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DAESH:
THE CHALLENGE TO REGIONAL AND
INTERNATIONAL SECURITY

REPORT

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

I.	INTRODUCTION	1
II.	IDEOLOGICAL TRAITS.....	2
III.	ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION OF THE ORGANIZATION.....	3
IV.	THE OPPOSITION BETWEEN AL-QAEDA AND DAESH.....	5
V.	DAESH STRUCTURE	6
VI.	FACTORS WHICH FACILITATED DAESH EXPANSION	7
VII.	FOREIGN FIGHTERS	9
VIII.	THE USE OF THE MEDIA.....	10
IX.	REGIONAL EXPANSION OF DAESH.....	11
X.	FOCUS: DAESH IN LIBYA AND THE ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION ISSUE	12
XI.	CONCLUSIONS	13
	BIBLIOGRAPHY	16

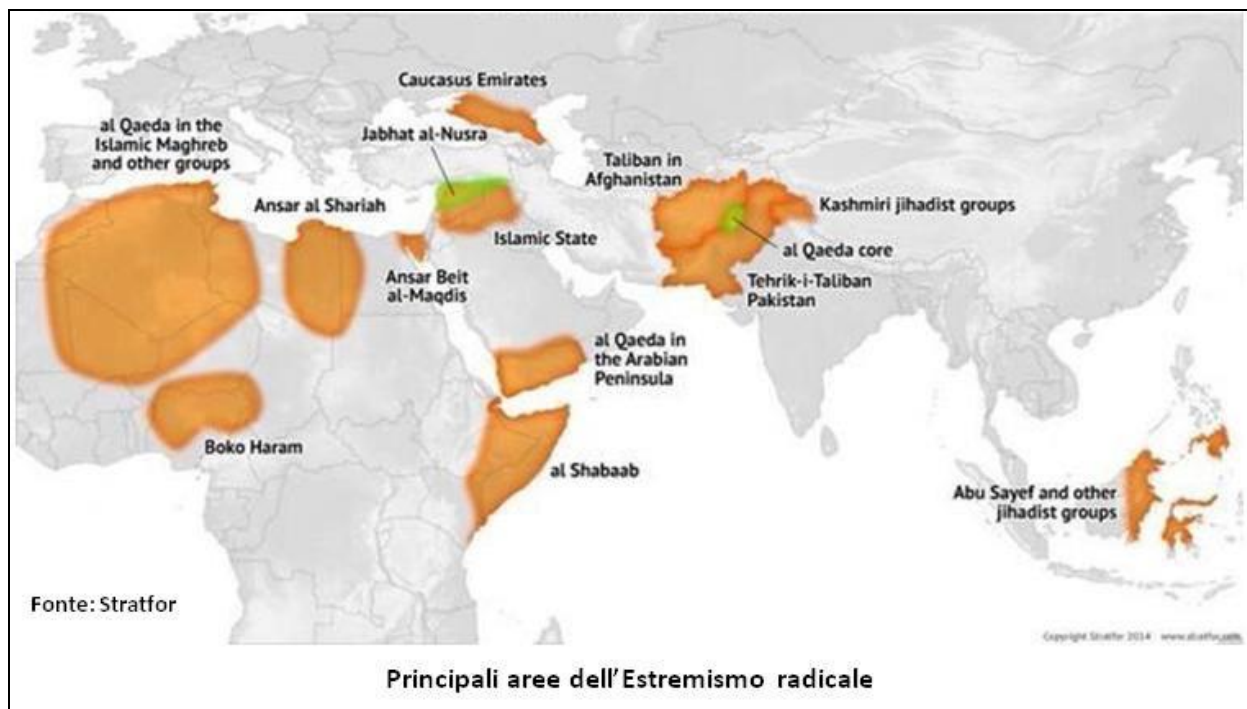
I. INTRODUCTION

1. Since the end of 2012 the attention of the international community and public opinion has been frequently drawn to the emergence of the Daesh¹ phenomenon in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, within the broader context of instability that ensued from the so-called Arab Springs.

2. The general public has been struck by the apparent novelty of this organisation's identity and modus operandi. Typically, the people's attention has focused on:

- the *spectacularisation* of violence. Global media consumers have become inured to the deliberate exhibition of brutality which characterises Daesh executions;
- the organisation's ability to design and implement a sophisticated communication strategy based on up-to-date technology and techniques;
- its capacity to rapidly expand and acquire control over an impressively large area – which, some say, is today estimated to be as large as Italy.

3. Undoubtedly, Daesh is a new phenomenon, characterised by peculiar traits which set it apart from other forms of international terrorism. However, a thorough analysis of the organisation shows some elements of continuity with trends previously observed by analysts of international terrorism. For instance, strong ideological overlaps link – in spite of differences – Daesh with al-Qaeda (AQ) and its branches worldwide. In addition, it has long been known that Daesh draws its leadership and parts of its manpower from preexisting groups, including from the Iraqi insurgency post-2003.



4. For sure, besides affecting regional balances and dynamics, the appearance of Daesh on the international scene has had the effect of bringing to the fore a renewed and multifaceted threat against the West and NATO's interests. In NATO's perspective, it has become clear that the

¹ Daesh, the Arabic acronym, will mainly be used in this report to refer to the armed terrorist group also known as the so-called Islamic State or ISIS.

traditional threat on the eastern front, recently rekindled by the Ukrainian crisis, is matched today by the equally important and immediate threat stemming from the Alliance' southern and south-eastern flanks.

5. The resumption of terrorist activities in the MENA region, combined with Daesh's ability to project its strategy into the heart of Europe – as in the case of the recent attacks in Paris, Copenhagen and Brussels – and its potential capacity to run illegal activities (such as trafficking), strongly confirms the need for reassessing the threat posed by Daesh to the Alliance.

6. This report aims at providing an overview of the most salient aspects of the Daesh phenomenon, addressing basic questions regarding its identity, goals, methods and strategy.

