



THE MIDDLE EAST IN THE SHADOW OF ISLAMIC STATE

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Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY /5

I. ISLAMIC STATE – TERRORISM FULFILLED (A TENTATIVE OVERVIEW OF THE PROBLEM) /8

1. Islamic State – portrait of a terror organisation /8
2. Islamic State – terrorists with an army /12
3. Islamic State – (re)building the caliphate /13

II. THE MIDDLE EAST IN THE SHADOW OF ISLAMIC STATE /17

1. Islamic State – an exception, or a typical problem? /17
2. The crisis of the state and the emergence of new actors /20
3. The Middle East – collapse of the system? /23

III. ISLAMIC STATE AND THE MIDDLE EASTERN CRISIS – AN UNSOLVABLE PROBLEM? /35

1. The war on Islamic State /36
2. The war for peace in the Middle East /40
3. The strategy of containment /44

CONCLUSIONS /52

APPENDIX /54

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Since June 2014, Islamic State (IS) has been regarded as the principal security threat in the Middle East and one of the most important problems for European and global security. Islamic State, which for many years was just one of many terror organisations with links to al-Qaeda, has succeeded in achieving much more than other similar organisations: it has taken over control of large swathes of territory in Syria and Iraq by military means, created its own para-state structures in that area, and become the greatest civilisational challenge for the region in a century as it established a self-proclaimed caliphate and credibly pledged to expand further on a global scale. Those successes have been accompanied by widely publicised acts of systemic brutality which meets the definition of crimes against humanity. One outcome of these developments is the emergence of an exotic informal alliance to combat the Islamic State, which has brought together all the states from the Middle East and many from beyond the region. However, contrary to what could have been predicted, after almost a year of the declared war against IS, the Caliphate still holds most of the ground it gained in 2014.
- Islamic State is a real and serious problem that must not be taken lightly. However, it is a fundamental mistake to focus attention on IS alone, without taking into account the context in which it was established and operates. The gradual disintegration of the political, social and civilisational order in the Middle East, a process which has been particularly dynamic over the last decade, is crucial in this respect: individual states in the region have been experiencing deep crises, and the model of the state itself has come into crisis. The role of non-state actors has increased exponentially; a deep reassessment of identities has taken place, and the delicately balanced and dynamic regional security system has started to implode as a result of the regional proxy war in which nearly all the states

of the region, as well as influential external players, have been involved for years. The emergence of Islamic State is the effect and not the primary cause here, a living proof of the scale of the problems. Islamic State aspires, not entirely unjustifiably, to the role of an independent actor, and even today is actively and effectively stimulating the Middle Eastern crisis.

- While certainly justified, the fight against Islamic State is extremely difficult, albeit not so much militarily as politically. Today no realistic plan exists for a sustainable stabilisation of the region following the putative defeat of IS, and even the prospect of eliminating the symptoms of Islamic State's activity in the area currently under its influence (e.g. terrorism) is highly uncertain. This demonstrates that Islamic State is not the cause, but one of the painful symptoms of a wider crisis in the Middle East.
- Islamic State embodies the strategic challenges faced by the West (the Euro-Atlantic community) in the Middle East. In the short term, this concerns the costs and risks involved in the struggle to contain terrorism and other soft security impacts (such as migrations), and in the medium term, the potential consequences of the presence of large immigrant communities from the Middle East in the EU (although these are not the subject of this analysis). In a broader sense, this is a problem without precedent in the last two centuries: a situation in which the West is losing its strategic initiative in the Middle Eastern neighbourhood, and the political, civilisational and military instruments which have so far safeguarded the West's basic interests (especially in the sphere of security) are in crisis. The system aimed at actively promoting the Western model in the region seems to have lost its appeal and collapsed over the last decade, and a new approach to developing a threat containment strategy is now necessary. It remains an open question as to whether the widening vacuum left by the West will be filled by the existing, ambitious states (such as Iran or

Turkey), or whether completely new forces will emerge. In any case, for the West solving the direct problem posed by Islamic State would merely be the first step on a long journey into the unknown.

- The present text was drafted on the basis of analysis of materials available online, as well as study visits and numerous conversations with experts, especially from Turkey, Iran and the Kurdish community. It is not a monographic study of Islamic State. Neither does it aspire to present a complete and comprehensive description of the situation in the Middle East, because a number of detailed monographic studies of Islamic State are already available.¹ Providing a full description of the complex and dynamic situation in the region would not be possible here. The principal objective of this analysis is to present the problem posed by Islamic State in a wider context, and to put forward some arguments to stimulate reflection on the challenges that the West faces in connection with the crisis in the Middle East.

¹ See the appendix for a list of selected studies of Islamic State.

I. ISLAMIC STATE – TERRORISM FULFILLED (A TENTATIVE OVERVIEW OF THE PROBLEM)

1. Islamic State – portrait of a terror organisation²

Before June 2014, the organisation known today as, Islamic State was a typical terror organisation, organically linked with al-Qaeda and centred around its founder, the Jordanian Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who was an outstanding al-Qaeda commander.

The history of Islamic State is the living history of Sunni radicalism and terrorism. Al-Zarqawi was a frustrated volunteer in the anti-Soviet war waged by the Mujahidin of Afghanistan, who had been sentenced to prison for terrorism in Jordan, and who in 1999 founded the organisation Jamaat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad which operated within the orbit of Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan under Taliban rule. He fought against the Americans in 2001, and in 2003 escaped to Iraq via Iran to take over leadership of the most active Sunni communities fighting against the Americans and Shia Muslims. He held that position until his death in June 2006. Despite the serious crisis caused by al-Zarqawi's death and the successes of the US anti-terror operation, his organisation survived in Iraq, stepped up its activities there with no small degree of success after 2011, and expanded into Syria, itself torn by a civil war since 2011, while at the same time intensifying its activities in Iraq. In early 2014 the organisation ultimately severed its ties with al-Qaeda. In the meantime, it changed its name several times: before it became Islamic State, it was known under such names as the Islamic State of Iraq, then the Islamic State of Syria and Iraq (ISIS, ISIL or Daesh). Since 2010, its leader has been Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.³

² For a more extensive bibliography, see the appendix.

³ Since 29 June 2014 he has presented himself as 'Caliph Ibrahim'; his real name is Ibrahim Awad Ibrahim al-Badri.

In the course of its history, the organisation known today as the Islamic State has demonstrated impressive operational capabilities in conducting terror and sabotage activities. Al-Zarqawi and his people have been active in Jordan and Afghanistan, and reportedly carried out operations in Morocco, Turkey and Jordan (a foiled chemical weapons attack), but they have mainly focused on their main theatre, Iraq and Syria. They have conducted effective and sustained campaigns against local authorities and security institutions, as well as against specialised US forces (2004–2008).

Islamic State's methods include individual terrorism, notorious bomb attacks (using suicide bombers and car bombs), dramatic executions (of journalists, aid workers and others), mass killings, etc. IS has targeted the security forces and the army, as well as civilians, which in the case of Iraq means Shia Muslims and Shia religious sites. Islamic State has demonstrated its impressive organisational potential by, for instance, simultaneously carrying out a series of bomb attacks in distant locations in Iraq, or by effectively breaking into prisons in Iraq in order to release actual and potential members (including the infamous Abu Ghraib prison near Baghdad in 2013). The financing arrangements of the Islamic State also testify to the organisation's professionalism. While similar organisations depend to a considerable extent on external support (donors and distributors of funding), IS has developed its own large-scale criminal activities (mostly in Iraq, including racket and extortions), thanks to which it has been financially independent for years, and has expanded the range of instruments at its disposal to influence the surrounding world.

In other words, while on the one hand IS is a typical terror organisation, on the other it has demonstrated an outstanding capability to adapt to various theatres of operations, a resilience to losses (for instance, by withstanding the consequences of the deaths of its long-time leader al-Zarqawi and his successors), an ability to accumulate experience, and an openness to new forms of activity. When the Islamic State seized huge swathes of territory in Syria

and Iraq in 2013–2014, this was the culmination of its previous efforts, and at the same time moved what was once a mere terror group to a new level of military, political and ideological activity.

Islamic State's relations with al-Qaeda are good illustration of its specific nature and strength. For more than a dozen years, IS used to be part of al-Qaeda's network, and acknowledged the latter's superiority. However, at least since the start of the Iraqi chapter, it became clear that Islamic State's objectives and instruments differed from those of the parent organisation. First and foremost, unlike al-Qaeda, Islamic State's terror attacks have mainly targeted the Iraqi state's structures developed under the auspices of the United States, as well as the US forces in Iraq and civilian Shia Muslims. In principle, Islamic State did not carry out any large-scale attacks on Western targets in Europe and the United States, focusing instead on the 'near enemy', i.e. the Shia Muslims, regarded as particularly dangerous heretics; as well as, inevitably, US troops. Unlike al-Qaeda, Islamic State did aspire to take over effective control of territory, especially of cities in which it had some support (e.g. Fallujah), which necessitated military activity, and not just terror operations. Finally, Islamic State has demonstrated a great openness (which has subsequently turned out to be politically profitable) to all forces and communities that recognised the same enemies (such as former Ba'ath party functionaries and Saddam Husain's officers⁴), even if they did not necessarily share Islamic State's radical Islamist slogans). Islamic State still retains these characteristics today; its 'typical' terrorist activities are auxiliary in nature and are focused on attacking close targets in order to intimidate enemies, provoke retaliation and consolidate IS's own support base. The most notorious acts of terror committed by Islamic State since its advances of 2014 have been remarkably consistent with this trend: they involved the mass executions

⁴ For instance, Abu Muslim al-Turkmani and Abu Ali al-Anbari, two deputies of the Islamic State's self-appointed caliph, were former officers of the Iraqi army.

of captured Iraqi troops, massacres of tribes opposing the IS, and the executions of foreigners (journalists, prisoners and others), and were isolated acts carried out on-site, whose impact rested on the brutality and the professional mediatisation of the acts (e.g. execution footage posted online).⁵ Al-Qaeda's specific character and strength rested and continues to rest on the notorious attacks carried out in the West, targeting symbolic locations and civilians, which required much more sophisticated logistics (starting from the attacks of 11 September 2001, to the attack on the commuter train in Madrid in 2004 and the London underground in 2005, and to the al-Qaeda-inspired individual 'lone wolf' attacks such as the shooting at the *Charlie Hebdo* office in Paris in January 2015). If one looks at IS's declarations and its human resources, i.e. the volunteers and supporters it has in Europe, the threat posed by the Islamic State to the West remains merely potential for the moment, which cannot be said of al-Qaeda.

