

Despite international efforts to contain, fight and delegitimise it, the self-proclaimed "Islamic State" - a terrorist jihadist entity also known for its previous designations ISIL/ISIS or DAESH - not only has consolidated characteristics as a *de facto* State, but has also expanded far beyond Syria and Iraq. In fact, the IS has become one of the most disturbing threats to international security in recent years, rivalling with al-Qaeda (AQ) as the leader of global jihadism.

How did this phenomenon emerge and evolve? How can we characterise the IS in terms of its goals, ideology, structure, governance, military and financial capabilities, propaganda, and recruitment procedures? Which groups have sided with the IS around the world? What strategies and legislation have been developed to contain and fight the IS? What are the dilemmas involving jihadist Internet use, and what is the balance between security and freedom? And what is the meaning of the IS's rise for our societies and also of so many actors involved in fighting it to the regional geopolitical chessboard?

These are some of the questions addressed in this book through nine essays written by a transnational team of some of the most prominent experts from Portugal, Italy and Turkey. So as to ensure a variety of topics related to this new global jihadist phenomenon, the book has relatively short and concise chapters, albeit containing in-depth and well-informed views from eight scholars and two journalists.



EDITOR LUÍS TOMÉ

"ISLAMIC STATE" - THE NEW GLOBAL JIHADIST PHENOMENON



## THE NEW GLOBAL JIHADIST PHENOMENON

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## **FINAL REMARKS - A GLOBAL THREAT TO FIGHT IN A VERY SENSITIVE GEOPOLITICAL CHESSBOARD**

Luís Tomé

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The alarm caused by the expansion of the ISIS/ISIL/Daesh/IS and its corresponding social, economic, humanitarian, and political implications led to a sudden change in the geopolitical chess in the region, and brought about a very eclectic “anti-IS front” - which began in the summer of 2014, including the creation of a broad international coalition led by the US currently with 64 participants, and the hitherto unthinkable joint positions of Western countries, Arab countries (especially Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Qatar, and Jordan), Iran, Turkey, the Iraqi government, the Peshmerga Kurds, and several rebel groups operating in Syria... Until now, the US and allied aircrafts have conducted more than 6.000 strikes on IS targets in Iraq and Syria, and, according to the US State Department, the IS controls 25% less territory than when the “International Coalition” began its campaign a year ago. In addition to a significant number of IS militants, some IS leaders were also killed - including the alleged previous number two in the hierarchy, Abdul Rahman Mustafa Mohammed al-Qaduli (or Abu Alaa al-Afari), and the so-called “Oil Emir” Abu Sayyaf. There are also reports that the IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi has been seriously injured, but none was confirmed by an independent source until this date.

At the same time, some previous state support to ISIS/ISIL was also stopped: currently, no government supports the IS, which placed itself as an enemy of all countries, not only in the region, but worldwide. Meanwhile, following the Iraqi government’s request, NATO decided to

reactivate the training and assistance mission to Iraqi government forces for more effective anti-IS fighting. The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation and numerous Islamic religious authorities denounced the illegitimacy of the alleged "Caliphate" on several occasions and condemned the IS narrative and acts for violating all principles of Islam. In parallel, the Internet and social media industry became more vigilant and active regarding the control and removal of terrorist and jihadist oriented content conveyed by the IS and its supporters.

In addition, showing «*particular concern that foreign terrorist fighters are being recruited by and are joining entities such as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)*», the United Nations' Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 2178 on 24 September 2014, and further called upon all states to cooperate urgently to prevent international flows of IS fighters and other extremist groups to and from conflict zones. Also aware of the fact that the "European jihadists" pose a serious threat to both the external and internal security of the European Union, European authorities and the governments of the 28 Member States, particularly reacting to the attacks in Paris on 7 and 8 January 2015, strengthened measures to combat terrorism, prevent movements for purposes of association with terrorist groups, and detect and monitor travel to and from theatres of jihadist conflict. In addition, the European Commission set out a "European Agenda on Security" in the fight against terrorism and radicalisation, organised crime and cybercrime.

However, despite local, regional, and international efforts to contain, fight and delegitimise it, the self-proclaimed "Islamic State" has consolidated characteristics as a terrorist *de facto* state and it has expanded far beyond Syria and Iraq. In fact, it became the new jihadist phenomenon and one of the most serious threats to international security.