II. IDEOLOGICAL TRAITS

7. Contrary to widespread views, the emergence of Daesh does not mark a major turning point in the ideological evolution of Middle Eastern and international radicalism. The organisation is, in fact, fully integrated in a context which is not unfamiliar to analysts and observers of terrorism. It shares with AQ and AQ-affiliated groups references to radical ideas and figures well known within a certain Islamic Salafi tradition. For example it promotes a rigorous, textual reading of the Islamic sources, rejecting modernising interpretations; it prompts Muslims to strive and put into practice a social and political order consistent with such uncompromising views; it admits and encourages the use of terrorist violence in order to achieve this goal, and so on. The analysis of the relatively numerous documents published by Daesh reveals that the movement's leadership engages in the same doctrinal/theological debates and issues – and frequently the texts of the same authors - as other AQ-related groups.

8. The ideological make-up of Daesh is dynamically shaped by the conclusions drawn by those debates, which may align the movement with – or distance it from - other radical organisations operating in the Middle Eastern and international scene. Daesh appears, for instance:

- to hold a particularly strict view on the issue of what is “true belief” and “true Islam”, which frequently leads it to label members of other radical group as “un-Islamic” or “unbelievers”. Accordingly, “true Muslims” are compelled to fight against any “deviant” interpretation of Islamic sources, as well as other religions and ideologies, with the aim of establishing a “pure Islamic society” (Gaub), within a space of “Sunni Islamic predominance” (Wood);
- to cultivate a strong hostility towards anything that could be likened to idolatry, as demonstrated by its conduct against the archeological or historical heritage in Mosul or in Palmyra;
- to pursue an openly “territorial” project through the re-establishment of a “Caliphate”, a polity ruled on the basis of what Daesh claims to be a strict, literal interpretation of Islam (Berman) whose origins are purportedly traced back to the “classical” Islamic state and to the social traditions of the time of the Prophet Mohammed and of his immediate successors, the “pious forefathers” (Turner). Over the long term, Muslims should strive to extend the “Caliphate's” control over new territories, if necessary through the systematic destruction or suppression of any opposing community (Stern);
- to hold specific views on the process of establishment and legitimisation of the Caliphate itself, claiming that a duty of allegiance (*bay'ah*) to the proclaimed Caliph – in this case the leader of Daesh – falls on every Muslim. The Caliph is seen as a central leadership figure, whose role is that of guiding the whole Islamic community, on a global scale;
- to reject the authority and legitimacy of any Islamic court which may be established to de-conflict the relations between Daesh and other radical groups on a peer-to-peer basis.

III. ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION OF THE ORGANISATION

9. Daesh claims that its foundation dates back to Prophet Mohammed's struggle to create a Caliphate in the 7th century AD (Wood). It is known, however, that the organisation originates in fact from al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), the group led by the terrorist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (Ahmad Fadil al-Nazal al-Khalayleh). The latter pursued an anti-state, anti-Shia agenda based, to some extent, upon the influential preaching of fellow Jordanian Abu Muhammed al-Maqdisi (Isam Muhammad Tahir al-Barqawi), whom he had first met in Afghanistan in the 1990s². At that stage, al-Zarqawi's relationship with al-Qaeda Core (AQC) was not very close, as he regarded the Levant as a more important front line than the West. In this period, the Jordanian terrorist created his own organisation, *Jund al-Sham* (Army of the Levant), then renamed *al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad* (Monotheism and Jihad). Later, in 2003, the organisation carried out three major attacks, namely against the United Nations (UN) headquarters in Baghdad, the Jordanian Embassy (also in Baghdad), and the Imam Ali Mosque in Najaf, an important Shia shrine.

10. Despite initial "cold" relations with AQC, the following year (October 2004) Abu Musab al-Zarqawi pledged allegiance to the AQC leadership and renamed his organisation al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). This step was considered to be beneficial for both al-Zarqawi and AQC leader Osama bin-Laden: while the latter was seeking to reinforce AQC's presence in Iraq as the most important front of the struggle, the former expected the association with bin Laden to boost recruits and funding (Barrett).

11. AQI's operational capabilities were strengthened in the course of the insurgency against the US-led international coalition in Iraq (Rand and Heras). In 2005, al-Zarqawi formed the *Mujahideen Shura Council* together with other extremist groups and, in mid-2006, his neutralisation following a US aerial strike resulted in a reshuffle of the group's leadership, favoring the recruitment of new fighters as well as merging with new extremist formations. In particular, two key figures arose as the main AQ representatives in the area: Abu Hamza al-Muhajir, an Egyptian man close to al-Zawahiri, was appointed as the leader of AQ in the Mesopotamia region, whereas Abu Omar al-Baghdadi was chosen as the leader of the *Islamic State of Iraq* (ISI), more locally focused and mostly composed of Iraqis.

12. During this phase, ISI developed alliances with many ex-Ba'athists who found themselves excluded from power in post-Saddam Hussein Iraq, and were therefore fighting against the new Iraqi institutions. However, by the time Abu Omar al-Baghdadi was killed in 2010, the group had been weakened. During his custody in the detention centres in Iraq, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was able to build close links with former Ba'athist officials (detained as well). The same officers were to become the new leaders and military commanders of Daesh. Camp Bucca became a real 'nursery' for AQ and Daesh followers. The US authorities' efforts aimed at isolating the more extreme elements from the moderates, in order to prevent radicalization, were completely unsuccessful. The Iraqi Government estimates that more than two thirds of Daesh leaders still active in Syria and Iraq were kept in detention centres between 2004 and 2011. Leaders such as Fadil Ahmad Abdallah Hayyali (responsible for Daesh operations in Iraq), Abu Mohammad al Sweidawi or Abu Ali al Anbari (responsible for Daesh operations in Syria), Samir Abed Hamad al Obeidi al Dulaimi (aka Hajji Bakr) and Abu Hamza al-Muhajir played a fundamental role in al-Baghdadi's rise as leader of the group. Against this backdrop, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (aka Ibrahim Awwad Ibrahim Ali al-Badri al-Samarrai), appointed as Abu Omar's successor in

² Al-Zarqawi and al-Maqdisi also spent time together in the 1990s. Al-Maqdisi's theories draw upon the 14th Century scholar Ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328) and other scholars. While a strong supporter of al-Qaeda, Maqdisi has recently condemned the actions of Islamic State (for instance, see his declarations after the Jordanian pilot Mu'adh al-Kasasbeh was burnt alive by militants of Daesh).