The differences between Islamic State and al-Qaeda became even more pronounced in the course of last year, leading to the emergence of two competing models of terrorism. Al-Qaeda remains the centre of an extensive and apparently weakly integrated terror network, a kind of franchise trademark with aspirations to co-ordinate global action against the 'crusaders'. Islamic State, on the other hand, has become a model of how to build and consolidate influence in a defined area. It aspires to the status of a state, and is focused on local and regional activities. It has been building its global influence not by expanding a network, but rather by creating an attractive centre of gravity – its 'state' or 'caliphate' – for existing groups.

In other words, a huge split has occurred within al-Qaeda, related not so much to personal or prestige issues as to the very strategy

⁵ The mediatisation of the acts of destruction of pre-Islamic monuments by the IS complements this approach: these efforts are also intended to provide publicity and show the uncompromising character of the organisation's ideology and methods.

of action; and in this way, competition has appeared within the mainstream of Sunni terrorism, stimulating its growth.

2. Islamic State – terrorists with an army

What clearly sets Islamic State apart from most of the other terror organisations in the Middle East is that it has created its own army.⁶ The organisation had been working towards this objective for years (see ‘IS in Iraq’ previously) and had stepped up its efforts upon the outbreak of the civil war in Syria. In theory, Islamic State is no different from the other groupings conducting military operations in Syria which aspire to take permanent control over territory. In practice, however, the ‘caliphate’ is the only organisation to have created a regular armed force, one that has not been bogged down in trench warfare and local clashes in Syria, but which has proved capable, having been tasked with a well-defined political objective, of quickly defeating the stronger, nominally professional and well-armed Iraqi forces; scoring a number of tactical victories over the paramilitary Kurdish units (the Peshmerga) who until now had been considered to be a difficult enemy; seizing Mosul, Iraq’s second largest city, in addition to many other towns; and posing a threat to Baghdad itself on a number of occasions. Islamic State’s forces emerged radically strengthened from the offensive, having seized the Iraqi army’s weapons or taken over abandoned arms caches. Despite Baghdad’s efforts, and the support it received from powers ranging from the United States to Iran, air strikes by coalition forces, etc., Islamic State has effectively held its ground.

Islamic State’s military actions are notorious for their brutality and totality, with the killings of prisoners, extermination of

⁶ No clear and reliable figures are available; estimates range from 20,000 to 200,000. It may be assumed that the army has several tens of thousands of more or less regular forces in Iraq and Syria, a considerable mobilisation potential, and irregular and only symbolically controlled forces that recognise the superiority of the IS beyond Iraq and Syria.

civilians, ethnic and confessional cleansing (e.g. Yazidis), mass rape and the alleged use of chemical weapons, all of which seems to be the consequence of the organisation's terrorist background. On the one hand, the brutality is intended to intimidate enemies, but on the other, it leads to real and irreversible changes in the region's social structure.

The actions – and advances – of Islamic State since 2014 have exposed the weakness and limitations of Iraq and the coalition fighting the 'caliphate', but also its real military power. This power stems from a number of factors including well-defined military objectives, high morale and training level, and good commandship. Even more than its terror activities, Islamic State's military dimension demonstrates the organisation's inclusive nature: its military operations involve officers and troops who used to serve in Iraq's regular army in Saddam Hussain's time, as well as foreign professionals, especially Chechens from Georgia and the Russian Federation. Even though Islamic State's offensive has been effectively stopped and the organisation has sustained losses in the coalition air strikes, it has retained its military potential.

3. Islamic State – (re)building the caliphate

The Islamic State has brought a new quality into Middle Eastern relations, not so much because of its terrorist or military potential (which is a means to an end), but rather because it has been trying to establish a state – a state whose emergence may shake the entire Middle Eastern (and potentially also global) order.

Firstly, Islamic State has seized huge swathes of the territory of Iraq and Syria (more than 100,000 km² in total, inhabited by around 8 million people); it controls this territory and has been developing administrative structures there.⁷ In addition to the army (see

⁷ It is impossible to put reliable numbers on the size of the territory controlled by the Islamic State or its population because of the highly dynamic situa-

above), Islamic State has also created a security apparatus and a judiciary system, an education system and an economic system complete with taxes, enterprises and its own currency.⁸ It exerts real influence on the social and political situation, e.g. by eliminating potential enemies (through marginalisation, forced emigration, enslavement or mass killings), co-opting potential supporters and building up its own support base. It is worth noting that the parastate which IS has been building is founded on inclusive principles: the IS hard core is surrounded by secular forces (former Ba'ath party members), numerous Iraqi tribes, Sufi groupings (which for religious reasons are considered to be hostile), and finally, large numbers of foreign volunteers.⁹ Islamic State is in practice conducting a foreign policy, in particular by developing co-operation with similar radical groups, but also by negotiating on contentious issues with other states (e.g. the release of Turkish hostages held in June 2014 in Mosul). The fact that IS controls its territory and has been regularly expanding it, unhindered by the governments in Damascus and Baghdad, the rival militias, interventions by external actors (e.g. Iran) and operations by the US-led coalition (which have been underway for nearly a year), proves that Islamic State is not a temporary phenomenon. It also considerably strengthens the basis for its further terror and military activity. Islamic State may (but does not necessarily have to) become a permanent presence in the Middle East.

Islamic State also poses a challenge to the entire existing political and social order in the Middle East. It has questioned the

tion (including migrations), as well as geographic conditions (the problem with assessing the degree to which IS controls desert areas). Islamic State controls approximately around 20–30% of the territories of Syria and Iraq, inhabited by around 8 million people.

- ⁸ Gold, silver and copper dinars modelled on the coins of the 8th-century Umayyad Caliphate. However, the new currency seems to have mainly symbolic and propagandistic importance, but little practical use for the moment.
- ⁹ The political structures are nonetheless dominated by Iraqi Sunnis of Arab descent.

legitimacy of the regimes in power, undermined the façade of republican governance modelled on Western systems (by introducing the caliphate, i.e. a theocratic monarchy), and rejected the concept of a nation as the basis of statehood, replacing it with confessional categories. It has also questioned the United Nations' global system governing the formation of new states, as well as the regional security system (which had been dominated by the United States but used to take the interests of local powers into account). It has posed a direct challenge to all the Arab states in the region, and has pledged to take action against them. It is significant that Islamic State does not operate within one state or part of it, but controls and unifies the territories of two states which had been in conflict for decades, i.e. Syria and Iraq. It has actively rejected existing international and political divisions, and has claimed the right to create an entirely new order. In the short term, Islamic State remains focused on the area in its vicinity (historical Syria, spanning also Jordan and Lebanon, Israel (now beyond the caliphate's reach), and historical Mesopotamia, i.e. Iraq). In the longer term, it aspires to rule the entire Middle East and North Africa, and symbolically and propagandistically, to control all the areas inhabited by Muslims now and in the past.

Finally, Islamic State purports to be acting in the name of religion. This refers not just to Islam and Islamic law as its foundations; the declaration of a caliphate means that the IS claims a supernatural right to lead the entire Muslim world, aspires to restore its mythical unity and strength, and lends a clearly cosmic and moral character to its fight against the enemies. Its millenarian vow to unleash a world war (by first taking *jihad* to Europe), end global history, initiate the end times and bring on Judgement Day is a symbolic measure of its ambitions. While the leaders of Islamic State are essentially pragmatic, and the role of such declarations is mainly propagandistic, it would be a mistake to play down such views and beliefs among Islamic State's elites and supporters. With its para-state, IS has also gained a practical strategic advantage over al-Qaeda: the latter sought unsuccessfully to rebuild

the caliphate, and has now been overtaken by Islamic State, thus finding itself on the defensive. The caliphate, despite all the controversies concerning its legality, has also become attractive to smaller terror organisations scattered around the world, from the Philippines to Pakistan, from the Caucasus to Syria, Iraq, Sinai, Libya, the Maghreb and Nigeria. This has elevated IS's prestige and lent more credibility to the ambitions of its leaders in Raqqa.

In short, Islamic State has announced itself as an extremely strong and resilient terror organisation, an unexpectedly powerful military force, and finally, an ambitious and effective political subject capable of creating state structures. At the same time it is evidently totalitarian, systemically criminal by international standards (with terrorism, brutal violations of the rights of individuals and of ethnic and confessional groups, slavery, use of weapons of mass destruction, etc.). Islamic State thus poses a serious threat, both current and prospective, to its surrounding areas and selected locations globally, especially in the West. The establishment of a coalition against Islamic State, which now includes several dozen states under US leadership and has NATO's political support, is a sign of the *de facto* recognition and validation of Islamic State's achievements; and the fact that Islamic State continues to exist despite the coalition's efforts shows the seriousness of the situation co-created by the caliphate.

II. THE MIDDLE EAST IN THE SHADOW OF ISLAMIC STATE

Islamic State's expansion in 2014 gained global notice, focused the attention of the media, experts and politicians, and started to be seen as the central challenge in the present-day Middle East. However, any analysis of IS needs to take into account the regional context, without which it will be impossible to understand the essence of the problem and its consequences. First of all, Islamic State is a consequence of the Middle East's problems, rather than their main cause. Secondly, Islamic State is a phenomenon that is at the same time exceptional and yet very typical for the region. And finally, the focus on Islamic State seems to have overshadowed much broader and more serious problems which are independent from, or parallel to the IS.