With regard to al-Qaeda, the ISI/ISIL/Daesh/IS has been oscillating for some time between pragmatic cooperation and fratricidal dispute. But the fact is the IS "caliphate" has become an issue, competing with AQ for the leadership of global jihadism. Al-Qaeda and its affiliates have publicly repudiated the IS and its proto-"Caliph Ibrahim". The two major global "jihadist brands" and their affiliates are fighting at least in Syria, Libya, Afghanistan/Pakistan, the Caucasus, and Yemen, while disputing jihadist funding resources, recruits or group affiliations. Hence, this competition

between the IS and AQ tends not only to foster or aggravate violent conflicts and terrorist activities, but also instigate large-scale terrorist attacks in an attempt to promote each group's supremacy.

The number of IS militants and "foreign fighters" has not stopped growing. The phenomenon of jihadist "foreign fighters" has long been known in places such as Afghanistan, Bosnia, Kosovo, Chechnya, Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, or Mali. But never before have so many "foreign fighters" been involved as with the Islamic State. In addition to swelling the ranks of a jihadist and terrorist entity as ISIL and contributing to the humanitarian tragedy and barbarity in Syria and Iraq, the threat posed by the "foreign fighters" phenomenon also brings about the increased risk that they return to their home countries as members of the global jihadist movement. One quickly realises the danger this represents. Hence, this phenomenon also raises new challenges regarding the law as an instrument for preventing and combating transnational terrorism.

At the same time, the IS continues to widely use the Internet and new media for the purposes of propaganda, radicalisation, recruitment and terror, inspiring countless "lone wolves", in addition to launching powerful cyberattacks. As such, besides the "planted cells", terrorists from the "outside" and those who have obtained their nationality in an opportunistic or fraudulent manner, there is now a stunning number of "express jihadists" who are more or less self-radicalised and were born and raised in "the West"; just as the propaganda, radicalisation and recruitment in mosques, madrassas and prisons, these activities on the Internet are conducted like never before in the history of the jihadist movement. Using all these possibilities and allegiances, the IS is now in a better position to launch or instigate large-scale attacks in many other countries. Hence, the IS has also become an "internal" threat for many societies all over the world, raising new dilemmas on the delicate balance between security and freedom, new technologies and the fight against terrorism and fundamental rights.

Furthermore, there are now almost forty jihadist groups around the world that pledged *bay'at* or expressed support for "Caliph Ibrahim", as well as twelve new IS proclaimed provinces or *wilayats* outside Syria and Iraq - in Afghanistan, Libya, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Yemen, and

Nigeria.

Although the scope and power of IS affiliate groups and *wilayats* vary, the IS trajectory shows that it takes advantage of conflict and state fragile contexts to expand. And the expansion of the IS has changed the balance among jihadist groups and the volatile connections with insurgent movements in various other stages of conflict beyond Syria and Iraq, from Afghanistan-Pakistan to Libya, Yemen or Palestine.

In parallel, the IS has contributed to intensify historic rivalries and sectarian conflict between Sunni and Shiite Muslims, not only inside Syria and Iraq but also within many other Islamic countries, as well as between regional powers (namely, Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shiite Iran). For example, while in Lebanon the IS is facing the well-established Lebanese Shia movement Hezbollah, in Yemen both the IS and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula are fighting Houthi Shiite militias. In fact, the situation in Yemen is a good example of the geopolitical complexity that currently characterises the Middle East and the Islamic world: a typical "proxy war" between two regional powers (Saudi Arabia and Iran) and two rival Islamic branches (Sunni and Shia), which intersect with tribal loyalties in support of the current President or attempt to replace the previous one, coupled with the dispute between affiliate groups of the two rival jihadist organizations, AQ and IS.

Furthermore, many of the anti-IS groups also opposed to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad are either linked to al-Qaeda or more heavily influenced by Turkey, Iran, the US or the Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia. And fierce opposition against IS has increased the power and role of not only Shiite militias, but also of the Kurds, creating new tensions among Arabs in the area and their purported Kurdish liberators, and drawing allegations from Syrians, Iraqis and Turkish that the Kurds are taking advantage of the war against the IS to carve out a Kurdish state. Hence, the new geopolitical arrangement among IS opponents is undergoing multiple and mutual tensions, with all attempting to predict what will happen after IS is pushed out of an area.

