

# TEN THINGS WE NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE ISLAMIC STATE

Maciej Huczko PhD

Warsaw School of Economics, Warsaw, Poland

mhuczko@sgh.waw.pl

**Abstract:** The Islamic State (IS) (arguably the most successful terrorist group ever, or at the very least, the terrorist group which has attracted the most media attention) has declared itself a state, seized territories, and implemented a quasi-government. Widely recognized by their black flag, white pickup trucks, and horrendous executions broadcast live; the IS is a terrorist organization that because of its goals, methods, and appeal to young people, is worrisome to global leaders and decision-makers.

But what do we know about the IS? How is it possible that such a phenomenon came into existence let alone became capable of threatening global powers, obtaining continued funding, staging military actions, and grabbing media attention as it has done so far?

To explain the above question one must look at many different strategic issues that were not managed properly and therefore allowed Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian dropout and petty criminal, to create such a deadly organization. Today the IS plays an important role in the Middle East and is capable of carrying out deadly terrorist attacks not only in its home region but also in Europe, the United States, and Asia.

The name, funding, controlled territories, roots, religious affiliation, and many other factors must be explained in order to fully understand the IS; the terrorist group of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**Keywords:** The Islamic State; Terrorism; Syria; Iraq; Conflict; USA; The Middle East.

The 9/11 Al-Qaeda attacks on the United States marked a completely new chapter of terrorism. These attacks introduced us to global terrorism, where remotely-based terrorist groups are capable of carrying out deadly attacks on civilians all over the world. But, in its consequences, targeting American landmarks (WTC the Pentagon, and possibly the White House or the Capitol), killing nearly 3,000 people demanded from president George W. Bush and his administration immediate and decisive action against the authors of the attack Al-Qaeda severely crippling the potential of the terrorist organization.

American efforts aiming at fighting global terrorism to a certain extent were successful, mainly since Al-Qaeda as an organization has been curbed and its mastermind Osama bin Laden eliminated. But this success had its side effects. Among the most serious was destabilizing Iraq which led to the creation of a completely new global and regional menace, mainly the Islamic State. Since its establishment, the Islamic State has had a major impact on Middle East politics and security planning globally. News about this organization has dominated the media and generates interest among readers. According to Google Trends, the Islamic State, in 2014, ranked second, just after Ebola, in terms of new terms' popularity search (Fryer-Biggs, 2015). Therefore, explaining this new terrorist phenomenon through ten basic criteria will allow us to understand it and help separate truth from the misconceptions presented in the media.

## 1. Name of this terrorist organization

Despite the fact that addressing a terrorist organization properly is less important than understanding why and how such an organization carries out its deadly actions, certain clarification in this matter is essential. The New Year's Eve Reina nightclub terrorist attack in Istanbul was initially assigned to the Kurdish Working party (KPP) but has now been claimed by the Islamic State. Yet, opinion-forming media (e.g. CNN, Al Jazeera, Reuters) named the gunman to be a member of the IS (the Islamic State), ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) and also ISIL (Islamic State of Syria and the Levant) causing ambiguity. President Obama in numerous speeches referred to this organization as ISIL or more pejoratively Daesh (2015). All of the above depict one, self-proclaimed terrorist organization based in Syria and Iraq and the caliphate it aims to establish.

The name which has not been used for over a decade now is AQI (Al-Qaeda in Iraq) and was used by violent groups fighting an insurgency against Americans in Iraq since 2003. Together with losing its leader, AQI renamed itself ISI (Islamic State in Iraq) showing territorial ambitions and claiming the establishment of a caliphate. Later, in 2011, this terrorist organization expanded into Syria when this country was destabilized by a civil uprising against president Assad leading to the Syrian Civil War. Gaining territory for the caliphate in Syria resulted in the organization acquiring another name, ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria). Not only the evolution of this terrorist organization influenced its name but also different decoding of commonly used abbreviations. The two most popular names of the organizations are the Islamic State (IS and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), but the latter one is translated by terrorists themselves as Islamic State in Iraq and Al-Sham, where Al-Sham in Old Arabic refers to Syria but also more of the Middle East once known as Greater Syria. The word Al-Sham translates into Levant in English, which explains the ISIL – Islamic State of Iraq and Levant. Obama's choice for addressing the Islamic State as Daesh, an acronym for al Dawlah al-Islameyah fi Iraq wal-Sham. This acronym has a negative and pejorative meaning – "a bigot" or "to trample down and crush."

