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Published in the Russian Federation
European Researcher. Series A
Has been issued since 2010.
ISSN 2219-8229
E-ISSN 2224-0136
2017, 8(2): 63-69

DOI: 10.13187/er.2017.2.63
www.erjournal.ru



UDC 33

Reasons for the Emergence of the “Islamic State”

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Abstract

The article considers the problem of quasi-terrorist organization the “Islamic State”. Expansion of this terrorist organization can significantly destabilize the situation in the countries of the Middle East. This includes, above all, Iraq and Syria, where fierce battles against the terrorist organization continue, threatening not only the countries of the Middle East but also the countries of the whole world. In this article, we will study the Islamic State’s ideological roots, underlying causes behind the appearance of this movement as well as focus attention on the main political aim of this grouping.

Keywords: Islamic State; ISIL; ISIS; Daesh; Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi; Iraq; Middle East.

1. Introduction

The modern international situation is largely determined by the processes that take place in the Middle East, which has been turned perhaps into the most troubled region of the world in the second half of the XX century.

New aggravation of the situation in the Middle East began in 2014 and has taken armed confrontation to a qualitatively new level. It is evident that the Middle East is not only the region where the majority of global terrorist threats are formed, but it is also the region of institutionalization of quasi-state formation – the Islamic State (IS). This fact predetermines necessity to use fundamentally different approaches to counter this threat.

Civilized society must solve complex interrelated tasks to develop effective mechanisms for combating the international terrorist threat coming from IS.

It is evident that an effective solution to this problem is impossible without understanding the processes of formation and development of IS. This question, of course, should become the subject of serious scientific research. This article is the attempt to make a certain contribution to the solution of the above problem.

2. Discussion

Formation, Development, and Ideology

Before considering the problems of the genesis of the Islamic State, it is necessary to briefly describe the history of this unique quasi-state formation.

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The terrorist organization Islamic State that bore the name the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) until summer 2014 was formed in 2006 in Iraq as a result of the merger of eleven groups segregated from Al-Qaeda (Iraqi branch). The creation of this organization was performed with the active participation of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi who was the spiritual leader and close companion of Osama bin Laden. After the death of al-Zarqawi as a result of the strike of the USAF in June 2006, IS has been headed by Abu Ayyub al-Masri and his assistant Abu Omar al-Baghdadi ([CNN Library, 2016](#)). Until 2013, the group had no more than four thousand men. They were mostly former soldiers and officers of the Iraqi army which had obeyed S. Hussein before the US-NATO invasion of Iraq in 2003. In many countries, including the countries of the Arab League, this organization has been designated as a terrorist one. According to a study of the Financial Action Task Force (2015) – an intergovernmental organization dedicated to the elaboration of international standards in the sphere of combating anti-money laundering and terrorist financing – the main sources of financing this group are revenues from:

- illicit proceeds from occupation of territory (control over banks, oil and gas fields);
- kidnapping for ransom;
- donations including by or through non-profit organisations;
- material support provided by foreign fighters;
- fundraising with the help of modern communication networks ([Financial Action..., 2015](#)).

Since 2012, IS has prepared annual reports that provide digital information about its activities in the manner close to one of the corporate reports, seemingly in an attempt to stimulate and encourage its potential donors ([Matthews, 2014](#)).

In mid-2014, Iraqi intelligence received information that IS had assets worth \$2 billion ([Chulov, 2014](#)).

Al-Masri and Omar al-Baghdadi “have gained fame” mainly by the fact that they have directed a number of successful operations of fighters against Iraqi soldiers who fought on the side of the NATO coalition. In April 2010, both leaders were killed as a result of point shelling by American artillery. Abu Suleiman – whose real name is Neaman Salman Mansour al Zaidi, an ethnic Moroccan – was then appointed military minister of IS and successor of al-Masri. In February 2011, he was liquidated by Iraqi militaries. From that time until the present (June 2017), the Islamic State has been headed by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi ([Kort, 2016](#)).