In particular, Turkey has been very concerned about Kurdish ambitions and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has warned that his country will "never allow" the Kurds to establish a new state on southern frontier with Syria. So, Turkey's decision to join the fight against

IS was driven in part by the threat posed by the Kurds' territorial gains within Syria. Since the announcement it would directly fight the IS (on 24 July 2015, with "some conditions", including the creation of an ISIS- and Kurdish-free zone in Syria on the Turkish border), Turkish forces began an airstrike campaign also against elements and positions held by a Kurdish separatist-terrorist group known as the P.K.K. But that group is one of the very groups that have been crucial to stopping the advance of the IS as it is also a close ally of the Kurdish Y.P.G. which, in turn, is one of the US-led coalition's most effective allies in Syria against the IS. Also, the Turkish airstrikes effectively ended a two-year cease-fire with the P.K.K. and have set off rounds of protests and clashes between Turkish security forces and Kurdish militants throughout Turkey. From the Turkish point of view, the self-proclaimed Islamic State is just one of the enemies in Syria, along with the Assad's Alawite regime, the Shiite militias and the PKK and Kurdish radicals. Therefore, the entrance of Turkey in the fight against the IS also means a new active military player with its own interests and perspectives on the geopolitical recomposition in the region.

Adding to this, Russia and Iran's growing military involvement in Syria greatly complicates the geopolitical chessboard, once both countries support President Bashar al-Assad more than just fight the so-called Islamic State. From late September 2015, with strike and close-support aircraft on the ground at its new airbase outside Latakia (besides its naval base in Tarous), Russian targets are largely also various "rebel groups" supported by members of the US coalition, including groups linked to the Free Syrian Army, the main opposition to Assad's regime. No doubt, Russia's intervention in Syria – the first time the country has launched major military action outside the borders of the former Soviet Union since the end of the cold war - has changed the military and diplomatic dynamic in the Syrian conflict along the fight against IS. In parallel, hundreds of Iranian troops have arrived in Syria to join Assad's regime forces and their Lebanese Hezbollah allies in a major ground offensive backed by Russian air strikes. Iran has also mobilized Shia units, including Iraqis and some Afghans, to fight alongside Syrian government forces. Officially Iran denies it has deployed any combat troops in Syria, but many other sources are reporting that hundreds of Iranian troops had

arrived in Syria in preparation for an imminent assault on rebel-held areas – and Teheran also announced the deaths of several officers from the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) in Syria.

In legal terms, Russia and Iran are doing nothing more than the US and other countries are doing to assist the Iraqi government. But of course, the President Assad's regime in Syria has many other enemies beyond the IS, both domestic opponent' groups and Western countries, Turkey or the Arab Gulf States. Hence, the military support provided by Russia and Iran to the Assad's regime beyond the IS creates new problems and new tensions. For example, the US has accused Moscow of throwing "gasoline on the fire" of the Syrian civil and also of targeting civilians; and President Obama has ordered up to special operations troops to Syria, in an apparent breach of a promise not to put US "boots on the ground", to fight IS militants in the country. Indeed, the fight against the so-called Islamic State, the proclaimed enemy of all, risks to escalate an old cross-cutting confrontation in Syria: Iran and Russia, along with Lebanon's Hezbollah movement and Shiite militias are propping up the Assad's Alawite-led regime; Turkey, Saudi Arabia and other Arab States are backing the Sunni-dominated opposition, along with the US and other NATO allies. All actors want the IS defeated and some order restored in Syria and the region. However, long-term divergent strategic interests and the dispute over Mr. Assad's role may complicate joint efforts between the US-led coalition against the IS and Russia and Iran, leaving open what might happen in the future.

The self-proclaimed "Islamic State" is a territorial jihadist entity, but the threat it represents goes far beyond his terror strategy and its scope goes well beyond Iraq and the Levant. Being a terrorist *de facto* state, it is also a base for jihadism and terrorism in the region and worldwide. No doubt, the IS became global and a more diffuse and complex threat.

The IS's strategic weaknesses are real and it can be pushed back. Still, the former counterterrorism strategy is clearly not sufficient to combat it: the anti-"Islamic State" strategy may not be uniform and requires multiple approaches, multiple instruments, and multiple fronts based on multiple vectors. The IS has a territorial base where it can and must be fought and it shows a level of barbarism to which the international community,

starting with Islamic countries, cannot be indifferent. Moreover, fragile and unstable states must be stabilized quickly, as certain conflicts and resentments need to be urgently contained under penalty of continuing to be exploited by IS. And of course, the weakening of the IS cannot be at the expense of strengthening AQ or other terrorist groups.

Unfortunately, the delicate geopolitical situation which facilitated the emergence and expansion of ISIS continues today no less complex. Unfortunately, the tensions among IS's opponents complicate the strategy to degrade and ultimately destroy the self-proclaimed "Islamic State". Unfortunately, the common enemy that IS represents is not enough to enable a common strategic end-state and to recreate a peaceful and secure prospective post-IS regional order, starting with the most complex situation in Syria.

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