The above depiction of this terrorist group's name aims at clarification of the issue, but the name which is most commonly and widely used by different media is the Islamic State. This name not only is most common but also seems adequate since it prescinds from the geographical notion which is dynamically changing, focusing on the uniqueness of phenomenon that a terrorist organization has a state. A self-proclaimed state that holds territory which it administrates.

## 2. Founder/leader of the Islamic State

As presented above, IS has its roots in Al-Qaeda in Iraq, a major player or even the leader of the insurgency against the US-led operation in Iraq which toppled president Hussein. AQI was started in 2004 by a Jordanian Islamist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi also known as "Shaykh of the slaughterers" (Weiss, Hassan, 2015). Born to an impoverished family, he withdrew from high school early and started life on the streets of Zarqa, an industrial town in Jordan carrying out petty crimes and also as a procurer of prostitutes. Zarqawi gained his first military skills fighting the

Soviet Union in Afghanistan on the side of Afghan Mujahideen. There Zaraqawi met Osama bin Laden, who by then was successfully building Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. The two did not come to an understanding due to Zaraqawi's extreme position on numerous issues mainly the justification of killing other Muslims who are non-believers, in practice not orthodox enough. After return to Jordan he was imprisoned for possessing guns and explosives. In prison he radicalized both his political and religious stance. After king's amnesty, Zaraqawi traveled back to Afghanistan where he managed to convince the Al-Qaeda leader and bin Laden to sponsor his terrorist training camp in Iran. Zaraqawi perfected his military skills fighting the coalition forces in Afghanistan with the Taliban and Al-Qaeda fighters. From Afghanistan he moved to Iraq, where he started to organize first a resistance and then later an insurgency against American forces. Zaraqawi's Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) targeted Americans, but was also hoping to further destabilize Iraq, Iraqi civilians, government institutions, and mosques. This terrorist used the media to show the decapitation of American entrepreneur Nicolas Berg, a tool of promoting fear the IS later became known for. By 2005 Zaraqawi had become most wanted man by the US government in Iraq with a bounty as high as \$25m for information leading to his capture, the same as in the case of bin Laden. In mid 2006 Zaraqawi was eliminated by two American guided bombs.

Leadership of ISI was taken over by Aby Ayyub al-Masri, an Egyptian, and an active local leader of the Sunni insurgency against American led military activity in Iraq. Like Zaraqawi, al-Masri also gained experience and climbed the terrorist ladder in Afghanistan. After Zaraqawi's death he was named his successor and the American administration posted a bounty of \$25m for information on this terrorist. As a leader of ISI he was not highly-valued and his leadership led to a certain fragmentation of the organization into smaller and more local groups. Al-Masri was killed during an American and Iraqi operation in Iraq, on the outskirts of Tikrit in 2010.

His successor and the current leader is Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. First a local general supervisor of ISI and a member of the senior consultative council elected 1<sup>st</sup> Emir of ISIS in 2014. Al-Baghdadi, an Iraqi, educated Islamic cleric, who obtained a PhD in Islamic studies from the University of Baghdad. Known for being shy, secretive, a recluse, and highly interested in studying the Koran. The process of his radicalization accelerated after the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. He established his own extreme Sunni group which led to his arrest and was sentenced to detention at the Camp Bucca Detention Facility in Iraq, where he continued the recruitment of terrorists through his clerical activity. After the US forces left Iraq in 2011, al-Baghdadi continued his insurgency action being the mastermind of numerous terrorist attacks across Baghdad and the whole of Iraq targeting Iraqi institutions, officials, and also civilians. Under al-Baghdadi ISI took advantage of the civil war in Syria, and took over a local terrorist organization formerly associated with Al-Qaeda. His brutal methods, targeting other Muslims, caused Al-Qaeda to denounce ISI which inspired Al-Baghdadi to announce the establishment of a worldwide caliphate in 2014 (the Islamic State) with its headquarters in Iraq and Syria and himself a caliph. Today, al-Baghdadi is the top US target in the Middle East and possibly worldwide but due to al-Baghdadi keeping a low profile, hiding among IS followers and changing his location on a daily basis, he is still operating and leading IS.