However, beginning from 2011, one can see clear signs of qualitative transformation of IS in the direction of the creation of a stable and effective quasi-state structure. Within a short period of time, the strength of the group has risen to 80 thousand men. It has become a central rallying point for extremists of all stripes who are migrating between countries of the Near and Middle East, and North, West, and East Africa. This has allowed IS leaders on July 29, 2014, to declare the creation of the state on the territory of Iraq and Syria, controlled by its fighters. On the same day, in accordance with IS’s laws, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (whose real name is Ibrahim Awad Ali al-Badri), the head of the Iraqi branch of the organization Al-Qaeda, became the leader of this state at the general gathering of organization supporters ([Shaheen, 2015](#)).

Some experts even compare Al Baghdadi with Osama bin Laden ([Halpern, 2015](#)).

As for ideology of the IS, it is necessary to express that some Islamic experts argue that although the title of this group contains the word “Islam”, IS’s ideology is not linked with the tenets of the religion of Islam. According to the same experts to connect the IS with Islam is a big mistake ([24 reasons..., 2014](#)).

This opinion is supported by some heads of states. In 2014, even United States President Barack Obama officially stressed that IS is not connected with Islam ([Kleefeld, 2014](#)).

The true Islam is based on the Quran ([Hossein, 2007](#)). There are some claims about the ideology of IS. According to the opinion of Muslim experts, IS’s ideology is based on radical opinions of people who call themselves religious leaders of IS. They claim that their ideology comes from some “hadith” which they addressed to the Prophet Muhammad. But Islam also contains criticism of hadiths and approves that the Prophet Muhammad himself, and leaders of the Islamic caliphate forbade the writing of these hadiths. They worried that after the Prophet Muhammad died anybody could change his words and spread them as they wanted ([Brown, 1999; Ali, 2013](#)).

Also, according to the opinion of some experts, IS by its actions specially discredits the religion of Islam by claiming all their actions come from Islam. For example, they promulgate

murders of people with perversion, capture it on video, and then spread it. Their actions are inherently anti-Islamic and attempt to sway their followers with propaganda ([Diyane'ten İŞİD raporu, 2015](#)).

The main propagandists of the Islamic State also use communication technology effectively – YouTube, social networks Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and so on. Thousands of accounts, use of Twitter Storm during combat operations to create panic in the enemy rear, thousands of supporters and tens of millions of views of their videos.

Possible Causes of Appearance of IS

Briefly considering the process of development of the IS, we turn to the characterization of causes and prerequisites for such evolution of the political status of this terrorist group. In our opinion, the appearance of this quasi-state terrorist formation on the territory of Iraq and Syria has been caused by a variety of complex reasons, which may be classified according to various criteria.

In accordance with the constitutional amendment of 1995 in Iraq, the president of the state is elected for a 7-year term in the national referendum. A referendum on the reelection of Saddam Hussein for another seven-year term was been accomplished in Iraq on October 15th of the same year. At the first referendum in Iraq's history, 99.96 % of Iraqis spoke in favor of Hussein's nomination to the presidency ([Saddam scores..., 2002](#)).

Saddam Hussein was an extraordinary person who was also complex and ambiguous. Moreover, when Saddam Hussein became president of Iraq, he plunged his country into war with Iran and invaded neighboring Kuwait, which greatly crippled Iraq's economy. In the years of this man's rule, any dissent was stamped out, and harsh repressions were used against the enemies of the state.

According to a 2001 report by Human Rights Alliance France, during Saddam's rule between 3 and 4 million Iraqis left the country (the population of Iraq at that time: 24 million people). According to the statements of the UN commission on refugees, Iraqis were the second largest refugee group in the world. Witnesses described cruel massacres against civilians without charge or trial ([Foreign & Commonwealth Office, 2002](#)).

The dictatorial regime of Saddam Hussein, despite his cruelty, has been considered a secular regime. After the elimination of Saddam's power, a political vacuum arose with inter-confessional, ethnic and other social contradictions in the Iraqi community becoming more acute. It is possible that the current Iraq situation has created a breeding ground for the formation of organized radical structures.