May 2010, launched a persistent campaign of attacks with the aim of demonstrating a renewed efficiency.

13. However, the evolution of the Syrian civil war in 2012 represented a turning point for the organisation, providing an ideal ground for its expansion and reinforcement thanks also to the lines of communication between Iraq and Syria previously used by AQI and ISI during the Iraqi insurgency.

14. As the uprising spread and became more violent, a group led by Abu Mohammed al-Jawlani (who was also supported by al-Zawahiri) was sent to Syria with the task of establishing a foothold in the North of the country. Al-Jawlani was able to build up an effective fighting force attracting recruits especially from the internal areas of the country as well as many foreign fighters, and created *Jabhat al Nusra li Ahl al Sham* (the Support Front for the People of the Levant - JaN), ISI's Syrian branch.

15. In order to reassert his leadership, at the end of 2012 al-Baghdadi started launching operations in Syria and once again renamed the organisation into 'Islamic State in Iraq and Levant' (Daesh, which is its Arabic language acronym), hence confirming an even stronger inclination to project his religious ideology within the group as well as with respect to the choice of targets and the affiliates' *modus operandi*. In April 2013 al-Baghdadi declared that al-Jawlani and his group were his subordinates. The latter, by contrast, made public his links with AQ (which had until then been kept secret) and asked al-Zawahiri to settle the dispute. After several attempts, al-Zawahiri finally demarcated the two organisations' operational boundaries (Daesh in Iraq; JaN in Syria). However, following al-Baghdadi's refusal to comply with al-Zawahiri's ruling, the latter disavowed AQ's connections with Daesh. Daesh then established itself in Syria, also attracting defecting fighters from JaN's ranks. On 29 June 2014, following al-Baghdadi's announcement of the creation of an Islamic Caliphate, Daesh adopted its new official name, 'Islamic State'.

16. As a consequence of all the above, the border between Syria and Iraq has been *de facto* blurred, thus removing the historical border line established by the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement between France and the United Kingdom (Bhatt). Daesh has adopted a comprehensive land occupation strategy, taking over areas held by weaker adversaries, regardless of their political stance or sectarian belief, as well as areas that provide resources, such as oil, water, and wheat (Barrett).

17. Daesh – even though a relatively recent phenomenon – has been nourished by years of sectarian and tribal tensions in Iraq, exacerbated by the policies of then Iraqi Prime Minister, Nouri al-Maliki, under whose leadership Sunni Iraqis were arguably marginalised from major political and administrative positions. Many observers, indeed, share the view that the rapid emergence of Daesh would not have been possible without the support of former Ba'ath Party cadres (Chulov) and a years-long buildup of Sunni resentment and deepening cleavages between the Iraqi central Government and the Kurds.

18. Daesh's military effectiveness in Syria, combined with a steady inflow of fighters from Iraq, has until now enabled the extremist group to obtain rapid and significant territorial gains. However, Daesh's strategy ran counter to AQ's due to al-Baghdadi's challenge to AQ's worldwide leadership, as well as rampant media exposure, use of propaganda and operational capabilities, therefore negatively impacting the affiliation with al-Zawahiri's organisation. The clean split between Daesh and AQ (and the confrontation between the latter's military branch in Syria, with JaN, and Daesh) has strengthened al-Baghdadi's will to retain a leadership role both within the organisation and within radical extremism in general. The formalisation of Daesh's status as the renascent Caliphate modified the existing ideological debate among extremists. Previously, Daesh's status was the main matter of dispute; now AQ's legitimacy was thrown into doubt (Bunzel).

IV. THE OPPOSITION BETWEEN AL-QAEDA AND DAESH

19. As previously mentioned, the first steps of Daesh within the context of extremist organisations date back to its activities in Iraq as an AQ-affiliated group. The affiliation proved to be mutually beneficial at that time. However, following the official proclamation of the Caliphate, the AQC leadership showed little enthusiasm for the establishment of the 'state' it had previously called for, in all likelihood because it had lost control over its formation process. Moreover, Daesh adopted an extremely hard-line ideology, often disregarding instructions issued by AQC's leadership (Bunzel), and thus creating further frictions.

20. Some of these frictions are fuelled by Daesh's deliberate use of the mass media and web communication to drain resources from AQ, for example by attempting to obtain the support and allegiance of AQ affiliates. Responses to these attempts have been mixed. Some groups have switched allegiance (the most important case being Boko Haram's allegiance to Daesh) or split between a pro-Daesh and a pro-AQC faction, as occurred in Libya with some splinter cells from Ansar al Sharia which, after affiliation to Daesh, started fighting against former allied groups such as Abu Salim Martyrs Brigade. Others maintained their affiliation to AQC, such as Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria, and others still suspended their decision. In fact, whatever decisions were made, some personal ties seem to have remained in place, connecting groups across the dividing line, which may result in some degree of *de facto* cooperation. This is what happened with the transit of extremists between Syria and Lebanon, who comprise AQ-inspired fighters and Daesh affiliates, both present within Palestinian refugee camps. The shared anti-Shia sentiment allows cooperation in operations against Hizbollah within Syria. Evidence suggests that some Daesh sympathisers are reluctant to completely break off their ties with whatever AQ-affiliated organisation they had originally signed up with (Barrett).

21. What seems undisputable is that, from a geographical point of view, Daesh has progressively managed to erode AQ's supremacy in some areas where the latter had previously displayed unchallenged hegemony, attracting thousands of fighters and supporters eager to carry forward the aspirations of the organisation.

22. However rampant the rise and expansion of Daesh may be, it also faces some resistance, especially in two countries that are considered AQC strongholds, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Daesh's *Wilayah* in Afghanistan (the so-called "Khorasan Province"), is facing strong resistance from rival militant groups like the Taliban. For this reason, some analysts believe that Daesh will probably continue to encourage supporters to emigrate to the Caliphate, rather than attempting to compete with AQ in its main areas of influence (Gambhir).