### 3. b

The goals of the Islamic State can be named as immediate and ultimate, where the immediate are local and ultimate ambition should be understood more globally. The local goals which are realistic and, under current circumstances of the Arab Spring and its consequences, empirically achievable, is establishing a caliphate in the region, erase man-made borders, and remove

secular and not orthodox enough leaders (Lister, 2015). These steps would allow the IS to establish a new state based on a distinct interpretation of the Koran. This territorial ambition and authority is the one of the most essential differences from the goals of bin Laden's Al-Qaeda, which never claimed territory.

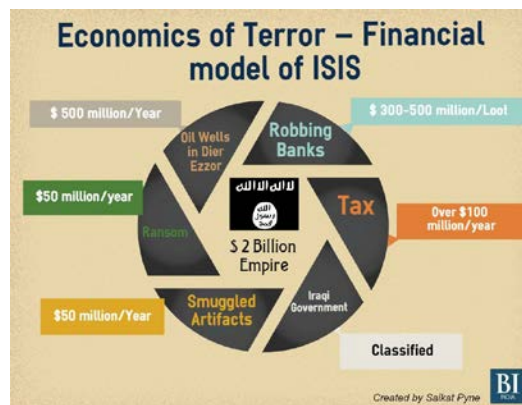
The global ambition of the IS is to take appropriate measures to establish a global caliphate. While this goal is not viable, a caliph can only govern if he launches a jihad, an Islamic war against nonbelievers. This jihad materializes globally in the form of different terrorist attacks: as the shooting in the Reina nightclub or in Paris, driving a lorry into passersby as in Nice, or recently in Berlin, suicide bombings in many cities in Turkey, and planting bombs in cars or even planes. Such malicious actions will not result in the establishment of a global caliphate but have a more direct effect, mainly spreading fear among Western societies and will have a strong propaganda effect in helping to attract new recruits.

### 4. Funding of the terrorist organization

The above presented IS aims require extensive financing. Both local and global terror activities require funding. The terrorists and their families need to finance everyday existence, recruits and fighters must be trained and equipped and above others the caliphate, a state needs to finance its administrative activities. In parallel, financial and trade sanctions have been imposed on the IS and their territory is under constant aerial and land bombardment making many fund generation operations challenging. This terrorist organization has managed with these obstacles by developing a complex, multichannel financing system, outside of the legitimate banking system, choosing cash, crude oil and contraband as basic currency (Faeg, 2014). There are numerous different sources of fund raising and the most essential among them are the crude oil trade, money from private donors, taxation on occupied territories, looting banks on its territory, kidnapping and ransom and black market antiques sales.

Oil, the black gold feeding the black flag, is the predominant source of funds for the IS. With control of nearly 60% of Syrian oil fields and some in Iraq (which they are now losing due to international intervention), the IS, at times, was capable of producing and selling oil of \$40m value monthly. Offering its oil at about 50% of current market price, the IS was able to smuggle and sell its oil to neighboring countries, mostly Syria and Assad, and used Turkish middlemen who are capable of finding other customers in the region.

As can be seen from the Business Insider chart below, including oil, other sources of financing contribute to \$1,5b IS earnings yearly (Pyne, 2015):



Above is the value of each additional source of funding, but the other key aspect is reliability and continuity of it. While territorial control of the Islamic State is changing, so is the oil output but together with taxation these two sources are kept at a

stable level. But the overall share of taxes in the IS funding model is low, making oil the main source of funding for IS terrorists.

### 5. Territory of the Islamic State

At first it must be stated that the IS is self-proclaimed and no other nation recognizes its existence. As stated above a caliphate can only exist if it holds territory, if it can be geographically determined. But the challenge with the IS is that at first, after its establishment, it gained control and spread its influence to new territory at a rapid rate. But into late 2016 it has started losing its territory at an equally high speed. Therefore, it is difficult to precisely say where the IS is. First, the terrorist organizations which were later transformed into the IS, claimed territory, six provinces, in Iraq. Together with the further destabilization of Syria, it claimed expansion into this country in early 2014. These two countries are mostly and correctly associated with the Islamic State, but al-Baghdadi, in late 2014, announced that his caliphate has expanded its reach into provinces of Libya, Algeria, Egypt, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia. In 2015 the IS claimed to be present and operating in Afghanistan, Nigeria, and the North Caucasus. If all this territory would have been conquered by al-Baghdadi's terrorists, the success and effectiveness of the IS would have been indisputable. But this expansion was due to more external than internal factors, mainly radical terrorist organizations throughout the Middle East decided to declare their support for the Islamic State and pledged its allegiance to al-Baghdadi as the caliph and the black flag. Among others, this was also the case with Abubakar Shekau's Boko Haram, the Nigerian terrorist group famous for kidnapping 276 schoolgirls in Nigeria.