The emergence of Islamic State is a symptom of a deep crisis in the regional political order, comparable at least to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire or the period of decolonisation. At the same time it is a social crisis and a crisis for the Middle East's security architecture, and it has been engendering deep revaluation and growing conflicts.

1. Islamic State – an exception, or a typical problem?

1.1. The Middle East at war

Islamic State started its war in Syria and Iraq, hoping that it could expand into other countries. That war has been brutal, involving huge forces and means, and has been dangerous for the outside world, meaning that it must not be taken lightly. However, it should also be remembered that war has been the reality in Syria and Iraq for years,¹⁰ and Islamic State's development and advances

¹⁰ It should be noted that while Iraq and Syria stand out in terms of the scale of war and the attention that politicians and global media have been paying

are a direct consequence of the conflicts that have long been dividing the region.

Iraq has been involved in numerous conflicts, with hardly any respite, at least since 1980. The first was the brutal war with Iran (and the Kurds), which involved the use of chemical weapons against troops and civilians, and ended in 1988. This was followed by the invasion of Kuwait (1990), the war with the Arab coalition, the United States, the Kurds and Shia Muslims (1991); the blockade (combined with periodic attacks) by the coalition forces in the following years, and finally, the invasion by the United States and the coalition (2003), followed by a conflict that was in effect a civil war involving post-Saddam, Sunni and Shia formations, the United States and the coalition forces. Since 2003 alone, between 135,000 and 155,000 people have reportedly been killed in acts of violence in Iraq,¹¹ and in 2007 it was estimated that around 2 million people had fled the country, and another 2 million had become internally displaced (with the total population estimated at 32.5 million in 2014).

The situation in Syria is similar. The country had been in a frozen conflict with Israel and had been playing a key role in the Lebanese conflict before it found itself in a state of civil war in spring 2011. As a result of the brutal conflict involving ethnic and religious cleansing, mass human rights violations and the use of chemical weapons, among other means, at least 215,000 people had reportedly been killed by March 2015 (civilians accounting for more than half of this number); the number of registered refugees has reached 4 million, and the number of internally displaced persons

to it, internal armed conflicts are a common occurrence in the Middle East. In the last decade alone, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been a permanent phenomenon, to varying degrees of intensity, and has been accompanied by Israel's military operations in Lebanon and Syria; Iran has been facing the threat of US or Israeli strikes; civil wars have been taking place in Yemen and Libya; Turkish-Kurdish fighting has been recurrent; and tensions have accompanied the Arab Spring in every Arab state since the end of 2010 (including actual or attempted coups and revolutions).

¹¹ <https://www.iraqbodycount.org/database/> accessed on 28 March 2015.

is probably much higher (with the total population estimated at 18 million in 2014).

Islamic State has grown out of these conflicts, and its role in them has been expanding, but certainly it has not been their underlying cause, nor the main actor, and evidently it should not be expected that IS can provide any solution.

1.2. Terrorism

Islamic State today is undoubtedly a powerful terror force, which has accumulated the experience of many years of terror activity and – compared to other organisations – operates on the frontline of its struggle. However, it is neither the first nor the only Islamic terror organisation. The Middle East has been the world’s most vibrant centre of terrorism over the last century. Irrespective of the differences that could be observed over time and space in terms of the underlying ideologies (ranging from Arab and Israeli secular anticolonial and independence movements to radical Muslim movements), tactics (individual, collective or political terrorism), the phenomenon has been permanent in the Middle East. In recent years, Islamic terrorism has been the greatest challenge. In the case of Sunni Islam, this refers to the organisations that subscribe to the ninety-year-old tradition of the Muslim Brotherhood and the movements in al-Qaeda’s orbit. However, Shia terrorism with links to Iran has also unexpectedly emerged and consolidated in the region: Hezbollah from Lebanon is the perfect example, and the movement has been expanding its base in Iraq, Syria and Yemen. The Middle East has invariably been the main ideological, social and financial centre of terrorism, and has replaced Afghanistan as the main front and the main platform for the exchange of *jihadi* experience in the aftermath of the war in Syria and Iraq. Bearing in mind that decades of struggle against terrorism in the Middle East by various actors have been futile, it is doubtful whether solving the problem posed by Islamic State would radically alleviate the threat of terrorism.

2. The crisis of the state and the emergence of new actors

Islamic State poses an open challenge to the regional political order. It defies:

- the existing regimes in power in the Middle East;
- the permanency of the existing borders;
- the concept of nations as sovereign states;
- Western influence, which has defined the historical origins of the region's current shape, and more recently has been a way for the West to defend and consolidate its interests;
- the role of the West as a civilisational point of reference for the elites and societies of the region, without any permissible alternatives.

Islamic State has proposed an alternative concept of social and political organisation: a state based on Islam as a legal and ideological foundation and the main element of identity. This is clear proof of the crisis of the state as we know it (especially the Syrian and Iraqi states), its implosion and growing dysfunction. However, this is not the first nor the only occurrence of the problem in the Middle East; the question of states' cohesion, their failure to meet the obvious criteria of statehood from the European point of view (i.e. exercising sovereignty over their territory and controlling their borders), and the inadequacy of the formal status to the actual conditions – all these problems have become the Middle Eastern norm.

The official authorities in Syria and Iraq control no more than a third of their respective territories, which to a great extent is the result of many years of armed conflicts and the political disintegration of the state (cf. the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq).

The situation is similar in Lebanon, where the Hezbollah statelet has gained *de facto* independence, and in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula, which is only nominally controlled by the military.¹² Likewise, the situation of Israel has remained in suspension for decades, with the Israeli state controlling the Golan Heights, to various degrees the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and with the process to formally resolve these problems continually stalling. The degree to which the individual states control their borders is highly disputable, and the problem is exacerbated by geographic conditions (mountains, deserts), cultural issues (communities split by state borders), and even more importantly, the conflicts within and the weakness of the state apparatuses. It is notable that this inability to effectively control borders affects even well-established states such as Israel (the border with Sinai), Turkey (borders with Iran, Iraq and Syria) and Iran (almost all its borders to varying degrees).

As a consequence of the weakness of the states, an alternative political map of the region has been emerging, and new organisms have been formed with some of the important hallmarks of contemporary independent states, including consolidated political decision-making centres, institutions replacing state bodies (e.g. local administrations), integrated communities, armed forces, and independently conducted foreign and internal policies. In most cases, their overtly declared objective is to gain formal independence, the absence of which is often the only reason why such entities are not recognised as sovereign. Islamic State is also a para-state entity of this kind. The Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq is another such, to at least the same degree: it has been institutionalised since 1991, is internally sovereign, conducts an active foreign policy and serves as an important point of reference for Kurds outside Iraq (especially in Syria, where the Kurdish community has been consolidating its own autonomy in

¹² And further away from the direct neighbourhood of Syria and Iraq, this problem also applies to the disintegrated and war-torn Yemen, Libya, and the desert and mountain areas in North Africa.

the conditions of the war). Other para-state entities include the Hezbollah-controlled territory in Lebanon, the Gaza Strip, and especially the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank (which is the most advanced in gaining international recognition). Autonomous and separatist tendencies are also present either directly, for instance in Iraq (the Basra autonomy), or indirectly, e.g. in Saudi Arabia (the eastern al-Ahsa province), and most importantly in Turkey itself (the Turkish Kurds' long armed and political struggle for autonomy/independence, and the structures of the underground Kurdish state).

Another problem, which cannot be neatly separated from the collapse of states and the separatist tendencies, concerns so-called black holes, usually small areas in which official authority has *de facto* disappeared, replaced by informal criminal or terror structures, or reactivated traditional (e.g. tribal) forms of social organisation. A black hole is typically the area or hinterland of a political conflict, and the conflict is often its point of reference, but in practice the forces in power in black holes do not aspire to political independence, and are not capable of creating alternative state structures. The Sunni triangle in Iraq was an example of a black hole (and also a perfect breeding ground for what later became Islamic State). Today large areas in Iraq and Syria certainly meet the definition of black holes, including both the territories controlled by the numerous anti-regime terror groups, and the areas that formally recognise the government in Damascus but in practice are controlled by local Alawi militias.

The problem of the implosion of states and the erosion of their structures and legal order is the underlying cause and, starting from a certain point, also the consequence, of the emergence and consolidation of new political forces which either do not fit into the constitutional order or openly challenge that order. Those forces include terror organisations ranging from Islamic State to the al-Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra, its main rival in Syria, or Hamas, to name just those groupings which play a key role in

the territories in which they operate. There are also organisations (often also terrorist in nature) that stem from confessional groups, such as the Shia Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Zaidi/Shia Houthi movement in Yemen, and finally, at least a dozen Shia militias in Iraq. Meanwhile, groups built on ethnic foundations have not disappeared entirely (in particular the Kurds). In many cases, groups of this kind have been used by the nominal state authorities as additional armed forces parallel to the army and deployed in military operations: cf. the case of Syria, and the Shabiha Alawi militias operating under the umbrella of the ruling Ba'ath party; or Iraq, where the Shia militias, alongside the Kurdish Peshmerga, have been the main force in Baghdad's counteroffensives against Islamic State. It is an important aspect of the situation that these non-state forces *de facto* conduct their own international activities (expanding beyond the regional level), that is, they receive foreign volunteers, money and weapons, in some cases maintain official bureaus abroad, and are themselves the addressees of other players' foreign policy (as in the special case of the Iraqi Kurds).

3. The Middle East - collapse of the system?

The Middle East's problems associated with Islamic State may be seen either as a stability deficit issue, generating local disturbances and typical for the region; or more broadly, as a symptom of a deeper crisis, or even the collapse of the entire regional order. The latter perspective seems to be gaining prominence both in the region and in the West.

According to the latter point of view, the Middle Eastern order is the result of Western dominance, which culminated in the dismantling of the Ottoman Empire in the aftermath of World War I (1918) and the creation of new states more or less modelled on Western social and political solutions (including the nation-state model).

