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WHAT IS SO ATTRACTIVE ABOUT THE "ISLAMIC STATE"?

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20,000: that is the number of foreign jihadists who have gone to Iraq and Syria to swell the ranks of the Islamic State organisation (hereafter, IS) and other groups, as of January 2015. The spectacular growth of IS's strength in the region and its global repercussions (an international coalition, terrorist acts in the name of IS and so on) is today obliging a number of European countries to fight against a phenomenon that is global in scale: the growing number of young and less young people leaving the countries where they have always lived in order to reach countries where extreme violence coexists with a politico-religious utopia.

Though we write its name in quotes to deny its qualification either as a state or Islamic, the characteristics of what we continue to call a "terrorist organisation" go well beyond this simplistic categorisation. It is precisely these new characteristics -territorial, ideological, structural and even institutional- that must lead us to reflect on the reasons for the attractiveness of IS, if we intend, eventually, to dismantle it. This is all the more true given that the profiles of people IS attracts are increasingly diversified.

The traditional profiles of the radicalised person that we are used to dealing with are now out-dated. A number of jihadists are still young, marginalised, socio-economically and politically excluded young people (predominantly male),

whose pasts have been hampered by personal problems and greater or lesser degrees of delinquency and who are likely to have been radicalised through contact with a recruiter. However, increasingly diverse profiles appear in the rare studies on the subject: converts make up **nearly a quarter of French jihadists**, for example, and middle-class people and even whole families have gone to live on "Islamic soil". How, then, is a "terrorist organisation" able to attract such a range? The Islamic State organisation is innovative in its structure, its project, its ideology and also in its communicative impact.

Arab springs, Islamist winters and authoritarian summers

The recent context in which this phenomenon has accelerated can be demonstrated in three key moments. First was the famous wave of "Arab springs" that raised enormous expectations in terms of

The new characteristics -territorial, ideological, structural and even institutional- make reflection on the reasons for the attractiveness of IS necessary if we intend, eventually, to dismantle it.

The traditional profiles of those radicalised are out-dated: it is not only the young, marginalised and excluded, but converts, middle-class people and even whole families have gone to live on «Islamic soil» too.

The disastrous handling of the Syrian tragedy by Western governments whose promises of intervention have not been seen through has contributed to feeding resentment.

From a regional perspective, the Islamist parties who reached power, representing, initially, an alternative to the regimes in place, have become parties in government and lost their oppositional role.

At a geopolitical level, jihadist Salafism claims to defend oppressed Muslims wherever they are and seeks to reunite them within a single, unitary entity: the Islamic caliphate.

IS fits, inversely, Huntington's theory of the clash of civilisations: it is the West that declared war on Islam and «Muslims» should fight alongside their brothers in an apocalyptic war.

In controlling a territory almost as large as the United Kingdom with a degree of territorial continuity, the organisation has, in reality, performed a radical break with all that a jihadist Salafist organisation has done in the past.

The existence of a territory that allows the jihadist doctrine to be protected is at the very heart of the strategy adopted by IS, not only in ideological terms, but also in terms of communication.

IS came entered the scene with a bang due to its extreme brutality; its media policy has had gradual effect, according to a logic that is revealed by its communication strategy.

Only a multi-dimensional approach allows the relativisation of the jihadist Salafist vision as an exclusively religious current, as the majority of people IS attracts have only a recent association with the religion.

democratisation. Some resistance was met in Bahrain, Libya, Yemen and, above all, Syria, which tipped the last three countries over into civil war. And of these, the Syrian war has particularly mobilised foreign public opinion and civil societies due to the extreme violence and terror that characterise it.

The international community's inability to respond to the Syrian tragedy and the disastrous handling of the crisis by Western governments whose promises of intervention have not been seen through have contributed to swelling the ranks of the anti-Bashar al-Assad forces. This "resistance" has weakened under the pressure of the proliferation of militias and organisations with divergent or even contradictory political agendas. Beyond the regional developments that brought this situation about (the Syrian conflict's spillover into Libya and Iraq), above all, resentment of the promises made that must be taken into account.