23. It seems worth remembering, in any case, that despite their falling out al-Baghdadi's long-term goals remain strikingly similar to those of the AQC leadership; the tensions between them, which can be traced back to the days of al-Zarqawi, have always been about leadership and tactics, rather than on long-term objectives.

24. At the moment it seems that adopting a state-like organisation has given Daesh some strategic edge over AQC, whose resilience in this phase may be mainly due to its ability to 'go underground' and avoid a direct confrontation with the enemy. From another perspective, Daesh's grip on the territory gained in Syria and Iraq appears crucial for its survival (Wood).

V. DAESH STRUCTURE

25. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's proclamation of the Caliphate on 29 June 2014 represented a first step towards Daesh's transformation into a sort of 'state-like' agent. The same goal is, in general, pursued by AQ itself, but AQC leaders have traditionally held that the establishment of a state would only be successful when certain basic criteria can be met in the future (Habeck).

26. As a matter of fact, Daesh has tried to establish and gradually expand its control over territories in Iraq and Syria, and to govern them according to its interpretation of Sharia (Islamic law). This has had an impact on the warfare conducted by Daesh against its enemies: the terrorist group has adopted both asymmetric techniques (such as suicide attacks, IEDs – improvised explosive devices – and VBIEDs – vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices–) and more conventional warfare tactics (such as the deployment of militias on the ground).

27. Daesh has put in place an organisation based upon the division of the territories under its control into different provinces (*Wilayat*), each of which is ruled by a Governor (*Wali*), who is in charge of a local structure. Governors have only a small degree of independence from the Emir General, his deputies, and his 'Cabinet' (which consists of about seven personal advisors). These are usually supported by a Military Commander and by three Ministers (one for administrative affairs, one for financial affairs and one for security).

28. Below the level of Governor, the provinces have an administrative apparatus and a services apparatus. The first covers security, law enforcement, religious education and tribal affairs, while the second, the Islamic Administration of Public Services, also known as the General Services Committee, looks after the region's infrastructure including electricity, sanitation, water, agricultural irrigation systems, cleaning and repairing roads, and other essential services such as the production of bread (Barrett).

29. As to the military structure, a well-organised command and control structure has been established, based upon the principle of the independence of the military units deployed on the battlefield. These are able to conduct coordinated simultaneous operations.

30. Moreover, the Daesh command and control structure seems to have been designed with the specific intent of avoiding infiltration by hostile intelligence services. In particular, the structure is thought to include three distinct levels:

- the first core leadership level consists of 12 to 13 members, including the Caliph, the Head of Training and Special Operations, and the Head of Security and Intelligence at Group level;
- the second level consists of 27 members (leaders and local commanders) located on the Daesh-controlled territory in Iraq and Syria and tasked with ensuring communications between all the senior leaders and the regional representatives;
- the third level consists of 61 military commanders who are responsible for the province-level operations on the ground. Former Iraqi Army officers make up this level. Each third level commander has access to only a single member of the second level, in order to avoid compromising the entire organisation in case of infiltration by hostile players.

31. According to the information available, the following bodies are reported to compose the organisation's summit:

- *Shura* Council: is a collective decision-making body that comprises 9 to 11 members appointed directly by the Emir General and has to support the *Walīs* and the members of the different Councils. In theory, it can decide to replace the Emir General. It is responsible for organisational aspects and the appointment of Commanders and Emirs;

- Military Council: appointed by the Emir General and approved by the *Shura* Council, it is tasked with planning, managing and supervising military operations and overseeing the military Emirs who make up the *Wilayat*;
- Media Council: in charge of overseeing media operations, including forums and social networks. Abu Mohammed al-Adnani is the spokesman of this Council;
- Security and Intelligence Council: headed by Abu Ali al-Anbari (former Iraqi Intelligence), the Council provides safe houses and security for the Emir General's movements and meetings, implements judicial decisions and protects the organisation from penetration/infiltration. In addition, it oversees the movements of couriers between the *Wilayat*, and carries out murders, kidnappings, and fundraising operations;
- Religious Council: acting as a religious guide, it settles judicial disputes. It also deals with recruiting, and edits the movement's media propaganda;
- Council for the Postal Services: its main task is managing postal correspondence among the *Wilayat*, through the use of couriers. Its key members are a First Adviser and a Special Coordinator for mail.

32. *Wilayat* members and operatives are all reportedly appointed by the Emir General. His First Adviser and deputy is Abu Ali al-Anbari, the other three members are also, purportedly, former Iraqi Intelligence officials.

33. Raqqa is considered the capital city of the Caliphate (north-eastern Syria), where government offices – dealing with such matters as health, education, security, and relations with local tribes – are located. It embodies the type of “state” the Caliphate intends to export outside its current area of operation. In the territories under its direct control, Daesh imposes taxes on water consumption, electricity, private and commercial property and telecommunications infrastructures. The organisation acts as a “provider” of public services, although the revenues from illegal activities (sales of crude oil on the black market, extortion, kidnappings and toll charges) remain the principal source of income. Great importance is attached to religious education, in particular to the indoctrination of youth according to Islamic law. The *hisba*, or religious police, oversees the correct application of the law.

34. Daesh's attempts to run the territories which fall under its control as a “state”, (that is to effectively impose its sovereignty upon the population and to implement its own legal system), appear for the moment only partially successful. In fact, it would be hard to consider the self-proclaimed Caliphate as a legal entity in international law. The situation on the ground remains unstable, and open to sudden changes. The organisation has not been able, so far, to exert its total control over clearly delimited territories, which would be the precondition for its constitution as a state under international law.

VI. FACTORS WHICH FACILITATED DAESH EXPANSION

35. As previously mentioned, the expansion of Daesh's “support base”, at least initially, originated from the ability to leverage existing tensions and cleavages. At a later stage, the ability to provide some services to the population (including basic health and administration) has allowed the organisation to gain support from local fighters, contributing to its further territorial expansion. However, in many well-documented cases, local support was harnessed through the use of sheer violence.