Irrespective of the region's rich history, the contemporary Arab states in the Middle East were first given their present shape and

formal independence only in the 1930s (e.g. Iraq, Saudi Arabia), 1940s (e.g. Syria, Jordan or Israel), or even the 1970s (some Gulf states). Given their huge internal dynamics, this means that they still have not become fully consolidated.

Western dominance (in recent decades, US dominance) in the civilisational, political and military dimension has been the key aspect of this model.¹³ Currently it has been experiencing a deep crisis, or might even be close to reaching the limits of its potential. Interestingly, the view that the situation at hand is about the collapse of the post-colonial order is shared by Islamic State, Iran and Turkey, despite all their differences.

3.1. Internal dimension of the crisis

A number of hypotheses have been formulated about the fundamental nature of the crisis. One of them concerns the eroding legitimacy of governments, which are corrupt, built on narrow and closed elites (the military, the security apparatus, in some cases royal families), and incapable of creating effective institutions, modernising the state or solving social problems. The Arab Spring, the wave of protests that broke out throughout the Arab world demanding reforms, improvement of living standards and the political situation, can in this context be seen as an expression of this kind of frustration. The response to the Arab Spring was based on force in most cases: the protests were suppressed, or morphed into civil wars. However, the hypothesis about the eroding legitimacy of the governments remains valid.

A more serious question concerns ongoing revaluations of identity. The plans to build modern states in the region were based on the assumption that modern nations would exist, or be created,

¹³ It should be noted that even the USSR promoted Western values, such as social and economic modernisation, secular state, armies, etc., during the Cold War.

to legitimise (in any way possible) both the governments and the states themselves. The present condition of Iraq and Syria, which for decades used to be counted among the most socially and politically developed Arab states, shows that states as such have decomposed, and the prospects of restoring their functionality based on the original institutions, and reintegrating them within their original borders, are extremely vague.

Worse, one could call into question the resilience, or even the very existence, of the Iraqi or Syrian nations as political subjects, the supreme category ordering the two countries' political reality. Confessional and ethnic divisions, and the political divisions founded on them, seem to have ultimately undermined the notion of political nations in the cases of Iraq and Syria.

To varying degrees, this question also applies to other states/nations of the region, for instance the Palestinians (in the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, Israel and Jordan) or the Saudis (who define themselves as subjects of the Saud dynasty). For the critics of the Middle Eastern order, this proves that while local, confessional and possibly ethnic identities remain strong, the nation, especially as a political entity, is an artificial category.¹⁴

Religion, on the other hand, seems to offer a tempting alternative to the notion of nationality – with Islam as a universalising category (albeit subdivided along confessional lines). The position of Islam as one of the key components of identity is entrenched in the region and deeply rooted in its history and culture, and it also offers a strong mandate for political activity. Islam has been, and is still seen as the foundation of movements challenging the colonial

¹⁴ The Kurds are an exception from this rule, as their Kurdish national identity and ambitions to establish a modern nation state have not been eroding, but on the contrary, are on the rise. Naturally, Israel, too, remains a fundamental exception from the rule, as it is engaged in a mounting debate on strengthening the ethnic component of its identity, i.e. transforming Israel into a 'Jewish state'.

and post-colonial order in the region (with fundamentalist movements originating either from the tradition of the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood, or Khomeini's Shia revolution). The Salafi current in Islam today is probably the strongest movement of both religious and spiritual, as well as moral and social revival, in which social justice is an important element. Finally, Islam is a very spacious category, and is remarkably open to interpretations: it can be at the same time the foundation of radical anti-systemic movements such as Islamic State, the pillar of conservative rule in Saudi Arabia, Iran's theocratic system as introduced 36 years ago, and an important component of Turkey's modernisation under the Justice and Development Party (AKP). Finally, Islam and all its divisions seems to offer a key to the present-day conflicts in the Middle East: it is a commonly held, and not necessarily unfounded, belief that all these conflicts fit the blueprint of the Sunni-Shia rivalry which overarches any local specificities and exceptions.

The presumed identity and ideational revaluations and conflicts are not the only reason why the categories which used to order Middle Eastern realities (including state and nation) have been eroding. Demographic and social issues also play a significant role here. This refers in particular to demographic pressures¹⁵ and migrations caused by conflicts,¹⁶ which have considerably changed the traditional societies and are inevitably engendering cultural (and political) change.¹⁷

¹⁵ For instance, if one takes Iraq and Syria and all their neighbouring countries, in all of them people under 25 years account for more than 40% of the population (around 53% in Syria, and around 56% of the population in Iraq and Jordan). Figures from the CIA World Factbook.

¹⁶ It is estimated that around 20% of the population of Iraq and at least 40% of the population in Syria have been forced to permanently leave their homes. As regards the migrations of non-Muslim minorities (especially Christians), their return is out of the question, and these communities are inevitably set to disappear from Iraq and Syria.

¹⁷ On the margins of the area under consideration here, the Arab Gulf states are experiencing another problem that stimulates identity, social and cultural problems, i.e. the high numbers of working migrants living there, who account for 30-40% of the population (in the United Arab

3.2. International dimension of the crisis

While the Middle East has long been considered to be an unstable region torn by tensions and conflicts within and between states, it used to have some 'checks and balances' to prevent the problems from escalating out of control. Those checks and balances included the principles of territorial integrity and strategic equilibrium between states, which were guaranteed and enforced since the end of the Cold War by the United States supported by local allies, partners and clients.

Examples of how this system worked included:

- the freezing of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict;
- the resolution of Israel's conflict with Egypt and Jordan;
- the existence and co-ordination of a block of states to contain Iran after the Islamic revolution of 1979;
- the war with Iraq following its annexation of Kuwait;
- the combatting of al-Qaeda;
- the attempt at comprehensively solving the problems with Iraq (after 2003).

The system worked better or worse until around 2011, when the United States symbolically stepped down from its role as the guarantor and regulator of stability in the Middle East. In late 2011 the operation in Iraq ended and the US forces were evacuated from the country; the Arab Spring broke out, towards which the United States adopted a very reserved attitude; and finally, the US turned

Emirates and Qatar, local inhabitants account for just over ten percent of the total population).

out to be helpless in the face of the civil war in Syria (it failed to deliver on its warnings to Damascus after the regime used chemical weapons) and Iran's nuclear programme.

In view of the huge and growing scale of problems in the Middle East, the stance adopted by the US administration has led to the disintegration of the network of 'allies' in the region, and created the impression of a vacuum, which other players, ranging from regional powers to actors such as Islamic State, motivated either by fear or by hope, have started to fill at the expense of overall stability, thus decisively contributing to the further destabilisation and disintegration of the regional order.

Describing the current conflicts in Syria and Iraq as 'the civil war in Syria' or 'the war on Islamic State' seems to be the sign of a possibly deliberate failure to notice the fact that the region was actually already in a state of war, or at least a proxy war.¹⁸ The development of the situation crucially depends on the involvement of individual states in supporting (and creating) the forces that take part in the conflict. The government in Damascus has been receiving political, financial and logistic support, as well as people and equipment, from Iran and the Lebanese Hezbollah (as well as Russia). The Syrian opposition, on the other hand, has built up its structures on the territory of Turkey (e.g. the Free Syrian Army) with the support of Arab and Western states, and its political leadership has benefited from the hospitality of Turkey and Qatar; and finally, the Islamist organisations have received broad support from Arab states and independent communities. Likewise, the Iraqi government in Baghdad has survived thanks to the political and military support provided by Iran and the coalition (including the USA); the Iraqi Kurds have received various forms of support from the United States, Western countries, Turkey and

¹⁸ The problem is not limited to the recent conflicts in Syria and Iraq; it has been at least as pronounced in the Yemeni conflict (especially considering its escalation in March 2015).

Iran; and Iran itself is believed to have created and given patronage to more than a dozen Shia militias, while the Sunni opposition groups in the period preceding Islamic State's offensive were supported by Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states. In addition to those indirect activities, direct military operations have been taking place in the region, involving the Iranian forces in Iraq and Syria (land troops and air forces), forces of the Arab states (air strikes against the Islamic State), and US troops and forces of other Western states (air strikes against the IS). In addition, the Israeli air force has repeatedly bombed targets in Syria, and Turkey's (hitherto solely rhetorical) threats to intervene in Syria have by now become a permanent element of the landscape (and incidents involving the air force and artillery have taken place on a number of occasions); while in the Kurdish context, Turkey has maintained a permanent military presence in the Kurdish regional government area in Iraq, and has carried out operations against the Kurdistan Workers' Party in Iraq).

The present situation is notable for its opaqueness and the absence of a single key to its interpretation. Undoubtedly, the conflict between Iran and nearly all the states of the region has been and remains a key issue (since 1979). Iran has been consistently working to undermine the regional order founded on US influence since Khomeini's revolution, and has pursued an expansive policy aimed at building its hegemony in the region, but at the same time it has been constantly surrounded and threatened by the USA (as well as Israel and Saudi Arabia) with war, economic sanctions, or the prospect of a coup. In this context, the problems of Syria and Iraq seem to fit into the blueprint of a clash between Iran's clients and the clients of Iran's opponents. However, while the Iran camp can be arguably described as cohesive to some extent, no consolidated anti-Iran front exists today (which seems to be the consequence of the USA's withdrawal). Tensions are huge, especially between Turkey and Israel, and between Turkey and the Arab states: relations are frigid at best, due to the consistent support Ankara has granted to groups with links to the Muslim

Brotherhood (both in Syria and in Egypt), among other factors; and this frigidity is visible in the way that Ankara has been distancing itself from any active efforts to combat Islamic State. Tensions also persist among the Arab states: they all fear Iran, but also Turkey's regional aspirations and the hegemonic ambitions of Saudi Arabia, and regard different forces as their proxies.

As a result:

- the situation in the region is extremely difficult to interpret, which makes it difficult to set priorities;
- the actors involved are suspicious of their obvious enemies, but also of their supposed allies; and finally
- they show a propensity to get involved in risky, short-term games in relation to the conflicts.

