world, are trying to point out several long term plans related to reducing the Islamic State's geographic, political, military and financial power.

The United States have formed a multilateral strategy in order to counter the Islamic State with military success and alliances from the European Continent and the Arab States. More specifically, first and foremost goal of the United States' strategy towards ISIS regards Iraq, due to the fact that they are trying to provide the state with support, especially military, in order to deal with the challenges occurred by the

⁷ See "The Montevideo Convention"
<https://www.ilsa.org/jessup/jessup13/Defining%20Statehood,%20The%20Montevideo%20Convention%20and%20its%20Discontents.pdf>

Islamic State, and furthermore, to preserve its political and territorial unity. Since 2014, the United States has used combat aircraft attacks against the Islamic State within Iraq and Syria. For example, on August 2016 there were several US led airstrikes in Libya⁸ targeting Islamic State's transport vehicles especially in the city of Surt.

Also, the United States especially Barack Obama's administration, had promoted the so – called "Syrian Train and Equip Program", which was a military operation led by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) aimed at identifying moderate Syrian opposition forces from allied states who will return to Syria in order to fight ISIS. Little progress was made by this program, and few months after its establishment, the Pentagon of the United States announced its halt due to the fact that it did not have the support it needed in order to be completed and effective at the same time. Some have criticized the United States' capabilities of dealing with the Islamic State as insufficient, while at the same time they argue for greater direct military commitment from the coalition.

Moreover, concerning the European Union, as stated by a declaration of the Council of the European Union on March 16, 2015, the EU also remains committed to countering the power of the Islamic State in order to promote and maintain stability in the region, supporting the Iraqi Government. The Council of the European Union also adopted a regional strategy for Syria and Iraq according to the international law, towards the threat posed by the attacks of the Islamic State as well as the extended violations of the human rights in the region.

Although the international community and especially the coalition led by the United States are trying to face and reduce the dangers caused by the Islamic State, the group hasn't been destroyed completely yet. Most countries are trying to participate somehow in the anti – ISIS efforts protecting their own citizens and territories. It is very important for the international coalition to be able to find and identify the challenges faced by the Islamic State and its points of weakness. In addition to this, one of the most notable reasons why the international community has to take more effective measures towards the Islamic State and the on – going conflict in the Middle East, is the fact that every day numerous violations of human rights as the deaths of innocent civilians occur.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it cannot be refuted the fact that the Islamic State has already and will continue posing inconceivable threats to regional and global security. ISIS power is growing rapidly in the political, economic, ideology and military fields. Most of the actors that play a key role in defeating the Islamic State are making use of a strategy aimed at countering the terrorism posed by the group. However, military forced use

⁸ See <http://www.latimes.com/world/africa/la-fg-libya-airstrikes-isis-20160801-snap-story.html>

by the alliance against ISIS is not the only key to its defeat, since the group's strategy includes several political, economic and military components.

As shown by the successful operations that the group has conducted, it is capable of finding out solutions to almost every challenge that it is facing. For this reason, it is necessary for the states that are trying to counter the Islamic State's power, to try to come up with different strategies that will make them able to eradicate the group and make its primary goal – establish a caliphate of loyalists – go away. Last but not least, as the Islamic State has basically been generated from the state of Syria, it is then very important long – term, to restore peoples' confidence in the state's government and institutions preventing them of falling into to the trap that lays from the Islamic State.

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