36. Daesh's visibility on the international scene has been greatly enhanced by the proclamation of a so-called Caliphate. In spite of the more than dubious legitimacy of such a proclamation, the event provided the organisation with a powerful symbol to entice extremists into joining the cause. The “Caliphate” can offer to some a message of discontinuity with the past. Any Sunni Muslim in the world, feeling oppressed or unhappy with his/her social and political condition, is now offered the possibility of joining a “state” where – according to Daesh – it is possible to live a “pure Islamic life”. It appears that for many fighters who volunteered to join the so-called Caliphate, the prospect

of being able to defend the existence of an Islamic “state” has played a crucial role in their motivation. Military success on the ground in Iraq and Syria has resulted in Daesh attracting other extremist groups, thus further promoting the idea of a ‘Caliphate’ which is capable of expanding globally, in competition with AQ, through a logic of conquest that from the Caliphate (Interior) proceeds through the neighbouring states (Near Abroad), and on to further ambitions and areas of influence (Far Abroad).

37. Based upon a narrative which echoes and at times overlaps with that of AQ and other extremist groups, Daesh denounces moral corruption, apostasy and the neglect of the fundamental values of Islam as practices which would allegedly lead to an unacceptable Westernisation of Islamic society. In this context, the organisation’s struggle is not exclusively directed against the West, but also – within the Islamic world – against Shiites and other non-Sunni Muslim communities (Alawites, Ismailis, Druzes, etc.), as well as against Sunnis who refuse to adhere to the cause.

38. Daesh as an organisation also benefits from income deriving from the sale – on the black market – of oil and gas extracted in those areas of Iraq and Syria which are under its control. Furthermore, significant financial resources were gained through the physical takeover of Iraqi bank assets, particularly in Mosul. This arguably makes Daesh one of the richest terrorist organisations in the world (Goulet).

39. An analysis of the set of factors which contributed to Daesh’s success cannot but include the impressive communication and propaganda apparatus which the organisation has been able to establish. In order to support its global ambitions, Daesh makes use of an array of modern (and symbolically Western) communication tools through which it is able to reach even Western societies themselves, with the purpose of contributing, through its proselytism, to the radicalisation of Muslims worldwide.



40. Daesh’s tactics appear to be largely based upon the experience of those combatants who had previously fought for ISI (Islamic State in Iraq) against the Western presence in Iraq. As a matter of fact, most of the Daesh leadership was involved in the violent opposition to the new post-Saddam Hussein Iraqi state. This kind of experience, together with the military training provided by the Soviet Union during the Cold War to some key Ba’athist figures, who now hold leadership positions in the organisation, have increased the group’s fighting capabilities. Moreover, in order to efficiently manage the territories under its control, Daesh can also rely on some of the technocratic/administrative personnel previously employed by the Iraqi state.

VII. FOREIGN FIGHTERS

41. In relation to Daesh, one of the main concerns for Western countries lies in the increasing number of foreign fighters who are ready to support the organisation by travelling to the region in order to receive training, participate in the fighting or to serve the 'cause' in any other way.

42. These fighters represent, potentially, a serious threat for Western societies. Training and experience on the battlefield as well as their leaders' planning and organisational capabilities, coupled with Western citizenship (and therefore with freedom of movement within the West) represent an impending threat which the returnees pose to the countries of origin and worldwide. The risk is exposure to acts of terrorism performed by highly motivated experienced terrorists who possess fighting experience gained abroad, and are, therefore, significantly better organised and have greater chances of success (Byman and Shapiro).

43. The reasons for foreigners to travel to Syria and Iraq in order to join Daesh are multiple. These frequently include some degree of ideological proximity with extremist narratives focusing on the opposition between the West and the Islamic world. This, however, frequently combines with socio-economic or even personal factors, such as unemployment, dissatisfaction with the family environment, the desire to become 'useful', or to break with the monotony of daily routines. The hype that followed Daesh's initial military success had, to some extent, the effect of attracting even more fighters from both the West and the Middle East.

44. For instance, in the MENA region, demographic and socio-economic conditions have produced a generation of alienated young people, providing a large recruitment pool for extremist groups. Unaddressed social problems and unanswered expectations, especially among the younger layers of the population, have created a context of increased grievances (Leahy). Daesh has exploited and leveraged this frustration, offering options for change. Thus, through the effective use of carefully crafted propaganda campaigns, large pockets of disillusioned young people have become liable to be recruited by this terrorist organisation or related groups (Beehner). As a matter of fact, most of those fighting in Syria and Iraq are from the MENA region. Tunisia has an estimated 3,000 citizens fighting in the ranks of Daesh, Saudi Arabia has 2,500, Morocco and Jordan 1,500 each. About 3,000 European citizens are thought to have joined Daesh (of which 1000 from France, some 500 from the United Kingdom and more than 400 from Belgium).

45. In a wider perspective, over 30,000 foreign nationals, from more than 50 countries, have apparently fought in Syria and in Iraq since the beginning of the crisis (Cronin). Of these, about one-fifth came from Western European countries. It is estimated that between 10 and 30 per cent of the foreign fighters have left the conflict zone and returned home (Neumann and Radio Free Europe). Apart from the accuracy of estimates concerning the number of potential returnees, the threat posed by these individuals includes a wide range of risks: from the single isolated veteran returning home, to a more complex and coordinated network of hardliners settling back in their countries.

46. Initially, the radicalisation of these fighters took place directly on the battlefields. But this scheme was later reversed. As for western countries, many individuals appear to have entered a process of self-radicalisation already in their hometown (far from the battlefields), sometimes through videos or other material made public by Daesh on the web. A handful of well-trained returnees may be sufficient to trigger a climate of terror in any Western city. The main concern for Western governments regarding foreign fighters is the difficulty of detecting them. Monitoring the movements and communications of these individuals represents, in fact, a major challenge for the security apparatuses of Western countries.