The proliferation of conspiracy theories about the sources of Islamic State's success are a good illustration of this state of affairs, i.e. the ongoing proxy war, the opaqueness, the dynamics and the lack of confidence in the region (at the same time, they have also played an important role in contributing to IS's success).¹⁹ According to those theories, Islamic State is alternately:

- a) a project inspired and supported by Saudi Arabia, aimed against Iran and its clients, i.e. the Assad regime and the Iraqi Shias;

¹⁹ Even the 'official' history of Islamic State, as presented in most studies on IS published in the West, shows that these various calculations and circumstances intersected: the group surrounding the Jordanian al-Zarqawi entered into the orbit of Osama bin Laden, with his numerous links to Saudi Arabia (and previous indirect links to the United States); also, al-Zarqawi's transfer to Iraq took place via Iran, certainly with the approval of the Iranian security forces (and was an act of sabotage aimed at supposed plans to attack Iran). During the Syrian war, Islamic State has been among the regime's most active opponents, and has mainly attracted Arab volunteers who arrive via Turkey.

- b) a project conceived by Israel and the United States in order to destabilise the Middle East and manage the subsequent conflict, in the absence of other instruments to control the region (the alleged evidence of this includes reports that IS militants have received medical treatment in Israel);
- c) a Turkish project, designed as kind of battering ram to destroy the Syrian and Iraqi states and Iranian influence, counterbalance the Kurds and clear the field for Turkish expansion (this theory is supposed to be substantiated by the relative freedom granted to Islamic State to operate on Turkish territory, as well as reports that Turkey has allegedly provided medical treatment to IS militants and let them use its territory in the operation against Kobane; has been tolerating IS-led oil smuggling, a key source of its revenues; and that Turkish security forces have very good contacts with IS, thanks to which they have been able to negotiate the release of the Turkish hostages held by IS in Iraq, etc.);
- d) an Iranian project designed to undermine Sunni unity and frighten the Kurds and Iraq's Shias so that they turn to Iran; proponents of this theory emphasise how easily the Shia Iraqi army 'ceded' its territory and weapons to Islamic State in June 2014;
- e) a Russian project - this theory refers to the anti-American aspect of Islamic State's activities, and the presence of a large and influential group of militants from the Russian Federation and the Commonwealth of Independent States, which is presumed to have been infiltrated by the Russian security services.

This list is far from complete, and these theories lack internal cohesion and are poorly substantiated, but what they all have in common is that they question the self-made nature and autonomy of Islamic State, *de facto* play down the threat it poses, and see its activities through the lens of the alleged hostile designs of the

regional rivals, and/or those rivals' losses or *ad hoc* gains stemming from Islamic State's existence. Clearly, there is also a fundamental difference between the way the West and its politicians, media and experts see Islamic State and the problems in the Middle East, and the views and perceptions of the states in the region and their politicians, media outlets, experts and the wide public; this difference also seems to be a major problem.

3.3. A regional alternative

The sense that the Middle Eastern order is collapsing, and that a vacuum has been created by US policy, has not only open opportunities for forces such as Islamic State, but has also intersected with the ambitions of the new-old regional powers, Iran and Turkey, both of which are actively involved in the region's proxy war.

Apart from their pragmatic will to influence the unstable surrounding area, and fill the vacuum left by the United States as its position in the Middle East erodes, another crucially important motivation in this respect comes from the reassessments taking place in both countries, which constitute a positive response to the region's general problems.

Iran's ever bolder conviction of its own strength largely stems from the view that the country is emerging victorious from its confrontation of more than thirty years with the United States, and from the belief that recognition of its status as a power and its positive role in the region will come about in the not too distant future. Also important is the conviction that its policy towards Syria and Iraq has been gaining significance, and that it has developed an effective set of instruments which have proved effective, while the relative position of Iran's potential regional rivals has been eroding. The view that Iran's position in the Middle East today (in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon) is the strongest it has been in centuries, in stark contrast to the deeply defensive positions in which Iran's rivals have found themselves, is an opinion held not just by Tehran alone.

In the case of Turkey, its ambitions are largely based on the sense of the strength of the Turkish state and economy, and on its attractiveness to the neighbourhood.

In both cases, identity transformations have also played an important role: both countries are increasingly emphasising and mythologising their former imperial and civilisational glory and the continuity of their statehood, which sets them apart from their neighbours in the Middle East. Both Turkey and Iran have long been undergoing violent evolutions of identity, processes which have now also started in the Arab Middle East. In the case of Iran, these began with decades of selective modernisation and nationalism under the Pahlavi Shah dynasty, followed by the durable experiment of Islamic democracy (whereby Islam served as the axis of policy for internal and external use), and leading to the policy of Iran's present-day ruling elite, which is far less religiously ideological and more pragmatic from the Iranian leadership's point of view. In the case of Turkey, the process started with decades of secular and extremely nationalist military dictatorship, which drew its inspirations from Western models, followed by the rise to power of the AKP in 2002 (when none of the parties that had previously been in parliament won any seats) and the process of social, political and economic modernisation with a strong focus on traditional, i.e. Islamic, values and references to Ottoman times. In both cases these processes have generated a sense of sovereignty in internal policy, and have been a manifestation of spontaneously initiated internal transformations that generated additional political and social energy.

In the conditions of the Middle East's present crisis, Iran has been trying to build up an image of itself as a strong state capable of providing a protective umbrella to political players such as Baghdad, Damascus or the Kurds, the Shias from the Arab Peninsula and groups endangered by the Sunni radicals. Moreover, Iran offers a positive example of durable social development and relative social security. Turkey's ideational offer is even more ambitious:

the country has been representing itself as a paragon of a successful model of political, social and – most importantly – economic development, bringing together the best aspects of the Western model and Turkey’s own tradition, combining the achievements of Western modernisation with an effective adaptation of Islam to the demands of modernity, and finally, responding to the challenges of nationhood (by mitigating Turkish nationalism to some extent and becoming much more open to the national ambitions of the Kurds, as Turkey’s relations with the Kurdish regional government in Iraq and its peace process with the PKK arguably demonstrate).

Both Iran and Turkey are convinced that their own assessments of the situation and their strength are correct, and both have been remarkably consistent in implementing their policies, despite the costs and risks involved, and – especially in the case of Turkey – the failure of the policy to produce any tangible benefits in recent years. In both cases it would be more justified to speak of long-term, strategic policies that the two states have initiated, and from which neither Tehran nor Ankara could withdraw without massive disturbance, especially in view of the objective challenges in the region and the impossibility of restoring the former order. In both cases there are also ever stronger linkages between the international situation and the internal processes, which may stimulate instability. Although for the moment, Turkey and Iran seem to be much internally consolidated than their neighbours, identity problems and social tensions related *inter alia* to questions about democracy, Islam, nation and state still persist in both countries. Both are also affected by ethnic and religious tensions, problems with the control of territory and borders, etc. In both cases (but especially in Iran), the strength and credibility of the ruling elite rests on the success of its regional policy. At this stage, it now seems impossible for either Iran or Turkey to withdraw from the proxy war – they still have a long way to go to fulfil their huge ambitions, and serious risks lie ahead.

III. ISLAMIC STATE AND THE MIDDLE EASTERN CRISIS – AN UNSOLVABLE PROBLEM?

There is a fairly common understanding, both in the Middle East and worldwide, that Islamic State is a threat.

Hence, several tens of states under US leadership have formed a coalition against it; and in parallel, Iran and its satellites, which have not joined the coalition, have been actively combatting the ‘caliphate’. For the United States and Western countries, being in that alliance is primarily another phase of the war on terror and a way to preserve their prestige in the Middle East.

The Arab states are motivated mainly by concerns about their own security in the medium and long term, because Islamic State’s success has already exposed the weakness of those states’ regional policy, and in future could lead to the emergence of a real alternative to the current regimes and enable actions aimed at destabilising the internal situation in those countries.

For Iraq and the Kurds, Islamic State poses an existential threat, and for Syria a real challenge to its current position, while for Iran it threatens the failure of its much-considered strategic initiative to combat Sunni radicals, who could potentially be exploited by Tehran’s regional opponents.

Thus, large-scale air strikes against IS positions are underway, and efforts are being made to strengthen IS’s local opponents (ranging from the Kurds to the Iraqi state and the Shia militias) and create a counterbalance for the radicals in Syria. Active negotiations have been going on to co-ordinate the efforts and interests of all the states implicated in the war.

The scale of difficulty involved in combatting Islamic State is visible in the fact that it has been able to withstand its powerful enemies for so long – nearly a year has passed since the June offensive – but while

Islamic State's territorial expansion has been stopped and its support base is being consistently destroyed, the vital foundations of its existence have not been touched.

1. The war on Islamic State

1.1. Lessons from the war on terror (the war against al-Qaeda) and the US operations in Afghanistan and Iraq

The experience of the USA's 'global war on terror', as declared in the wake of the attacks on 11 September 2001, has had a direct impact on the problem of eliminating Islamic State. In that 'war', al-Qaeda was the main target and Afghanistan, ruled by the Taliban with close links to al-Qaeda, was the main theatre. The USA administration quite quickly and effectively minimised the risk of terror attacks on US territory (no major attacks have taken place there since 2001), effectively disintegrated both al-Qaeda's organisational structures scattered around the world and its system of financing, and finally – once the political decision had been made – defeated the Taliban state within several weeks, and almost completely destroyed al-Qaeda's structures in Afghanistan within several months. In Iraq, the situation was fairly similar (even if the scale of difficulty was greater): when the US attacked Saddam Hussain's regime in 2003, it crushed it within a month, and by 2007 both Shia and Sunni armed and terror groups had been ultimately pacified. Of course this did not entirely eliminate the problem in Afghanistan and Iraq, nor the risk of terrorist attacks against US citizens and facilities (e.g. embassies) around the world, but undoubtedly the United States managed to take the initiative in and control of the fight against terrorism.

It seems that in those two cases the factors that played a key role included the political will to carry the campaign through, the nearly unlimited military, financial and political means at the USA's disposal; and at the local level, the deployment of US forces

on the ground, the use of local groups hostile to al-Qaeda and the Taliban, and to the Shia and Sunni radicals in Iraq, and finally, the fact that there existed a political alternative to the groups backing the radicals.

