

# CONSIDERATIONS REGARDING ISLAMIC STATE OF IRAQ AND SYRIA -ISIS / DAESH-

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**ABSTRACT:**

*THIS ARTICLE IS AN UP-TO-DATE RADIOGRAPHY OF THE TERRORIST ORGANIZATION ISLAMIC STATE OF IRAQ AND SYRIA, ALSO KNOWN AS ISIS, ONE OF THE MOST DANGEROUS TERRORIST GROUPS IN THE WORLD, KNOWN FOR ORCHESTRATING OVER TIME COUNTLESS VIOLENT TERRORIST ATTACKS, WHICH HAVE HAD A DEFINING IMPACT ON GLOBAL SECURITY. IT ADDRESSES ISSUES OF INTEREST RELATED TO THE ORIGIN AND STRUCTURE OF THE TERRORIST GROUP, ITS IDEOLOGY, OBJECTIVES AND OPERATION, AS WELL AS THE EVOLUTION OF THE GROUP SINCE 2014 (THE YEAR IN WHICH IT EXPERIENCED THE MOST IMPORTANT OPERATIONAL SUCCESSES) AND UNTIL NOW. IT IS CONCLUDED THAT, DESPITE THE FACT THAT THE TERRORIST ORGANIZATION HAS FACED, IN RECENT YEARS, A MAJOR DESTRUCTURING, IT CONTINUES ITS ACTIVITY TODAY, BEING FOCUSED PRIMARILY ON THE DIMENSION OF REORGANIZATION.*

**KEYWORDS:** ISLAMIC STATE, ISIS, DAESH, AL-QAEDA, TERRORISM

## INTRODUCTION

Islamic State is a terrorist group that has managed to gain international notoriety through numerous terrorist attacks characterized by a particular cruelty, but also by its unpredictable evolution, being identified under various names that create echoes of panic and terror around the world. The group can be considered an example of the evolution of modern terrorism, succeeding in transforming terrorism into the rank of a war operation, which is why it was perceived, at one point, as the greatest contemporary threat to world security.

The name under which this terrorist group is popularized is the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant or the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, but also Daesh, and the abbreviations used are IS, SI, ISIL and ISIS. Daesh is an acronym for the title of the organization and comes from the Arabic language, meaning "one who crushes or tramples", and is similar to another Arabic term, Dāhis, translated as "one who seeds discord" (Irshaid, 2015).

The Islamic State group has its roots in Al-Qaeda, formed after the detachment of a faction during the Syrian civil war. The peak of the group was reached in 2014, when the

terrorist group reached the rank of a state entity, declaring the Islamic caliphate in the controlled lands of Iraq and Syria, thus managing to gain control of a territory the size of Belgium, with a population of about 8 million (Gilsinan, 2014).

ISIS propaganda, full of awful and shocking images for the general public, worked very well as a recruitment tool and attracted people from all over the world to join its ranks. The propaganda and information infrastructure, corroborated by the access to modern technologies, contributed to the recruitment of new followers, from various regions of the world, who were later subjected to a process of indoctrination and radicalization, becoming fanatical supporters of Islamic jihadism (Peptan C., Peptan A. & Sirbu, 2020, p. 135). Following the creation of the caliphate in June 2014, ISIS inspired attacks outside Syria and Iraq, in which more than 1,300 people were killed and more than 2,000 others were injured (Lister et al., 2018). Several extremist groups around the world, including groups in countries such as Nigeria, the Philippines, Afghanistan, Indonesia and Pakistan, have shown their sympathy and supported ISIS.

Therefore, it can be said that ISIS is a special dimension of a radical movement born from the need of individuals of personal and collective significance, an ideological narrative that presents violence as the path to meaning and a process that transforms the narrative into a common social reality that marked humanity in an immeasurable way (LeBaron & McCants, 2015).

## **ORIGIN AND ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE**

Islamic State, in 2006, broke away from the parent organization, giving birth to the Islamic State of Iraq, which enjoyed a rapid evolution and immediate success, being involved, since its inception, in virulent terrorist attacks in Iraq on government authorities or the capabilities of the international community on Iraqi territory, but also on Iraqi civilians (Peptan C., Peptan A. & Sirbu, 2020, p. 134). After a series of operational successes, in 2014, the terrorist organization changed its title to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, also known as ISIS, managing to restore its dominant position in its original location - Iraq. Finally, on June 29, 2014, the first day of the holy month of Ramadan, ISIS declared the caliphate, with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as its caliph, calling on all Muslims to show loyalty (Isis rebels declare ‘Islamic state’ in Iraq and Syria, 2014).

As a structure, the Islamic State was very well organized, being led by a caliph (Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi), having under his subordination several deputies whose mission was to manage areas controlled by the terrorist group (Robillard, n.d.). The Islamic State also had a Cabinet (consisting of advisers appointed by al-Baghdadi), a Shura Council (which oversaw the group's affairs), a Military Council (which managed military operations), a Defense, Security and Intelligence Council (which ensures the security of the caliph and the collection of information), a Judicial Authority (dealing with judicial matters), and last but not least, an Institution of the Islamic State for Public Information (which transmitted official information through the spokesperson) (Robillard, nd).