From a regional perspective, calls for regime change and/or constitutional reforms have resulted in the establishment of electoral processes meant to solidify the revolutionary expectations. In the consultations held in 2011 and 2012 the Islamist parties won majorities (despite not being the source of the revolts) and were given the tasks of leading the processes of transition in Egypt and Tunisia and reform in Morocco. They were suited to this both because of their political virginity and the ambitious projects they defend, which centre around concepts of social justice and Islam as standards in the administration of public affairs.

The Islamic State organisation is innovative in its structure, its project, its ideology and also in its communicative impact.

Yet upon reaching power, these parties, who initially represented an alternative to the regimes in place, became parties in government, met various fates and ended up losing their oppositional role. Thus, Behkirane's Justice and Development Party is today thought to be in the pocket of the royal palace while its Tunisian counterpart, Ennahda, has undoubtedly lost ground. Nidaa Tounes, a coalition of opposition parties that brings together figures from the previous regime, won the October 2014 legislative elections. Their leader, Beji Caid Essebsi, who was minister of the interior, of defence and of foreign affairs under the first Tunisian president, Habib Bourguiba, and then president of the parliament from 1990 to 1991 under Ben Ali, won the December 2014 presidential elections. In Egypt, where the Muslim Brotherhood won a majority in the People's Assembly as well as benefitting from the presidency of the republic, a coup d'état on June 30th 2013 aborted this premature democratic experience. Worse, it was followed by a veritable witch-hunt against the Muslim Brotherhood which resulted in several hundreds of deaths in August 2013, mass imprisonments and a purge of the Brotherhood's leadership.

In the eyes of diverse actors (Islamists, Salafists and others) hoping for the installation of genuinely Islamist regimes, the transformation of certain Islamist parties into parties in government and above all the ferocious repression that unfolded against the Egyptian Brotherhood demonstrates that,

with the exception of Turkey, the Islamist project cannot be realised via the ballot boxes. What is more, **this debate is taking place at the very heart of the Brotherhood's membership**, which is now being reacquainted with clandestinity.

Finally, this new era has led to the beginning of civil societies who increasingly use the internet as a means of freely expressing themselves and getting their message across borders. While this explosion may be relative,¹ it constitutes a communication bias that has today become crucial for a wide range of governmental actors (e.g. the Bahraini and Syrian regimes) but also, and above all, non-governmental actors (activists from civil society, etc.). In this sense, the web has today become a new space of ideological confrontation and propaganda; a new order that helps a number of organisations and small non-governmental groups such as Ansar al-Sharia, al-Qaeda or even the Islamic State organisation.

It is in this context, which some declare the end of the "democratic springs" interlude (sometimes portrayed as the return of the old regimes), that IS has developed and is expanding. Its backdrop is the absence of an authentic Islamist alternative, the multiplication of ideological fighting in the virtual sphere and, above all, the continuation of the Syro-Iraqi tragedy.

A politico-religious project with a totalitarian air

The structure of IS is a key element in understanding the new challenges that it poses for those who want to understand how to fight against it. Born of a strange marriage between pro-Saddam Hussein forces and al-Qaeda, of which it is a former branch, and with which it continues to share aspects of its ideology, it is part of what is commonly called "jihadist Salafism" (we will return to this later). But its practical translation is radically different.

The current of jihadist Salafism of which the Islamic State organisation forms part legitimates the recourse to violence and combines theology and political theory. At a religious level, jihadist Salafism claims to be making a return to the source to give a stringent reading freed from contextualisation in order to embody the original Islam -the Islam of their ancestors (*salaf*). In doing this, it rejects and forbids all interpretation that differs from its literalist perspective, given that all divergence from this view leads, in the long term, to the weakening of the community (the *umma*) and to sedition (*fitna*).