While the US anti-terror operations in Afghanistan and Iraq demonstrated that it was indeed possible to defeat and marginalise terror organisations, they also showed equally clearly that the crushed and dispersed groups tended to have a remarkable ability to adapt to new conditions, change the locations and forms of their activities, and to regenerate (especially if they received support from outside). Those operations also showed that the durability and stability of the state structures and order in the countries affected by terrorism (such as Iraq), together with sustained political will on the part of that state and the guarantor of its stability (the USA in this case), were absolutely decisive.

1.2. The war on Islamic State in 2014–2015

The coalition which has been fighting Islamic State under US leadership (in parallel to the fight against the IS waged by Iran and its clients) has a number of assets needed to achieve the basic military objectives, i.e. destroying the military and political structures of Islamic State. The coalition nominally enjoys strong political backing and includes more than 60 states, including all the states of the Middle East with the exception of Iran, Israel and Oman,²⁰ some of which have been actively taking part in the military operations (mainly air strikes) against Islamic State in Syria and Iraq (including Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates and Qatar). The coalition members have an overwhelming military and financial advantage over Islamic State. Moreover, a number of local forces vitally interested in destroying Islamic State are operating directly in the area of IS activity, among which the Kurds (both Iraqi and Syrian) are the most prominent.

²⁰ <http://www.state.gov/s/seci/index.htm>

One can also assume that the populations in the areas controlled by IS are very dissatisfied with its rule.

However, the coalition faces a number of obstacles, among which two fundamental problems are most notable. The first one is military and political. In the previous operations in Afghanistan and especially in Iraq, the deployment of US forces on the ground was the factor which ultimately secured quick military success. Now Washington is uninterested in such a solution: air strikes and training missions are underway, but no regular operations on the ground are taking place or being planned. The other coalition members have also chosen not to independently deploy regular land forces in Syria and Iraq since the conflict started nearly a year ago, and are unlikely to do so in the future.²¹ In both cases there is no political will; the parties concerned are aware of the high financial and political costs of such an operation, and finally, the key problem concerns the fear of what would happen ‘the day after victory’ and how it would affect the dynamics of the regional proxy war. This takes us to the second and decisive problem that the coalition is facing, namely the absence of a strategy to solve the problems of Iraq and Syria, as today embodied by Islamic State. The experiences of last decades show that it is possible (albeit not optimal) to conduct an effective operation based on local forces with air support from external actors. By and large, this is how the operation in Afghanistan was conducted, in which the Northern Alliance played a key role; the same applies to a lesser extent to the operations in Iraq (the Kurds and Shia Muslims during the First Gulf War; Kurds during the Second Gulf War). The protracted and seemingly cheap French-British operation in Libya in 2011 (in which US support ultimately turned out to be decisive) was also similar in nature.

²¹ Nevertheless the Arab states quite quickly decided to carry out air strikes and operations on the ground against the Houthis in Yemen, probably because they had a greater motivation in that case, and there was agreement about the course of action among the coalition members and the local political and military partners.

However, in none of these cases was it possible to stabilise the situation using local forces after the enemy was defeated: in Afghanistan and Iraq, (temporary) stability could only be achieved using a massive US and allied military presence, and in Libya this element was missing altogether, which caused a complete collapse of the state and an escalation of the civil war. Today one could theoretically imagine a scenario in which the Kurdish and Shia forces seize the Iraqi part of the Islamic State territory, but one should not expect this to lead to stabilisation or effective co-operation with the disorganised and distrustful Sunni-Arab population and the local elites. In the case of Syria, the situation is even more absurd: Islamic State could be replaced by its radical rivals (al-Qaeda) or the Assad regime. Any attempts by the neighbouring states to foster new local political and military forces in the area occupied by Islamic State would without a doubt lead to an escalation of the proxy war and further destabilise the entire region, as was the case with the escalation of the Iranian-Saudi conflict just before IS's expansion, and even more evidently with the proxy war that has been taking place in Afghanistan since the 1980s (in which the local winner, i.e. Pakistan, has gradually changed from the subject of that regional game into its object). Finally, as the history of Islamic State indicates, it is highly probable that destroying the organisation's current structures would not necessarily mean its ultimate elimination, which calls into doubt the strategic sense of such an operation.

In other words, it seems that defeating Islamic State militarily would be a technically simple task if regular forces of external powers (especially the United States) were involved, and a relatively straightforward one if the local forces combatting IS consolidated their efforts and received air support (in a variant of what happened in Libya in 2011). Yet this task is extremely difficult to carry out because of the absence of political will, which in turn stems from the awareness of the costs that such an operation would entail and the challenges that would emerge immediately after Islamic State collapsed.

2. The war for peace in the Middle East

The situation appears much more complicated if one realises that Islamic State is merely a symptom, and not the cause or essence of the Middle East's present problems. Defeating Islamic State will not solve the problem of terrorism and will not end the armed conflicts deeply rooted in the region's social and economic crisis, the crisis of values and identities, and the crisis of the social and political model (including the state). Even if Islamic State were defeated, this would not undo the breakdown of the Middle East's fragile security architecture, nor end the almost open war involving nearly all states of the region – even worse, in fact, it would lend a new impetus to the proxy war. This leads back to the question, long pondered in the West, about a comprehensive solution to the Middle East's problems, the role that the West could play in it, and the consequences it would entail.

2.1. The maximum variant – *Ex occidente lux*

The entrenched assumption about the Middle East in the West, and one to which so far no alternative has so far been proposed, is that the Western social and political model (democracy, the rule of law, free markets, etc.) is attractive and universal, and that the West's political, economic, military and cultural power has been sufficient to tie the Middle East to the West, keeping the region in the Western orbit at least since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, through the Cold War until the present day. Indeed, this assumption has been shaping the region and its states for the last century. The end of the Cold War, and especially the emergence of the terror threat on 11 September 2001, gave new impetus to the question of stabilisation through modernisation. This approach was put to the test in Iraq for the Americans, and in North Africa and the Middle East for the European Union (especially in the context of the Arab Spring), as well as in Turkey, which played a dual role as a state that modernised along Western models and one that promoted Western (albeit 'Turkicised') values and solutions in the Middle East.

2.2. A transplant of stability – Iraq

The operation in Iraq (2003–2011) was, next to the parallel operation in Afghanistan, the most ambitious attempt at comprehensively resolving the region's security, political, social and economic problems. It envisaged military action (the elimination of Saddam Hussain's regime, and then the fight against the insurgents and terror organisations) and the creation of a new political system based on a constitution that would simultaneously respect the principles of democracy and Islam. As part of this programme, the old regime was to be held accountable (with the de-Ba'athification, prosecution and convictions of the regime's activists); hitherto marginalised groups (Shia Muslims, Kurds) were to be included into the political mainstream, and the problems of minorities were to be resolved (autonomy for the Kurds). Finally, an attempt was made at radically relaxing regional tensions (by exerting immense pressure on Iran, with the US military presence in the region as a containing factor in the event of conflicts). Theoretically, given such a broad and comprehensive approach, Washington's political will and the military and financial resources committed, one could have expected the overall reconstruction of Iraq to be successful, leading to the reconstruction and stabilisation of the entire region (which was Washington's deliberate and sought-after objective).

As we know, the project to reconstruct Iraq has failed. Leaving aside the factors of internal politics in the United States (the political and financial cost, the human losses, public fatigue, the change of government, etc.), the calculations concerning the strength of the Iraqi state proved wrong (the liquidation of the regime was essentially tantamount to the dismantling of the state), as were the estimates of the strength and 'maturity' of the political counter-elite (especially the Shias, who were being simultaneously played by Washington and, more importantly, Tehran). What also failed was the assessment of the extent to which the principles of democracy could be adapted to the conditions of a smouldering internal conflict (the rise of authoritarianism under Maliki's rule) and the

feasibility of creating an Arab and Sunni, but not Ba'athist, political force. The positive trends which first became visible around 2007 were undone by Maliki. The attempts at creating an efficient federal system failed due to Kurdistan's attempts at gaining independence, constant frictions in relations with Baghdad as well as problems originating from Baghdad's other policies.

With regard to the current situation in the Middle East, the Iraqi experience appears impossible to imitate, both because of the lack of political will and means, and even more importantly, because its outcome was far from what had been expected.

2.3. Stabilisation and reform through osmosis – Turkey and the Arab Spring

Until recently, the West believed that a policy of 'osmotic' absorption of values, standards and mechanisms, aimed at a gradual but deep transformation of the Middle East, could be an alternative to an ambitious and direct policy based on force, of which the Iraqi operation was an example. Turkey has been the most complete example of this approach, as a NATO member bordering Europe, interested in modernisation and aspiring to membership in the EU. Despite all the mutual doubts, misunderstandings and inconsistencies, against the regional backdrop Turkey definitely looks like a model of success in building a modern and gradually democratising state.

Since the AKP came to power in 2002, Turkey has also been a country that combines the European experience and local traditions, including Islam in particular (the AKP portrays itself as a synthesis of modernisation, democratisation and conservatism rooted in Islam).

Turkey has been regarded by the West, by itself and, over the past decade, often also by the public and elites in the Middle East, as a positive inspiration to transformation. It was assumed that the

Middle East could be stabilised and developed through neighbourly relations and soft-power instruments, as was the case with Turkey and had been the case with Central and Eastern Europe after 1989, which led the EU to formulate and implement the so-called Barcelona Process (1995) which over time evolved into the Union for the Mediterranean (2008).

The Arab Spring, which started in December 2010 and affected all the Arab states to varying degrees, became (in an apparently unplanned way) inscribed into the hopes for an evolutionary transformation of the Middle East. The Arab Spring was seen as a grassroots, pro-democratic, and consequently pro-Western movement for change, of which Turkey felt it was the patron. Existing regimes were toppled in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya (thanks to military support from the West) and in Yemen; in some cases limited reforms were undertaken (Morocco, Jordan). In most countries, violent riots took place, with long-lasting consequences. Finally, in Syria (as well as Libya and Yemen), a civil war broke out which has continued until the present day, and Egypt underwent a counterrevolutionary coup.