In our opinion, the open armed conflicts arising in Iraq have the potential to transform into global world conflict with absolutely unpredictable consequences. This situation points to the regional situation in the Middle East as being one of the most pressing global problems. From the moment of its formation until 2011, IS has shown no significant differences from the majority of groups operating in the territory of the Middle East region.

According to the opinion of former diplomats, the appearance of these marginalized radically-minded groups was the result of the total political disorganization of the Middle East, which is the result of the actions of the international coalition under the aegis of the United States in Iraq at the beginning of the 2000s. Former British Foreign Secretary David Miliband argues that the invasion by the US and its ally Britain in Iraq in 2003 has contributed to the destabilization of the situation in the country and caused the appearance of IS ([Porter, 2004](#)). Later, the former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, in his interview with CNN acknowledged that there is some truth in the fact that the invasion of the United States and its allies in Iraq in 2003 has become one of the main primary reasons for the appearance of IS ([Mullen, 2015](#)).

The most severe criticism has been expressed by the current president of the United States Donald Trump in August 2016 when he declared at a press conference in New York that the terrorist group IS was essentially created by the Barack Obama administration ([Siddiqui, 2016](#)).

In 2014, Edward Snowden, former employee of the US intelligence agency, published information about the connections between IS and international intelligence agencies ([Stinson, 2016](#)).

The complexity of the Middle East policy is not exhausted with a confrontation between Sunnis and Shia; however, it has a significant impact on what is happening, and without taking into account this factor, it is impossible to fully understand the situation.

The confrontation between the two main brotherhood movements of Islam in Iraq have played into the hands of IS and other forces that want instability in this region. IS has repeatedly made terroristic actions against civilians in many countries of the world. But most of all, they have organized terroristic actions in Muslim countries and especially in Iraq.

These acts of violence have aggravated tensions in Iraq and influenced attitudes of Sunnis and Shia. Based on their actions in this region, it appears that IS wants to organize a new bloody war between the Sunnis and Shia.

Repeatedly representatives of Sunnis and Shia have tried to build bridges over the gorges of theological controversy. In 1959, Mahmoud Shaltut, the rector of the Egyptian Al-Azhar University, announced that Shia religious practices are equal to Sunni ones (Brünnner, 2004).

This declaration of the Al-Azhar University was not random because the Al-Azhar University is considered one of the most prestigious universities in all of the Muslim countries (Delman, 2015).

Jordan's King Abdullah II collected in 2005 Shia and Sunni Islamic scholars. During the joint meetings, all the participants recognized that the representatives of both branches of Islam are Muslims. "Calling someone an unbeliever is neither possible nor acceptable" was said in a joint statement issued after the meeting (The Three Points..., 2005).

This statement was signed by Abdullah ibn Abdul-Aziz Al Saud, the sixth head of the Saudi royal house, who died in January 2015 (The Grand List..., 2016).

But some preachers in the Saudi kingdom declare again and again that Shia are unbelievers. The leaders of the terrorist group known as the Islamic State do the same.

The conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia shows clearly how confessional differences and appeal to historical examples can be used to mobilize the population. During the conflicts in Syria and Yemen, Tehran supported primarily not Sunni groupings. Saudi Arabia, in turn, created in response an alliance of predominantly Sunni countries.

Unfortunately, there is no over confessional highest religious authority, which would be able to stop the growing instrumentalization of religious differences to prevent military conflict in the Muslim states.

Allies – the United States, Canada, Australia, France, Great Britain, and other NATO members – use aircraft and supply weapons to fight IS by supporting the Kurdish troops in Iraq and Syria. In this regard, it is necessary to note that Iraqi Kurdistan after Saddam Hussein's regime collapse has received broad autonomy within Iraq and de facto has become its own independent state. Its leadership has stated its intention to hold a referendum on secession from Iraq and has published an official proclamation of the independent Kurdish state, which is opposed by the Iraqi authorities.

The Kurdish aspiration to independence is supported by the US, EU, and Israel. Active military and political support of the Kurd's confrontation with IS by the leading NATO countries is subject to both this factor and the fact that IS threatens the oil regions of Kirkuk and the city of Erbil, capital of Kurdistan, which is the residence of the offices of many Western companies.