In contrast, at a geopolitical level, jihadist Salafism resorts to constant contextualisation as it claims to defend oppressed Muslims wherever they find themselves, with the goal of reuniting them within a single, unified entity: the resurrected Islamic caliphate. Geopolitics perfectly serves

1. Sean Aday, Farrel Henry, Lynch Marc, Sides John, and Freelon Deen. *Blog and Bullets II: New Media and Conflict after the Arab Spring*. Peaceworks: United States Institute for Peace, July 2012.

their interests by giving support to their key argument -that the West has declared war on Islam- based on the current reality of the region and of the military interventions on "Islamic soil". Their reading of international relations fits perfectly with Huntington's theory of the clash of civilisations (which also colours current Western views of the region), but its reasoning is the opposite: it is the West that has declared war on Islam and it is up to "Muslims" to fight alongside their brothers in this apocalyptic war. The **eschatalogical vision** IS defends rests on the idea that the end of times will result in a generalised confrontation between Muslims and non-Muslims. According to the defenders of this idea, this global conflict will explode in the Sham, a historical area currently in Syria.

This combination of religious and political is particularly attractive because it offers a specific translation of a religious ideal and is supported by all Western intervention (Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Mali) and non-intervention (Palestine, Syria and Burma) to make its point. In this sense, it is through the state project it seeks to embody that IS intends to cement its revolutionary messianism.

The Islamic State organisation and the land: the protected jihadists

Through its project, IS has managed to make itself stand out. In controlling a territory nearly the size of the United Kingdom with a degree of territorial continuity, the organisation has, in reality, performed a radical break with all that a jihadist Salafist organisation has done in the past: it gives jihadist Salafism a geographical setting. In other words, after several years of al-Qaeda's reign and its **doctrine of deterritorialised terrorism**, IS provides jihadist Salafism with a territorial base. Further, months on, it is developing the fundamental attributes of a state: a territory whose borders are meant to grow, a military force capable of reigning over several million souls, executive power held by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and a series of consultative local assemblies (*majlis al choura*), as well as tribunals based on sharia, the sole and exclusive source of the law.

In contrast to al-Qaeda, who promoted and continue to promote war against the "distant enemy", namely, the West, IS calls for war against the "near enemy". In other words, in place of the deterritorialised terrorism that is al-Qaeda's flagship doctrine and has brought it some success, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's organisation, with its military conquests and territorial base, prioritises the expansion of the caliphate.

In reality, the Islamic State organisation draws its strength from its fundamental difference to the organisation to which it formerly belonged. In contrast to al-Qaeda's priority of fighting the West in order to reach the distant goal of its fight -an Islamic caliphate-, IS moves in the absolute opposite direction: establishing itself territorially, consolidating this establishment and promoting the unlimited expansion of the

increasingly powerful caliphate it claims to have established. That is to say that it is the specific and physical reflection of the ideals of al-Qaeda and the numerous other organisations in the jihadist Salafist sphere.

In addition, where al-Qaeda seems to be a relatively closed organisation -essentially bringing together Mujahideen from Afghanistan and the Maghreb by way of Yemen- or based on Western jihadists living clandestinely in the society they hope to attack (attacks in Madrid and London), the Islamic State organisation presents itself as an open, non-selective organisation, which, above all, offers a land to all those who share their project.

The major innovation of IS thus lies in the fact that the organisation increasingly resembles an authentic movement. A movement with its own trademark: the black flag stamped with the profession of Muslim faith, the right index finger raised to the sky, the slogan (**controversial**) -"*baqyia*" ("stand, remain", i.e. the Islamic State will remain), and such extreme violence that **even al-Qaeda thinks it too brutal**.

The existence of a territory that allows the jihadist doctrine to be protected is at the very heart of the strategy adopted by IS, not only in ideological terms, but also in terms of communication.

For those hoping for the installation of genuinely Islamist regimes, the Islamist project cannot be realised via the ballot boxes.

The clash of civilisations: the reverse strategy

Living in the open on land controlled by those who share their totalitarian ideology: which "terrorist organisation" can today boast of guaranteeing such treatment of their adherents? In breaking with the clandestinity that characterises al-Qaeda and other groups, IS also finds itself in a position to invest money and phenomenal energy in self-promotion throughout the world.