The Arab Spring put an end to any illusions about the feasibility of gradual reform in the region that would be at least loosely based on Western values. The democratic and secular communities turned out to have been too weak to manage the Arab Spring to their advantage. Even the specific credit of confidence that the West awarded to the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt (and Syria) turned out to have been misplaced: even the Muslim Brotherhood was unable to hold onto power, and the new-old elites, having staged a successful coup, were unable to offer anything but a restoration of the old system. The region's political scene became polarised: on the one hand there are the forces with links to the old regime, and on the other the Salafi communities which are much more radical than the Muslim Brothers. This has exacerbated the crises within individual states and throughout the Middle East.

Paradoxically, the West, including both the EU and the USA, has started to treat Turkey with increasing distrust. The process of its integration with the EU slowed down considerably. Turkey itself developed an ambition to find its own way (which has also become visible in its regional policy), and thus started to drift away from the West; and finally, it is simultaneously experiencing a rise of authoritarian tendencies and rising political, social and ideological tensions.

From the perspective of 2015, one is justified in fearing that the assumption that the Middle East could be effectively modernised on the basis of Western models and thence durably stabilised is baseless. Neither Washington nor Brussels (or Berlin) have the vision, political will and the necessary means, and in the Middle East itself (with the sole exception of Tunisia) the elites and public are not interested in Western solutions. Neither does a strong political (i.e. primarily state) infrastructure exist which could absorb the West's efforts. Contrary to the great hopes and many postulates put forward, no attractive alternative has emerged to the radical tendencies within Islam, which defines the axis of the conflict as a fundamental opposition between the West and Islam. The creation and expansion of Islamic State only testifies to the strength of the radical tendencies, and exposes the weakness and inefficacy of the efforts that the West has hitherto made towards Islam.

3. The strategy of containment

The end of 2011 was a symbolic moment marked by a final breakthrough in the West's approach to the Middle East; at that point the ultimate withdrawal of US forces from Iraq coincided with a sense of disappointment with the outcome of the Arab Spring and the outbreak of the civil war in Syria.

Since then, the West has realised that it had lost whatever initiative in the region it may still have had. It has since been on the defensive, supporting the existing states (with the exception of Syria), cautiously tried to support those non-state actors

considered to be pro-Western, and to slow down and contain the processes that posed a threat to the existence of certain Middle Eastern states. This stance has also been visible in the approach to Islamic State: the principal objectives have been to stop its territorial expansion, and to mobilise and support the IS's opponents, with the United States playing an auxiliary and regulatory role in the process. The West's awareness of its own limitations and the potential costs of tougher action have been preventing any more ambitious attempts at resolving the underlying problems.

3.1. Demonic dilemmas: Iran and Kurdistan

The fight against Islamic State, as well as the need to protect stability in the Middle East and retain some instruments to influence the dynamically changing situation in the region, have posed some fundamental challenges and dilemmas. In particular, these concern a choice between defending the existing regional order as a matter of principle, or accepting and joining the process of change – in effect, helping the disintegration of the old order.²² Iran, Kurdistan and Israel, as well as the West's allies in the Persian Gulf, play a key role in this respect.

3.1.1. Iran

In Western political logic, especially that of the US, Iran has been the Middle East's key problem for more than thirty years. It is considered to be the state which:

- is hostile to the West and its allies in the region (Iran has openly threatened to annihilate Israel),
- has been actively fanning instability in its surroundings (for instance by supporting anti-governmental forces from Iraq to Bahrain and to Yemen),

²² To some extent, this is the same dilemma that Turkey faced several years ago, with consequences that still significantly influence its policy today.

- has been instrumental in the development of Islamic terrorism in the region (by having created Hezbollah, supported the Palestinian Sunni groupings, and tactically co-operated with al-Qaeda),
- has been instrumental in the development of global terrorism (with attacks on Jewish targets from Buenos Aires in 1994 to Burgas in 2012 attributed to Iranian influence), and
- has been actively developing its nuclear and missile programmes in order to radically alter the balance of power in the region.

In recent years, Iran has been accused *inter alia* of escalating the tensions in Iraq (both those that were targeted against US actions before 2011 and those which fanned the Shia-Sunni conflict, as a result of which Islamic State came into being), and of providing decisive support to the Assad regime in its brutal struggle, initially against the public at large, and then against the opposition.

From this point of view, Iran is the focus of nearly all problems of the Middle East, and countering Iran (the Iranian regime and its policies) is (or should be) the basic and unchangeable priority of the West's actions concerning the Middle East.

On the other hand, there is a growing awareness that over thirty years of marginalising and countering Iran has not produced any effects (paradoxically, Iran's position in the Middle East is the strongest it has been in centuries). Iran's policy and ambitions cannot be reduced to the present regime's line (the revolutionary component has lost part of its significance to the benefit of a *Realpolitik* that would presumably be continued by the hypothetical successors of the current regime). Moreover, today it is not Iran that is behind real terrorism, but rather its deadly enemies. Finally, the Iranian nuclear programme may be treated as a political instrument (a way to raise the country's status and deterrence potential), and not necessarily as a real military threat.

In practice, Iran is also the West's tactical ally in the struggle against Islamic State (and one that is presumably much more active as far as ground operations are concerned) and in the efforts to stabilise Iraq (the Baghdad-controlled Shia part). Finally, it is the protector of the Assad regime, or whatever is left of the Syrian state, which may be troublesome but is nonetheless a state, to which at the moment there is no alternative.

This perspective is increasingly visible in the US administration's activities concerning Iran; the pressure on Assad is limited, and proposals for a political solution have been put forward that would take into account the interests of both Assad and Iran. Tactical US-Iranian co-operation in the fight against Islamic State in Iraq takes place on a regular basis. Most importantly, however, the prospects of a deal between the West and Iran on the Iranian nuclear programme are a sign of a coming breakthrough, visible in the fact that Washington has ceased making military threats against Iran and has been determined to continue negotiations, leading to the announcement on 2 April 2015 of a preliminary nuclear agreement between Iran and the West (mainly the USA).

At the time of writing it remains an open question whether a final agreement can be reached and effectively implemented, and the criticisms that have been expressed by the Republican opposition in the USA and elements of the Iranian elite are serious. However, there is a clear will to achieve a strategic breakthrough, both on the part of the White House and the Iranian government. This approach, however, runs counter to the fundamental assumptions of the West's policy towards the region (calling for an admission that the assessments of Iran have so far been wrong, or that the West has failed in its efforts to act on correct assumptions). It spells the beginning of the end of alliances with states in the region founded on a fear of Iran or on US protection. Finally, it may mean granting Iran the right to expand its own sphere of influence in the Middle East at the expense of the old order, which would entail an escalation of the region's proxy war.

As far as the fight against Islamic State is directly concerned, Iran's usefulness for the West and the coalition is disputable. Undoubtedly, Iran should be credited for stopping IS's offensive in Iraq, and for some successes in pushing the terrorists back in Syria and Iraq. In practice, however, this has meant expanding Iran's protectorate over Iraq. One could also be concerned at the efficacy of Iran's actions (whether direct or carried out through Shia militias) in traditionally Sunni areas that are hostile to Iran and the Shias. The prospects that those areas could not only be seized but also pacified and re-integrated with the Iraqi state are dim (by the way, Assad and Iran have not been able to achieve any more in Syria), while the prospect of undermining Iraq's fragile integrity is clear.

3.1.2. Kurdistan

While Iran today seems to be the state that has benefited most from the decomposition of the Middle Eastern order, the Kurds, especially those in Iraq and Syria, seem to be the main non-state beneficiaries, next to Islamic State.

In the context of the traditional assumptions about the Middle East, the emergence of the Kurdish para-state in Iraq – with genuine political legitimacy (both internal and external), an efficient administration, strong military formations, strategic economic resources (oil and gas, and infrastructures for their export), and its territorial expansion – are a clear sign that the principle of legitimism is crumbling in the Middle East. In view of the fact that similar processes have been taking place in neighbouring Syria – the rise in the increasingly battle-hardened *de facto* autonomy of the Syrian Kurds, developed by the PKK, which is broadly considered to be a terror organisation, and the ambitions and potential of the Turkish Kurds, likewise dominated by the PKK, have also been growing – the problem is acquiring serious political significance. Preventing any changes to borders, and in particular blocking Kurdish separatism, has for decades been a pillar of the co-operation between those states with Kurdish minorities,

i.e. Turkey, Iraq and Syria. Massud Barzani, the president of the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq, said in June 2014 that the vision of an independent Kurdistan was closer to fulfilment in recent years than it had ever been throughout the history of the Kurds (although he withdrew the claim in view of IS advances). An independent Kurdistan would deepen and perpetuate the decomposition of the states in the region (Iraq and Syria), perpetuate the risk of further destabilisation, and exacerbate the proxy war.

On the other hand, the Kurdish para-states, and especially the Kurdish regional government in Iraq, seem to be a fulfilment of the dreams of Western elites, ranging from the liberals to the US neoconservatives of some time ago, and an antithesis to the region's main problems. Here we have an efficient political entity, capable of establishing effective para-state structures, which has emerged in conditions of the growing chaos, disintegration and decomposition of the regional order, and has been created mostly by political means. Despite all its (significant) shortcomings, this entity is evolving towards democratic standards and the rule of law. While strongly rooted in Islam and facing an external pressure, the Kurdish para-state remains politically secular (in Syria, even firmly secular) and firmly West-oriented, and has been adopting Western standards. A similar trend is visible among the Turkish Kurds; they are abandoning armed struggle, which until now they had seen the only option, and are developing political formations and social movements that seek for solutions within Turkish law and the constitutional political process, while being strongly oriented towards integration with the EU. Finally, the Kurds at large have been, and will probably firmly remain, opposed to the radical (and terrorist) forces in the region, including Islamic State. Their involvement in radical movements has been negligible; they have demonstrated a remarkable ability to prevent terror acts in the territories they control, and have shown unshaken determination in countering Islamic State's offensive. In other words, the Kurds seem to be a natural and committed ally of the West – a unique phenomenon in the region – who might be

able to preserve stability in the areas they control, and provide crucial support in the actions against the Islamic State.