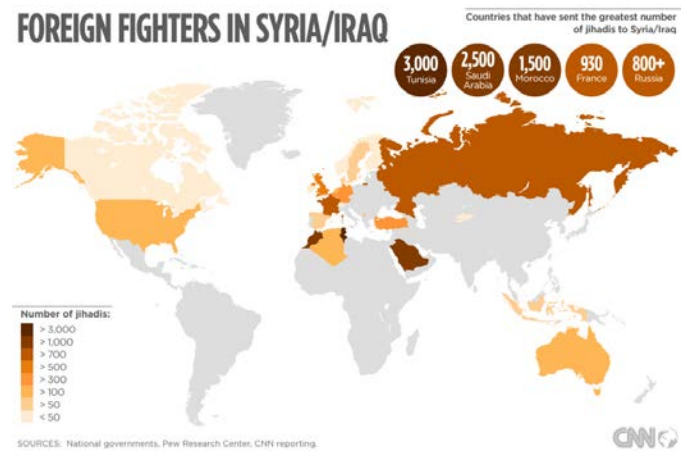
According to the Pentagon, the IS, by May 2015, had lost 45% of the territory it once held in Iraq and about 20% in Syria. This data has been modified on numerous occasions, following the intensification of the military offensive carried out by the Iraqi armed forces Kurds and also international coalition. The Islamic State's caliphate is shrinking and al-Baghdadi's governance project is failing. While this setback is an expected outcome of widely coordinated actions against the IS, it has also had negative side effects. The most visible one is the increasing activity of lone-wolf terrorists (a terrorist outside any command structure yet ideologically committed) and small groups carrying out attacks on civilians across the Middle East and outside.

### 6. Foreigners in the Islamic State

While discussing the number of fighters of the IS and foreigners that joined the group we must rely on estimates, since precise data is not available. The overall estimate of the IS terrorists is between tens of thousands to two hundred thousand. Not only there is lack of data but also this number has been fluctuating. In 2014 the group's forces grew rapidly attracting fighters from other insurgent groups but also civilians from conquered territories. For many, joining the terrorist structure means obtaining a certain level of stabilization since the IS fighters receive food, housing, petrol and regular wages equaling about \$50 monthly.

Foreigners who travel to Iraq and Syria to join the IS have different motives than many local fighters who might do it for materialistic reasons or lack of choice. For foreigners from outside of the Middle East, the primary driver for joining the caliphate was radical ideology. While these fighters were offered food and accommodation they were not receiving remuneration.

The following chart presents an estimated number of foreign recruits of the IS (Thompson, Green, Torre, 2014):



Today, since the IS is in decline, the number of foreign fighters is decreasing significantly. According to the Pentagon, the above numbers have dropped by 90%. This support is also decreasing among Muslims of the region, and the IS is experiencing a wave of desertions. Yet, together with the continuing inflow of refugees from the Middle East especially to Europe, there is a threat that some terrorists might infiltrate Europe as well and plot to carry out attacks on the continent.

### 7. Media and the Islamic State

The Islamic State is the one of the first (if not the first) terrorist organization to employ new media for recruitment, spreading propaganda, and striking fear into the minds and hearts of people worldwide. The terrorists were quick to learn Web 1.0, take advantage of Web 2.0 and master Web 3.0 in order to become more effective and powerful while simultaneously increasing its own security. Evolution of the internet from simply a source of information (Web 1.0) to a more interactive one (Web 2.0) where the users could upload content, share it and also communicate freely online became a completely new and attractive frontier for the terrorists. The launch of Web 2.0 giants such as Facebook and Twitter (the biggest social networks) in mid first decade of the 21st century coincided with the birth of the Islamic movement is Iraq that later transformed into the Islamic State.

Just like in the case of the Arab Spring, also in the case of building the caliphate, social media played a major role. Both phenomena have proven that access to the internet is high all over the Middle East and local societies (especially the younger generations) prefer this media channel to traditional ones.