To assert its trademark, IS came on to the scene with a bang due to the extreme brutality that characterises its actions against the enemy, whether "near" or "distant" (Western). The rising up the media agenda of IS has been gradual, according to a logic that is revealed in its communication strategy. The punishment, torture and violence of the minorities they have persecuted and continue to persecute (in particular, the Christians and Yazidis) have had a media impact that has largely rivalled the thousands of horrifying videos published by the pro- and anti-Bashar factions. Above all, it was at the end of summer 2014 that IS learned how to reach the whole world through the extremely calculated (aesthetically and otherwise) staging of the executions of Western hostages. Beyond the cinematographic techniques used, the screenwriting of the brutality and violence leaves nothing to chance: the orange uniforms worn by the "enemies" undoubtedly recall the prisoners of Guantanamo Bay, while

execution by crucifixion and/or decapitation sends out the image of a movement that neither compromises nor negotiates with the enemy (officially).

The image IS gives of itself is of an organisation that is determined and ready for the project its partisans support; the war against the West is summarised in a sequence of just a few minutes. Thus, the Western hostage represents the West, and the punishment handed out is meant to symbolically embody the punishments and humiliations of thousands of Muslims around the world. The fact that IS innovates in its barbarity and summons symbols that arouse horror (a **Jordanian burnt alive in a cage**) and indignation (Mosul library burned, archaeological monuments destroyed) reveals the key objective of the inextinguishable thirst for communication: to be spoken of throughout the world and to provoke a reaction in a highly emotional register. This reaction, cut-through with feeling and thereby pulling mechanically away from all interpretations let alone rational decisions, allows it to convince of its intransigence and its determination to, eventually, attract the last hesitators to its soil. In this sense, has IS not won in bringing about the formation of an “international coalition” against it after the execution of Western hostages, while no anti-Assad coalition has been set up despite the hundreds of thousands of Syrian victims? Thanks to the psychological shocks that it has provoked, IS has managed to bring about a military confrontation. That is an even more logical conclusion to draw given that the powers engaged in the bombardments today

Through its state project IS seeks to cement its revolutionary messianism

recognise that they have yet to define a clear strategic objective, to the extent that numerous **discussions** and **manceuvres** today bring to light the possibility of an alliance being formed with the previous no.1 enemy -Bashar al-Assad- who, following the rise of al-Baghdadi, has become enemy no.2.

Without the filters with which to interpret these realities in a non-Manichean way, what is the impact of this configuration, where two bellicose perceptions – the “war on terror” promoted by a number of states, and the IS discourse that claims to defend Islam in the war declared on it by the West – face one other? In a Huntingtonian reading -used by IS but equally by certain conservative actors in the West- it is tempting to see it as a genuine confrontation between two purportedly homogeneous entities, otherwise known as the “clash of civilisations”. This same reading is promoted by IS to categorise it as a “last crusade”, opposing the *umma* with the “non-believers”.² In this context, through the emotion and terror that they spread, the shootings in Ottawa and Sydney (October 22nd, 2014 and December 15th, 2014, respectively), the killings in Paris (January 7th-9th, 2015) and Copenhagen (14th February, 2014) seem to illustrate - for their advocates as well as their detractors- a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy: the cementing of this “global war”.

Jihadist Salafism 2.0: a “neo-jihadism”

Aside from the channels of communication that we might almost call institutional, IS deploys, by way of its partisans on the spot and followers in the wider world, an incredible communicational arsenal.

Just the fact that the people of numerous nationalities who have joined the ranks of this organisation live in the open on the land between Syria and Iraq opens up an almost unlimited horizon in terms of communication. It is in this context that the Islamic State, through its production and broadcast agencies (Al-Furqan Media and Al-Hayat Media Centre), produce the short, medium length and long films on the spectacular military successes of the group. The IS communicators sometimes seem to want to recreate extremely popular and violent videogames (Call of Duty, Grand Theft Auto) on behalf of certain figures in the organisation in order to seduce young people in search of adrenaline.

Above all, the development of social networks in recent years and their impact on communication is an asset that IS and its adherents have seized perfectly. Mainly public or of a public nature (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Youtube and even Vine), they essentially fulfil two functions: on the one hand, propagating terror and thereby sowing unrest in public opinion (broadcasting images and violent videos); on the other, deploying propaganda that not only informs of IS advances on the military and state-building front but also and, above all, allows it to seduce and recruit new people.