47. "Lone wolf" attacks are particularly worrisome for Western authorities, as they are rather unpredictable and difficult to prevent. To date, Daesh has incited and approved attacks carried out by Western residents (Taheri), albeit there is still no clear evidence that the organisation has

directly contributed to the planning and/or funding of recent terrorist operations in Europe. Nonetheless, no matter how weak the connection between attackers and Daesh, the latter still capitalises on any successful terrorist action, as it appears to be able to impose itself as a player in areas which would normally be considered beyond its potential reach and far away from the places of its actual presence.

48. The foreign fighters' phenomenon in the MENA region is different from other regions and has very specific traits. During the war in Afghanistan, foreign fighters had a deeply religious or ideological connotation. Today, thanks to the well-structured Daesh propaganda, young people are attracted by the prospect of a new life, without any reference to religious beliefs. Frustrated youths, not necessarily destitute but characterised by widespread malaise, are attracted to this totally new dimension. That is why Daesh's recruitment basin is broader and the average age of the fighters lower than in the past.

VIII. THE USE OF THE MEDIA

49. Daesh has demonstrated a high degree of expertise in using modern communication technology, exploiting the internet and social media with unparalleled marketing skills. Certainly, it is not the first time that extremist groups have employed mass communication technologies: for instance, *al-Shabaab* – a terrorist organisation active in the Horn of Africa – tweeted hundreds of messages in the course of its attack against the Westgate Mall in Nairobi in September 2013, and Lashkar-e-Taiba demonstrated the ability to effectively master cyber technology to collect data and send out instructions and information in order to prepare and carry out the November 2008 attack in Mumbai.

50. Furthermore, Daesh has stepped up its capabilities in terms of communication quality, especially in terms of video production and serial document publication. Additionally, videos and articles recorded and written in different languages (to include a variety of dialects) bestow upon Daesh's messages maximum coverage of an international audience.

51. The success of the organisation's information/media campaigns is indirectly attested to by the high number of recruits that it has managed to attract, initially in Syria and Iraq and at a later stage well beyond these two countries. In this context, the fact that thousands of young women and men in the West have left their homes and their families to join Daesh can be regarded as an indication of the group's success (Muscati). In addition, the use of extremely violent videos, depicting heinously brutal acts, beheadings and torture against harmless civilians, has become an instrument to project an image of invincibility aimed at potential recruits and affiliates and apt to intimidate potential forms of opposition.

52. According to a recent Brookings Institute study, at the end of 2014 Daesh supporters controlled about 45,000 social media accounts (Berger). While broadening its social media presence in an unprecedented manner, Daesh was also able to support many of its sympathisers in hiding through the active concealment of their web connections. Before Daesh, no other terrorist organisation had shown the ability to obtain such direct control of communications between its followers and potential supporters. Daesh has set up an efficient "crowd messaging" system, thus creating some sort of international arena where it can "manoeuvre" and spread its ideology. By comparison, AQ only maintained an undersized team, which controlled messages and transmitted them through poorly sophisticated videos.

53. Daesh has also shown the ability to use the media in order to convince very young recruits to take part in combat operations and suicide attacks (Cronin). The dissemination of violent videos displaying executions and torture represents a type of marketing strategy that addresses the emotional needs of violence-inclined individuals, thus creating a sense of belonging to the group and ultimately making the younger recruits more likely to accept Daesh's appeals and ideology (Bloom and Hortan). Exposure to these campaigns represents a remarkable challenge for families

and authorities which wish to combat this recruitment technique: the families of recruits, in fact, often realize only too late that their sons and daughters have established contacts with Daesh personnel.

IX. REGIONAL EXPANSION OF DAESH

54. The military successes achieved on the battlefield in Iraq and Syria have raised concerns in the region and beyond. On the one hand, Daesh attracts foreign fighters and, in a pattern similar to al-Qaeda's *modus operandi*, has established links and local affiliations with other groups in countries such as Libya, Egypt, Yemen and Afghanistan (Mendelsohn). In this respect, Iraq and Syria have become a training ground for extremists who aim at expanding Daesh's influence beyond the area. On the other hand, the Iraqi-Syrian security crisis and Daesh's advance have triggered the displacement of millions of people, causing a major humanitarian emergency and fuelling regional instability, for example in Jordan and Lebanon.

55. Daesh today controls a vast area straddling the boundary between Syria and Iraq. In Syria the organisation controls most of the Euphrates valley, up to the Turkish border. More recently it made important gains in the Homs Governorate, conquering Palmyra and its surroundings, from where it is trying to advance towards Homs City and, ultimately to the coast. Daesh is also present in the area of Damascus and in the South. In Iraq the organisation controls large portions of territory in the North and North-West, including the city of Mosul and the Province of al-Anbar.

56. In Lebanon the presence of small cells connected to Daesh has been established in the proximity of the border with Syria and in Akkar Province.

57. In the Gulf, Daesh or affiliated organisations have claimed responsibility for attacks against Shiite mosques and local authorities in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. These episodes are contributing to exacerbate sectarian tensions between Sunnis and Shiites across the peninsula. In Yemen, Daesh has established a "franchise", the so-called *Wilayat* al-Yemen, which is active in the areas already under the influence of AQAP (al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula).

58. In North Africa, Daesh has introduced a new threat parallel to the one stemming from AQIM (al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb), in part by obtaining the allegiance of a number of local terrorist groups. For instance, in Egypt, a segment of local Qaedist group Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis split off and pledged allegiance to Daesh, renaming itself Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis - *Wilayat Saina'* (ABM-WS). The increasing penetration of Daesh in North Africa is confirmed not only by the growing number of affiliated groups and foreign fighters, but also by the increased radicalisation of sectors of society, a phenomenon which particularly affects the younger segments of the population.

59. In Libya, the already complex domestic security situation has witnessed an increase in Daesh activism that started in the last quarter of 2014 thanks to local affiliated cells (Chorin). The organisation profited from the Libyan power vacuum, trying to establish itself as a new player capable of projecting its agenda into North Africa. Therefore, besides the pre-existing endogenous group Ansar al-Sharia in Libya (AaSL) and franchises of other North African and Sahelo-Saharan groups (Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia, al-Murabitun and AQIM), since autumn 2014 a number of smaller groups have pledged allegiance to Daesh. Ever since, these groups have displayed growing organisational and operational activism, contributing to rising levels of threat from the area.