Unlike NATO and Western countries, Arab states are not limited to declarations. The air forces of Bahrain, Qatar, UAE, and Saudi Arabia regularly make air strikes on IS positions in Syria. Egypt and the UAE also make strikes on the IS positions in Libya. The majority of war equipment from the United States that has been transferred in large quantities to the legitimate authorities of Iraq since the Saddam Hussein's regime collapse has fallen into IS hands. This includes police cars, armored fighting vehicles, artillery mounts, and so on. In fact, the Iraqi government troops and IS troops make war against each other with US weapons. The main point of clashes with IS are oil wells and refineries. Oil and fuel provide money and weapons of war for both sides.

Oil reserves in Iraq are considered the world's second largest proven oil reserves, with 140 billion barrels in the ground (International Energy Statistics, 2016).

This factor of itself is a key factor and can be attractive for those forces that want to take advantage of Iraq's wealth.

Another important prerequisite for the appearance of IS were the peculiarities of hegemony of anti-colonialist ideology or rather its transformations in the vast majority of the Arab states. As of the second half of the 20th century, the ideology of Arab socialism (which had pronounced secularism and similarity on the one hand with ideology of socialist reconstruction and on the other hand with European nationalism) becomes the state-forming and socio-guiding factor

following the wave of anti-colonial movements in the Middle East. Adoption of this ideology has led to secularism in the Arab world.

It is necessary to note that coalition forces at the head of NATO army have neutralized Gaddafi and whole Libyan army during circa eight months and operations against IS have continued for several years but up to now have made no significant achievements. Also, Leon Panetta, the former head of the CIA, expressed in one of his interviews about IS that “I think we're looking at kind of a 30-year war” (Valley, 2014).

The historical features of Iraq have influenced the process of formation of the quasi-statehood of IS in a substantial way. Historically, Iraq was the cradle of revolutions, uprisings, giving birth to multiple extremist groups and sects. It has been recognized by right as one of the most multi-confessional and multi-ethnic societies in the Middle East. Both Arabs and Kurds, which are both Christians and Muslims, live in this region. Also, Kurds contain the minority, which is named Yazidi, one of the most ancient peoples of the world that have preserved their national beliefs, that is, they are considered heathen.

It should be recognized that IS's ideology even without regard to the religious component is attractive to grassroots populations, as its other important component is populism. In this context, adherence of grassroots of the population to IS expresses social protest against the corrupt regimes of the satellites, which policy has led to worsening socio-economic problems and brought people in fact to poverty.

3. Conclusion

In completion of consideration of causes of institutionalization of quasi-state IS, let's note the following. It is necessary to agree with the view that its formation with its own laws, territory, sources of income that can not only ensure the retention of power but also make claims to further expansion on neighboring territories is the most unprecedented event in history. Renaming of ISIL to IS is a direct political message both to all countries of the region and to the international community: The IS representatives look ahead with confidence, are sure in their capabilities, resources, revenue potential, sponsorship, and do not intent to stop their forward momentum.

This development of events was due to objective reasons, the key ones are associated with activities of foreign policy actors, who traditionally, beginning from the second half of XX century, played a "card" of their own interests in the Middle East, using authoritarian political regimes whose policies brought the population of most countries actually to poverty.

In connection with the abovementioned, it appears that it fails to solve the IS problem with military means. The point of view that victory over IS will not stop the process of deconstruction of the Middle East is equitable. Another radical organization, whose activity will be expressed in guerrilla war and constant attacks, may appear instead of IS. The idea of the creation of the Islamic State and the caliphate is located in the mass consciousness of the inhabitants of the Middle East. This idea has sacred meaning for them.

This problem can be solved by active actions of the international community directed toward providing targeted financial and economic help to the countries of the Middle East, as well as on the implementation of complex reformation of political systems of the troubled countries of the region on the principles of democracy and humanism. Determination in struggle with terrorism and regional cooperation of the states that are in this region have an important role, too. Otherwise, taking into account the characteristics of the modern world's foreign policy situation, the current development of events can become a threat to all regional actors.

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