On this last point, the challenge posed by the development of social networks and their use is one of scale. In effect, the videos of innumerable jihadists connected on social networks create an impressive knock-on effect: all young foreigners who have joined the “caliphate” can, in this way, taste the adrenaline that the videos it creates have produced. The extreme violence, the weapons handling and the **risky behaviour** set alongside the fundamentalist discourse justifying any excessive violence are extensively broadcast via social networks and a plethora of forums. These egocentric expression spaces in the end allow all young people, whether ex-delinquents or those simply in search of meaning in their life, to live as heroes in a truly global war in which they claim to be a player. In this way, the Islamic State generates nearly a hundred thousand tweets a day and disposes of important virtual relays through which to articulate their ideas around the world.

And yet, this communicative and emotional part, which is what the West mainly focusses on, hides other communication that is just as well thought-out and calculated, and which is more refined and targeted. Because the man who coldly executes an “unbeliever” may, in the same sequence, appear in the middle of a humanitarian operation for orphans. This communication is aimed, specifically, at all those who are attracted to Islamic State for something other than the barbarity it practises. In effect, Islamic State, along with a number of its partisans on the internet, produces hundreds of propaganda videos in which they show the virtues of life on Islamic soil.

2. *Dabiq* n°4, “Reflections on the Failed Crusade”, pp. 32-34. Url: <http://media.clarionproject.org/files/islamic-state/islamic-state-isis-magazine-Issue-4-the-failed-crusade.pdf>

Among these videos are the highly popular mujatweets (neologism of mujahid and tweet): these very short sequences, with an extremely aesthetic focus show a number of foreign jihadists expressing themselves in their own language and claim to show the day-to-day life of the Islamic State to thousands of people around the world in several languages. In addition, it is in line with this that the existence of the magazine *Dabiq*, not just in Arabic but in several European languages, should be understood. Genuine competition with al-Qaeda's *Inspire* (also published in English for the last few years), this magazine is devoted to spreading the ideology promoted by IS in a positive light (actions taken for populations, education reforms, military successes) and in a format that permits the understanding that the "Islamic State" is more than a simple terrorist organisation.

When it comes to video sequences and simple articles, security, the practise of a pure Islam, the end of corruption and the return to price stability are just as much elements that are emphasised and staged to show the true face -the home front/ behind the front/rear front check- of the "Islamic State": a state that is authentically Islamic and unjustly demonised by the enemies of Islam.

The attractiveness of the "Islamic State" beyond the violence

It is therefore in light of these principal traits that the "Islamic State" must be understood if we hope to fight against it. This kind of multi-dimensional approach leads us to consider IS as something more than a simple "terrorist organisation" and to interrogate the means of fighting it other than the security-based approach.

This allows us to relativise the often over-ideologised vision (jihadist Salsfism as an exclusively religious current) that insists on the religious dimension of IS. Although necessary, the elaboration of a religious counter-argument is far from satisfactory. The majority of people IS attracts have only a recent association with religion: they may be people of Muslim culture who have rarely practised Islam and discover a radical and attractive ideology or converts who find that the reductive binarism IS proposes to be a simple solution to their deep problems of identity and self. Likewise, the vast majority are not radicalised by way of the Mosque but tend, increasingly, to self-radicalise while surfing the net.

Prisoners of an over-emotional vision ("the war on terror"), we no longer grasp the way in which regional geopolitics helps IS justify its politico-religious ideology, since we consider it above all a terrorist organisation. An approach that integrates the political discourse of IS as well as the political dimension of the jihadism practised by its adherents would certainly offer new means of countering its politico-religious propaganda. Such an analytical context permits the effective consideration of the jihadist Salafist phenomenon through its political prism and illuminates the political agenda of IS as

well as the reading of international relations that the organisation promotes and the political motives on behalf of which the actors belonging to or identifying themselves with the "caliphate" act.

Because, whether we like it or not, the Islamic State organisation reigns over a specific territory and it is that base that allows it to innovate in its ideology, to put it in a specific setting and to expose to the whole world its unflinching determination to realise the righteous purpose it has assigned itself. The Manichean radical ideology, its implementation, the noble objective that it claims to already embody and the way in which it communicates its determination are the key ingredients of its success. Without taking this into account, we risk attacking the false causes of a genuine problem.

The structure of IS is a key and central element in understanding the new challenges that it poses to those who want to learn how to fight it.