The Islamic State's media efforts have several aims and target both sympathetic and hostile audiences as well. The paramount one is the recruitment dimension. This is being done at three levels: 1) new recruits who are willing to travel to Syria and Iraq, 2) gain new sponsors who will co-found the IS and finally 3) inspire lone-wolves who will carry out terror acts in their homelands. Another reason for using social media by the IS is to generate fear (showing spectacles of beheadings) among opponents on the ground giving the IS an advantage on the battle field and also among the civilians. Finally, there is this basic informative dimension. A caliphate, a state, to gain acceptance (at least in the minds) must be present and visible, must document its success and achievements. Many of the above are spotted and broadcast further by mainstream media.

Apart for the presence in the social media, the IS's media arms include the al-Hayat Media Center, the al-Furqan, al-I'tisaam and Ajnad Media Foundation and the A'maq News Agency producing different media content in English, Arabic, Russian, Urdu, Turkish, and Hebrew. These agencies are located in remote places (in and outside of the IS territory), and are often relocated, prepare lengthy videos, publish magazines, newspapers and radio

programs. The productions are often of high technical quality and even employ cinematic tricks.

Finally, the IS has also employed techniques of communicating that rely heavily on access to the internet yet, since they are secured, functioning at a level not available to everyone. The popularity and attractiveness of smartphone applications has inspired the caliphate to create its own application. One such application dedicated for Android devices, discovered by the intelligence, is *The Nasher*. It's a hidden application that has to be downloaded manually, it cannot be found through the Google Play Store, and it channels the latest news and videos concerning the caliphate, it's also possibly used as a means of recruitment. It is assumed that the IS uses not only the widely available solution but also relies on the dark net/deep net – not visible to unauthorized users without specific software, configurations, and access authority.

### **8. Weapons used by the Islamic State**

The types and amounts of weapons the caliphate possesses is one of the reasons why this terrorist organization has been so successful. Weapons that are available to IS fighters predominantly come from Iraqi army stocks and are of Soviet, Chinese, and American origin. Similarly, Iraqi and Syrian stockpiles have also been partially repossessed by the terrorists. In addition to the acquired arsenal, the IS is also developing and producing less advanced military equipment such as: ammunition, rockets and bombs.

The captured weapons come from Saddam Hussein's stockpile which he was building and upgrading for over two decades when serving as president of Iraq. More advanced military equipment the IS managed to seize were weapons given to the Iraqi army by the Americans after toppling Hussein's regime. The unexpected and rapid fall of Mosul in 2014 served as an example of how modern military equipment was acquired by the IS. The fleeing Iraqi forces left behind in Mosul 2,300 American Humvee armored vehicles, dozens tanks and also artillery equipment (Porter, 2015). Also in Syria, military equipment provided by the United States and Saudi Arabia to the Free Syrian Army was lost to the caliphate when the terrorists were seizing military bases.

The manufacturing of weapons in the caliphate is carried out in different locations, which for strategic reasons are being often relocated. The IS has established an authority, Central Organization for Standardization and Quality Control, which is issuing guidelines and manuals for weapons production and manufacturing quality controls. The standards of this production is equal to those of national armies and even include packaging and labeling specifying place and date of production. Presumably the IS is engaged in the black market weapons trade.

### **9. Military intervention against the IS**

Since the Islamic State is a threat to many: domestically, locally in the Middle East, and also globally, it is being fought by many countries and groups simultaneously. The global fight against the caliphate, practically lasting since this self-proclaimed state came into existence, and with different intensity has continued until this day. The international coalition fighting the IS is led by the United States and consists of more than 60 countries. Members of the anti-IS coalition decide in what way and to what extent they wish to engage themselves. Some nations such as the U.K., Australia, France, Canada, and also regional coalitions from Jordan and Morocco, launched airstrikes in Iraq and Syria. Yet, other forms of engagement are retarding money supply inflow, preventing new recruits from joining the IS or contributing to humanitarian aid for refugees.

Airstrikes are conducted through CENTCOM (United States Central Command) therefore it is difficult to estimate how much each nation is contributing and individual countries' reporting varies in extent, precision, and timing. According to Airwars, a collaborative NGO reporting on air campaigns against the caliphate, there were over 17,000 coalition airstrikes – nearly 11,000 in Iraq, and 7,000 in Syria, which delivered about 65,000 bombs and missiles. Countries often decide to join the coalition as a response to the Islamic State's actions against their country, as it was first with Jordan (Jordanian pilot was burned alive by the terrorists) and later France (after terrorist attacks in Paris).