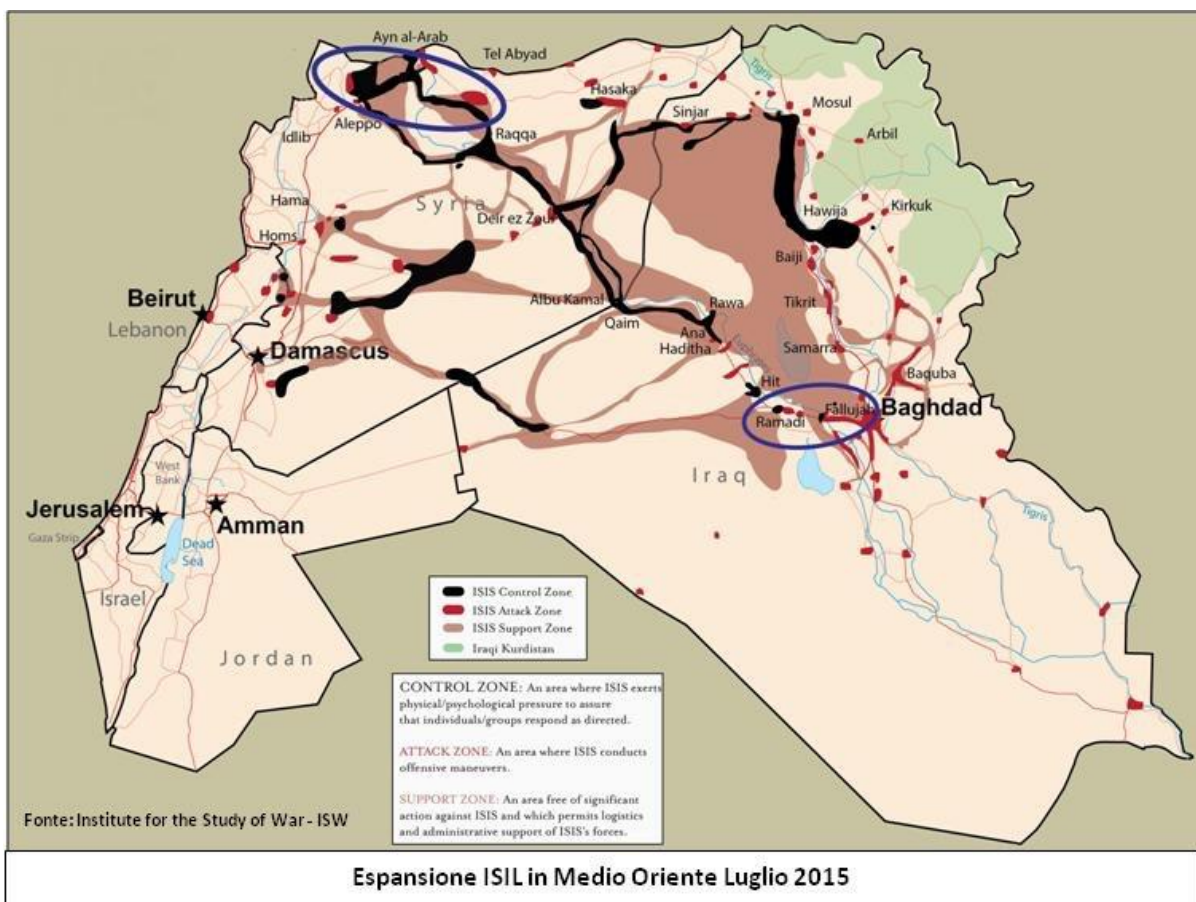
60. Beyond the MENA region, other areas appear increasingly vulnerable to Daesh influence. In Nigeria, on 7 March 2015, the terrorist organisation Boko Haram officially pledged allegiance to the organisation through a video statement broadcast online. The alliance between the two organisations can be viewed as mutually reinforcing. On the one hand, it showed international observers Daesh's ability to obtain the formal loyalty of a large and important terrorist group. On

the other hand, Boko Haram is now able to avail itself of the logistic and operational support of Daesh, arguably enhancing its effectiveness.

61. South and South-East Asia, areas where endogenous extremists are already very active, may experience increased levels of threat due to Daesh’s attempts to infiltrate the region. The success of such a strategy appears vindicated by evidence that a number of groups in the Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia are joining the Daesh project. In July 2014, Abu Bakar Bashir, Salafist leader in Indonesia, announced his support for Daesh, thus fostering recruitment. At the same time, increasing support for Daesh is coming from Pakistan and India where black flags and propaganda leaflets with the Daesh logo circulate in the main AQ areas where its affiliates recognise the successes and the objectives reached with the proclamation of the Caliphate (Barrett). Even Bangladesh, until now excluded from Daesh’s expansionist policy, had to step up its security measures to protect diplomats and tourists in the country, following the murders of tourists claimed by a Daesh-inspired extremist organisation in the area.

62. In Afghanistan and Pakistan, Daesh pursues the objective of attracting dissenting elements within the Taliban leadership and fighting manpower. For instance, on 10 January 2015, a new Daesh-inspired group was established in the area, namely the “Islamic State in Khorasan Province”. According to a recent UN report, Daesh was able to recruit followers in 25 out of 34 Afghan provinces and more than 10% of Taliban fighters. Daesh in Afghanistan often clashes with the regular Afghan Army, while avoiding direct contact with the Taliban, with the exception of Nangarhar Province where Daesh is trying to take control of the drug traffic. Among the most active Daesh leaders in Afghanistan, Abdul Rauf Khadim was one of the closest Taliban advisers of Mullah Omar, and has formed his own group of fighters – whose recruitment took place on payment of significant amounts of money – in the provinces of Helmand and Farah.

X. FOCUS: DAESH IN LIBYA AND THE ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION ISSUE



63. As already stated, Daesh is also active in Libya, trying to transform the country into a potential ground for further expansion.