## **IDEOLOGY**

Ideology is the driving force, being the one that sets the objectives, policies, but also the direction of any terrorist organization. Thus, in the case of the Islamic State, the ideology is divided into two dimensions: the dimension of jihadi-Salafism, the Islamic school on which the terrorist organization is based, and the dimension of harsh interpretation of the teachings of the jihadist-Salafist school.

The first dimension refers to the jihadist-Salafist school, Salafism representing a new vision of the world, which aims to return to pure Islam and revive the religious faith of Muslims all around the world, by purifying the faith, and eliminating idolatry, over time, Shiite Muslims being considered practitioners of idolatry, which turned them into targets of jihadist-Salafist terrorist groups, including the Islamic State, and therefore Muslims who practice idolatry were called apostates and sentenced, most of the time, to death (Bunzel, 2015, p. 8).

This brings us to the second dimension, that of harsh interpretation of Salafist teachings, the Islamic State differing from other Salafist terrorist groups due to the way it interprets this doctrine, precisely this difference leading to the split of the Islamic State from the Al-Qaeda group. The Islamic State's discourse on Salafist doctrine has promoted new concepts by which all Muslims are urged to associate themselves only with other true / pure Muslims, but also the concept that failure to rule under sharia law represents unbelief, the leader of the group, al-Baghdadi, saying about the leaders of Muslim countries who do not respect sharia laws that they are "sinners, liars and unbelievers", the fight against them being a compelling "necessity" (Bunzel, 2015, p. 10). Islamic State has also published a 40 points list, entitled Takfir's Creed and Methodology (takfir: the process of excommunication of Muslims who do not respect sharia law), which prohibits democracy and secularism, governments that embrace these concepts being considered renegades, thus becoming the enemy of the terrorist group (Jasko et al., 2018, p. 9). Therefore, we can observe a certain prioritization of internal / regional jihad, to the detriment of the global one, the Islamic State being engaged in violent conflicts that take place, with predilection, on Muslim lands, pursuing the fulfillment of the main objectives in these regions.

## **OBJECTIVES AND MODUS OPERANDI**

The group's goals are inextricably linked to its ideology, which is deeply religious. Compared to other terrorist groups, ISIS considered that it should start its offensive by eliminating the closest enemies, such as the Shiites and the Kurds. In this regard, the group's leader, al-Baghdadi, relied on the same faith as Zarqawi, which aimed at the need for a strong territorial base in the Middle East, without which his struggle would fail. Ultimately, the main goal of the group is to form a transnational caliphate, which needs a local starting point (Stern & Berger, 2016, pp. 823-824).

The United States of America and other European countries are certainly on the list of the group's targets, along with the renegade monarchies in the Persian Gulf, the Alawite regime in Syria and the Shiite governments in Iraq and Iran. For this reason, ISIS' resources and actions are mainly dedicated to these local and regional theaters or, as Zarqawi said, "the road to Palestine passes through Amman" (Joby, 2015, p. 387).

However, the political goal of ISIS is also to reverse the situation of subjugation of the Muslim world. Unlike Al-Qaeda, such a reversal has, at its center, the territorial assertion of ISIS, which involves engaging in the fight against local and regional enemies, which we mentioned earlier. This must be done without overlooking, however, the threat that external actors, such as the US, pose to achieving such goals.

To achieve its goals, ISIS has pursued two main types of strategies, each linked to one of its tasks. Regarding the territorial consolidation of the caliphate, the strategy used is to build a state, while its transnationalization involves other means, including the use of political terrorism. We can say that both the US military intervention in Iraq and the civil war in Syria can be considered aspects that led to the destabilization of the political order in the region, creating a fertile territory for the implementation of ISIS objectives.

The group exercised a form of totalitarianism and relied on the idea of "wilayat" or provincial subdivisions with their own rulers and administrative units that, to some extent, reproduce government structures, with a well-developed institutional design (Stern & Berger, 2015, pp. 280).

In its occupied territories, ISIS has implemented a series of administrative measures, which have led in some way to improving living conditions for the local population (road renovation, electricity supply, etc.), designed to provide legitimacy and strengthen its territorial position. However, the positive achievements of ISIS are insignificant compared to the group's mode of action, known worldwide, enshrined in episodes of abuse, terror and violence committed in the territories controlled by the group.

Another mode of operation specific to ISIS is represented by kidnappings and slavery, these actions being directed mainly against ethnic and religious minorities. It should also be mentioned the suicide bombings, bombings, beheadings, armed attacks, hijacking of means of transport and any acts of extreme cruelty, most of them targeting government authorities and civilians. ISIS is also known for kidnapping and beheading several hostages, including several international journalists, and posting videos of these crimes on various social media platforms.

Moreover, the population living in the ISIS dominated territories is forced to adopt the radical vision of the terrorist group, otherwise, they are sentenced to death by execution. ISIS' local control strategy involves the provision of services and the use of terror, which is directly linked to the goal of controlling the local population.