Since the terrorists are highly mobile and mix among civilians relying only on air strikes without engaging on the ground is not possible. Therefore, different anti-IS forces are also present in Iraq and Syria. A key group that is in operation on the ground is the Popular Mobilization Force (PMF) consisting of Iraqi Shia and Sunni Muslims, Christians, and Yazidi. Mostly equipped by the Americans and trained by foreign experts, PMF fighters are aiding Iraqi military forces. Similarly, Kurds fighting ISIS receive military and training support from the Americans allowing them to be highly effective. Yet, American support for Kurds is straining US – Turkish relations, since Turkey (a vital partner in fighting the IS) considers the Kurdistan Working Party a terrorist organization. Coalition forces also have troops on the ground, mostly Americans, but these forces are supporting the local anti-IS fighters with intelligence, training, and also special forces operations. On the ground operations are mostly carried out by the Iraqis supported by different groups from the region with foreigners only aiding these efforts.

Russia entering the conflict and their efforts to fight the caliphate in Syria is controversial, since according to experts and observers, it is only targeting anti-Syrian/ Assad rebels not the IS terrorists.

### **10. the United States and the caliphate**

Fighting the Islamic State has been declared a priority by president Obama and repeated by the new president, Donald Trump. This situation has a multiple dimension explanation ranging from economic or strategic, some widely understood while other less visible, yet equally interesting. The caliphate is an aggressive organization at the doorstep of two American strategic partners in Israel and Saudi Arabia. The IS as an offspring of Al-Qaeda, is continuing to pose a threat to the Western world, carrying out terrorist attacks, and attacking Western civilizations verbally. Also, the caliphate is located and is destabilizing a region which is rich in natural resources and is of strategic importance for the United States.

While explaining reasons why the US is engaged in fighting the caliphate now can be done by providing several arguments, an explanation of American failures which created an environment that allowed the IS to be created seems more vital. The paramount reason is the 2003 US intervention in Iraq which led to the removing of Saddam Hussein. The fall of Hussein's dictatorship led to the destabilization of the whole country, religious clashes, and an influx of terrorists posing a challenge to the newly formed Iraqi forces not ready for such challenges. The American removal of Hussein without a coherent plan for a post-Saddam Iraq created a vacuum which was exploited by insurgents and terrorists. Further destabilization of the region, mainly the part of Syria bordering with Iraq, only magnified the problem.

Finally, a certain pattern of negligence by American intelligence can be identified. Negligence which enabled terrorist leaders such as bin Laden, al-Zarqawi, and al-Baghdadi. Both the FBI and the CIA and even the Clinton administration failed to cooperate with Sudanese intelligence which was trying to provide files on bin

Laden in the early 90's (Minitier, 2003). Bin Laden, later became the mastermind of a terrorist organization that attacked the United States and because of that, two American interventions were carried out that further destabilized the Middle East and Afghanistan. Similarly, American intelligence, despite certain documents available, failed to elevate al-Zarqawi to Al Qaeda man in Iraq who is aiming at organizing a terrorist group in Iraq. Finally, al-Baghdadi, today's self-proclaimed caliph of the IS, was detained by Americans at Abu Ghraib and also Camp Bucca detention centers in 2004, where he was recruiting future terrorists, but still was labeled a "low level prisoner" and released. Such failures of American intelligence, and their repetitive manner, is worrisome since the consequences are of the highest degree.

Understanding the Islamic State is far from easy since this organization is hermetic for any infiltration. It uses the media to spread information about itself but also uses this tool for misinforming. The ground it holds, number of fighters and recruits is constantly fluctuating, and even its goals are constantly being modified. By the end of 2016 it became clear that the IS has been retreating and it is only a matter of time before it falls. A cohesive, multinational action is required to eliminate this threat. Yet, the biggest challenge is organizing Iraq, or helping Iraq organize itself once the caliphate ceases to exist. The Middle East chessboard has always been complicated. The Islamic State and the civil war raging in Syria complement each other and solving only one of these challenges will not stabilize the region. Stabilizing the region and halt the export of terrorists from the region requires solving the Syrian crises, elimination of the IS and these both can be dealt with by collective international engagement, not only at military level but also humanitarian one.

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