64. Daesh seeks indeed to pursue an expansionist strategy similar to the one implemented in Iraq and Syria. However, the terrorist organisation's ability to consolidate its presence in the area is at the moment hindered by a few factors peculiar to the Libyan socio-political context. In particular:

- the specific ethnic / tribal make-up of the Libyan population;
- the current control of key Libyan strategic and oil assets by local militias.

65. Nonetheless, Daesh is trying to gain the support of local terrorist groups and leverage existing tensions and grievances within the population in order to impose its form of governance and agenda, thus increasing the country's ongoing instability.

66. In the long term, however, Libya seems to represent an ideal hub to be exploited by Daesh as a coordination centre for its own agenda and/or a forward operational base from where affiliated cells and foreign fighters may undertake actions in neighboring countries or throughout the Mediterranean Sea.

67. On the one hand, it cannot be excluded that Daesh may attempt to get involved in the facilitation of illegal migration, in order to exploit trafficking both as a source of funding and for the purpose of infiltrating terrorists into Europe. On the other hand, its consolidated presence on the Libyan coast may pose a potential threat to naval activity and the security of shipping lanes in the Mediterranean Sea.

68. Therefore, Libya can be considered a country of strategic value for the Daesh leadership. Its internal instability facilitates the organisation's expansion through the affiliation of small extremist groups active in the region.

69. A consolidation of the Daesh presence in Libya clearly represents a serious threat to the stability of the entire North African arc, and by extension to the security of the southern and south-eastern flanks of the Alliance. In this perspective, greater attention needs to be paid to:

- the consequences of a hypothetical coordination of strategies among the various Daesh-affiliated groups from Africa to South-East Asia;
- the impact that potential alliances of convenience between Libyan militias and elements affiliated to Daesh may have on NATO's interests, especially in areas with considerable natural resources and a high economic impact on the whole Mediterranean basin (Milani);
- a potential flow of returnees from the battlefields to their countries of origin (in particular in Europe), as well as the risk that foreign fighters may concentrate in Libya or North Africa – as requested by Daesh's leadership. This would bring about an increase in the level of threat in the countries concerned, but also for NATO's interests in the area and NATO members' domestic security.

XI. CONCLUSIONS

70. This report presents a brief overview of the Daesh phenomenon in the current crisis scenario which has affected the MENA region since roughly 2011. The report also emphasizes some of the main aspects of the phenomenon.

71. Firstly, it highlights the "novel" elements introduced by Daesh on the scene of international terrorism. In particular, attention is drawn to the role of the organisation's communication and media strategy, which appears to be more sophisticated and more carefully crafted than in previous experience.

72. Secondly, the report stresses that – despite some elements of novelty – the Daesh phenomenon presents features that clearly link it to pre-existing and well-known terrorist organisations and practices. Such links are in part ideological, but they also concern the continuity of certain organisational features and personal connections between leaders.

73. A third point, of particular importance with regard to the Alliance's security, is related to the issue of foreign fighters and, more broadly, to radicalisation and self-radicalisation developments in the West. What happened in Paris on 13 November 2015 clearly shows the level of danger associated with Daesh. The report argues that this is a highly worrisome phenomenon, requiring the highest level of attention from Western authorities. In particular, it shows that Daesh propaganda aimed at reaching global audiences has a strong impact on the radicalisation of "lone actors", who are systematically attracted to the ideological discourse of the organisation.

74. In order to counter Daesh propaganda strategy, NATO and its partners need to develop and pursue a consistent and coherent counter-information campaign. A comprehensive presence in the social media arena appears as a necessary tool to effectively disrupt Daesh's ability to penetrate both Western and Middle-Eastern societies. By countering the radical messages of Daesh and promoting new measures of social integration, Western institutions may have a better chance to successfully oppose Daesh's claim to a "moral" lifestyle, and convince the more exposed younger generations that the adventurous existence promised by Daesh is in fact dissolute and inhumane.

75. From a NATO perspective, the revival of a strong terrorist threat stemming from the southern side of the Mediterranean and, in particular, the emergence of the Daesh phenomenon, points to the fact that the challenges confronting the Alliance and its members are today more complex and diverse than in the past. They range from crises on NATO's borders to threats stemming therefrom, including rearmament and the risk of proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, particularly around the Mediterranean. In this direction, the recent decisions of the Alliance to acquire an autonomous capacity of Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) might favor its collective ability to pre-empt difficulties in these areas.

76. The *locus* of challenges has in a way expanded, obliging NATO member nations to broaden both the definition of the risks and their geographic scope. In particular, terrorism remains a growing threat to the southern and south-eastern flanks of the Alliance, as – by the way - already acknowledged in NATO strategic documents. The emergence of the Daesh phenomenon further strengthens this awareness, and compels the Alliance and Allied nations to maintain the highest vigilance.

77. The Atlantic Alliance is facing a new challenge. It must fight an entity that does not hesitate to call itself a sovereign state, and is doing everything possible to acquire the elements characterizing a state: population, government, and administrative organisation. An entity that defines new boundaries, and overlaps with and erodes states recognised by the international community. An entity that adopts terrorist tactics while, at the same time, acting in such a way as to be perceived as having an army capable of engaging the conventional military forces of sovereign states, and de facto already waging a real hybrid war. An entity that relies on the social malaise of thousands of young people, not only because of economic reasons. To address the problem, the Atlantic Alliance should be able to go beyond conventional military confrontation and adopt a broad-spectrum strategy.

78. One thing should be borne in mind: "there is no cheap way to win this fight". Daesh is a multifaceted entity: a political movement as well as a religious, social and military force. Therefore, Daesh cannot be defeated only through military confrontation but, at the same time, it cannot be defeated without the use of military force. Moreover, the military approach has to include conventional warfare, e.g. through air strikes, urban warfare as well as counterterrorist activities. In this context it is essential to enhance cooperation between the intelligence agencies of all NATO countries.

79. However, the military approach, though essential in the fight against Daesh, is not sufficient to eradicate the movement. It is crucial to stem the economic flows feeding the financial apparatus of Daesh. At this stage, intelligence plays a preeminent role: that of persuading the people in the countries more exposed to extremism that the legitimate sovereign state is capable of ensuring security, social peace and the fulfillment of basic needs

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