Regarding the transnationalization of the caliphate, some authors have identified an ISIS strategy that has seven main stages, such as: establishing a presence in societies marked by sectarian, tribal, ethnic and political tensions; accentuating these divisions using calculated terrorist attacks, creating internal conflicts or even external confrontations between potential adversaries, in order to undermine morale and power; in the context of military control of the territories, the aim is to extract all possible resources to finance the expansion of the group; the use, in a planned way, of propaganda to convey an image of force; inspiring local leaders and other organizations to swear allegiance to the caliphate; recruitment, indoctrination with the vision of the apocalyptic world of ISIS; attracting lone wolves, ie individuals who are sympathetic to the cause of the group, even if they have no direct links with the organization (Stern & Berger, 2015, pp. 281-282).

## **EVOLUTION AFTER 2014**

As we all know, the year 2014 represented the climax of the terrorist group, the Islamic State managing that year to fulfill one of its most important objectives, represented by the establishment of the Islamic caliphate, thus the regional jihad being successful. Therefore, the terrorist group began a global jihad, turning its attention to new targets, in order to expand its influence around the globe and create terror, engaging in the conduct of terrorist operations against the West. To achieve this goal, ISIS used its propaganda apparatus, which over time attracted countless sympathizers from around the world. Thus, on behalf of the group, cells of the terrorist group and the so-called lone wolves began to be active (Peptan, 2019, p. 135), participating in countless terrorist attacks targeting Western targets, including coordinated attacks on several locations in Paris in November 2015 (Paris attacks: What happened on the night, 2015), and attacks on Brussels airport and other locations in the Belgian capital in March 2016 (Drozdik, Steinhauer & Verbergt, n.d.).

The wave of terrorist attacks on the West has diminished since 2017, when the US-led coalition's military campaign led to the destruction of the Islamic caliphate in November 2017, with ISIS losing control of 98% of its territory, killing more than 60,000 ISIS-affiliated fighters

(ISIS After the Caliphate, 2017). The defeat of ISIS in Iraq and Syria has left governments around the world worried about the fate of nationals who have left the countries to join ISIS. Thousands of foreign fighters have been detained in a war zone by Syrian democratic forces (Brown, 2019). However, many governments do not want to repatriate their radicalized nationals. Of the 41,490 registered foreign fighters, only 18% returned to their countries of origin (Cook & Vale, 2019).

Despite the dramatic decline in ISIS' activity, the number of affiliates outside Iraq and Syria continues to grow, as has the number of non-affiliated groups that have pledged allegiance to the group. The group's influence continued to spread to South Asia, through the Khorasan Province of the Islamic State, as well as to North and West Africa, through the Islamic State of the Great Sahara.

According to the statistics, it was found that, in 2019, ISIS was the third most dangerous terrorist organization in the world (Global Terrorism Index, 2020, p. 16). During 2019, the group suffered heavy losses as a result of counter-terrorism operations in Iraq and Syria. In March 2019, US and Syrian forces regained the last remnants of ISIS territory in eastern Syria. Also in the same year, the US carried out a military operation that led to the death of ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi: IS leader 'dead after US raid' in Syria, 2019). Despite these significant losses, the group continues to carry out attacks with the help of terrorist cells in Iraq and Syria, and globally with the help of a network of affiliated groups, and also, it continues to work under the leadership of a new leader, Amir Mohammed Said Abd al-Rahman al-Mawla, who replaced Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

Also, the terrorist group continued to carry out kidnapping operations in order to obtain ransom money, and to ensure the financing of the group it is assumed that they made a series of investments in legal business (fish farms, car sales), respectively money laundering operations obtained from illegal business (Callimachi & Schmitt, 2019).

Moreover, ISIS fighters, who were moving freely in small cells, escaped capture by taking refuge in deserts and mountains, especially along the border between Iraq and Syria. ISIS "has continued to strengthen its position in some areas previously under its control, operating more and more confidently and openly," said Vladimir Voronkov, head of the UN Counter-Terrorism Office, at the Security Council on August 24, 2020 (Statement by Mr. Vladimir Voronkov, Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism, 2020).

The year 2020 has been a challenge for all mankind. The focus of the world's governments has been on the new coronavirus pandemic, respectively on the public health crisis, leaving the issue of combating terrorism in the background. In this context, the measures taken to combat the pandemic have led to the restriction of the movement of people, which has also led to a reduction in the ability of ISIS, but also of other terrorist groups, to launch terrorist attacks around the world. Despite this, the pandemic offered terrorist groups the opportunity to reorganize, but also to carry out various activities in the online environment, in order to recruit new followers, but also to obtain funding (Coronavirus lockdowns limit ISIS attacks in many nations: UN, 2020).

## CONCLUSION

Islamic State is one of the most dangerous terrorist groups of the 21st century, becoming globally known for the bloody terrorist attacks it has carried out over time. Its operational activity has changed the definition of modern terrorism, which has managed to have a major impact on both regional and global security. Despite the fact that the terrorist organization has

faced, in recent years, a major restructuring, it continues its activity even today, the group being focused on the dimension of reorganization.

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