In the context of the fight against Islamic State, the Kurds seem to be a credible bulwark against the Islamic State's expansion (as long as they receive assistance from outside), and could potentially make up a key element of the land forces that would be tasked with reclaiming territory from the terrorists' hands. However, it would be an illusion to believe that they could be the main and independent force in the struggle against Islamic State, and it is even more unlikely that they could effectively relax the tensions that would follow a hypothetical victory over IS, administer such areas either independently or in co-operation with the forces in Baghdad, or finally, withstand a hypothetical open aggression by the local powers, i.e. Iran and Turkey, without significant support from outside.

3.2. Old allies

A US-guaranteed equilibrium among the individual states in the Middle East has been the foundation of the elementary stability and predictability of the situation in the Middle East in recent decades. The states which played a special role in this system included Turkey, Israel, Egypt and Saudi Arabia (which dominated the Arab part of the Persian Gulf). In line with this system's logic, a strategy of containment should be based on these states, while also taking into account smaller but important states such as Jordan, the United Arab Emirates or Qatar. In recent years, however, the principal community of interests between those states and the West has been eroding as a result of the allies' internal problems (for instance in the case of Egypt), their strategic reassessments (Turkey's rising ambitions, or the mounting existential threats against Israel and its growing isolation), inter-state tensions (the proxy war; differences in the approach to outside threats, for instance between Saudi Arabia and Qatar), Iran's pressure, the USA's eroding position, and many other factors. It is

a legitimate concern that presently, the strategy of containment is increasingly focused not so much on using the allies to stop the threats coming from Syria, Iraq or Islamic State, as on stopping the processes that could undermine the internal stability of individual states (e.g. the frontline state of Jordan) or the relations among those states and their relations with the West (especially the United States).

CONCLUSIONS

The situation in the Middle East is extremely dynamic, and any attempts at forecasting future developments are subject to a huge margin of error. The future of Islamic State remains an open question – its political and military structures may well be destroyed. However, it seems impossible that all the problems which Islamic State embodies will be eliminated. It is therefore quite certain that even in a most optimistic scenario in which IS is destroyed, new problems of a similar scale will emerge.

The balance of power in the region is also an open question. This refers in particular to the prospects of a political solution to the problem of relations between Iran and the West. Yet even if such a solution is found, tensions in the region will remain, and the situation could even deteriorate further. There is likewise no certainty about the domestic situations affecting external and security policy in the other states of the region, for example in Turkey, which expects particularly important parliamentary elections in June 2015.

Islamic State and the problems of the Middle East associated with it remain very important and very dangerous for Europe. The region is destabilising; the risk of conflicts and terrorism is on the rise, and the paradigms of thinking about and acting in the region, which have been in place for a century, are changing. Meanwhile, the scale of the migration from the region to the European Union and the spread of radical Islam (of which the terrorist threat and the people who set out from Europe to join the *jihad* in the Middle East are evidence) constitute a key Middle East-related security problem for the West. It seems that the West's actions towards the Middle East in recent decades call for radical revision (because they have produced very limited positive effects). The UE and NATO today are not prepared to act effectively because there is a mismatch between the nature of the problems at hand and the underlying objectives that NATO and the UE were created to address.

Some action seems to be necessary, but first and foremost, deep reflection on the nature of the Middle East's problems (taking into account the identity and civilisational aspects) is essential, and even more importantly, challenges of this sort within the EU itself should be noted, and an adequate response should be developed both at the level of individual member states and Union-wide.

At least for the EU, this seems to be an important part of inevitable reassessments, next to those concerning the pace and directions of integration, financial stability and climate policy.

KRZYSZTOF STRACHOTA

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APPENDIX

Selected studies of Islamic State

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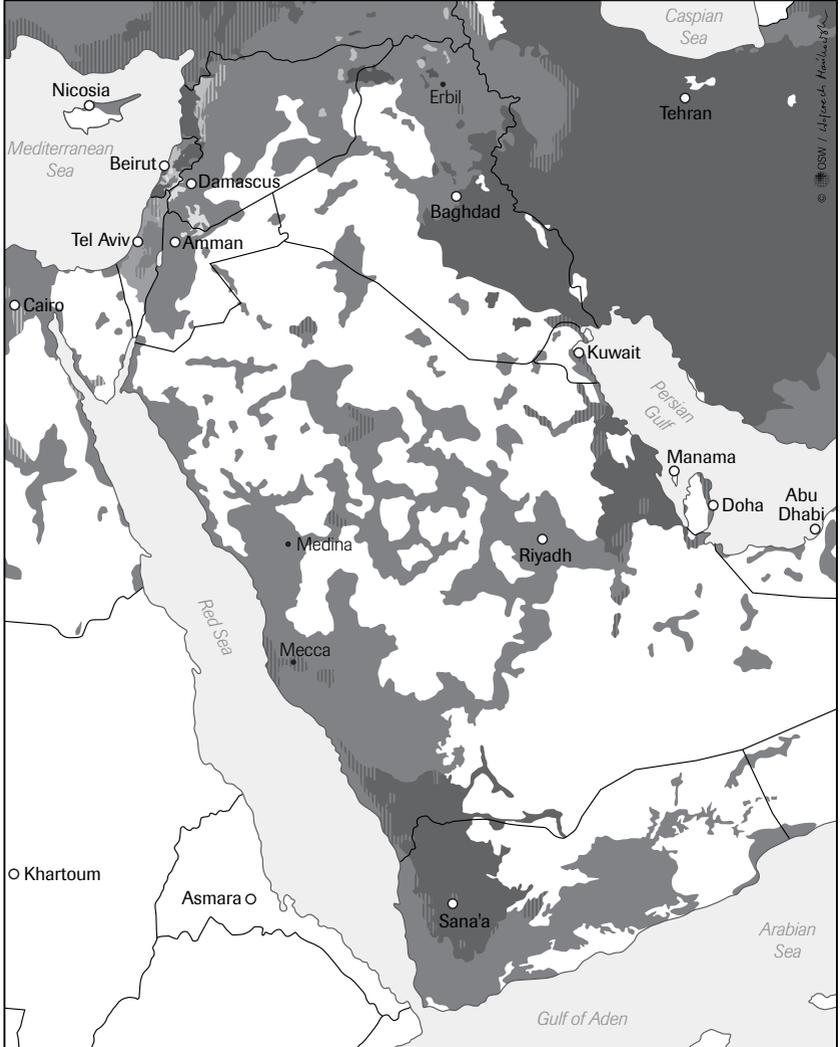
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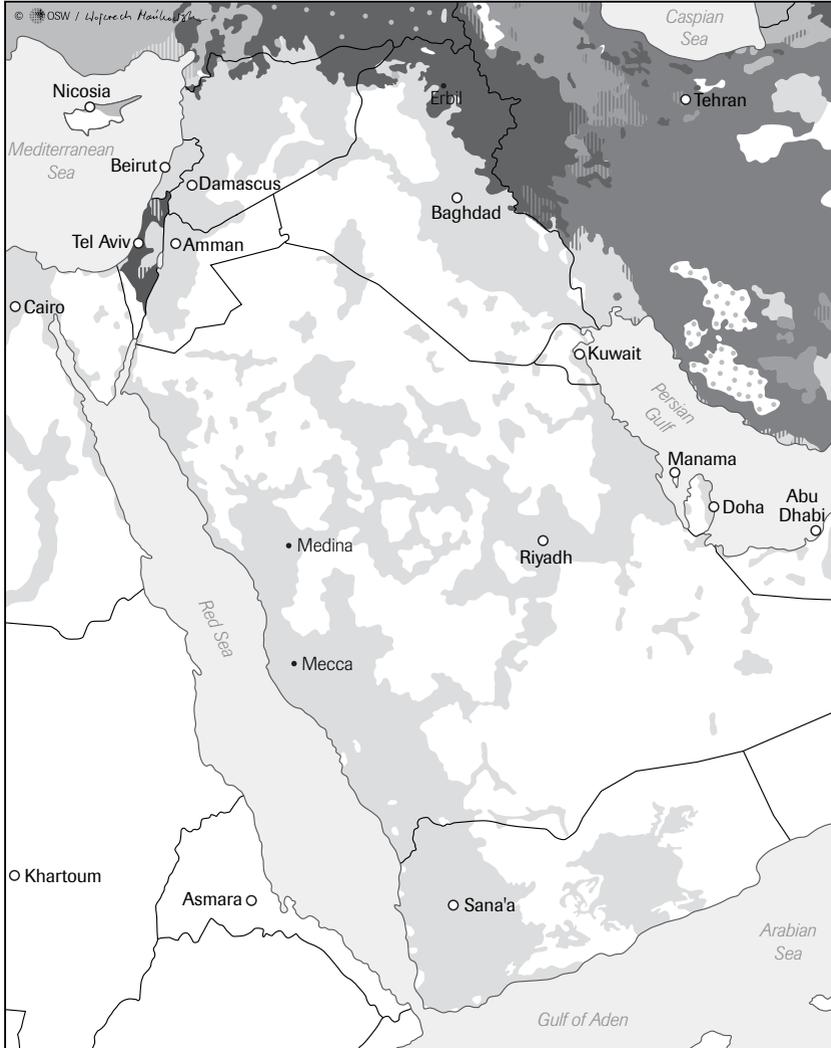
2. Middle East - religion map



Sunni Muslims
 Christians
 Druze
 Jews
 * including Alevis, Alawites and the Zaidi
 Yazidis

Source: Author's estimates based on The Gulf/2000 Project; http://gulf2000.columbia.edu/images/maps/Mid_East_Religion_lg.png

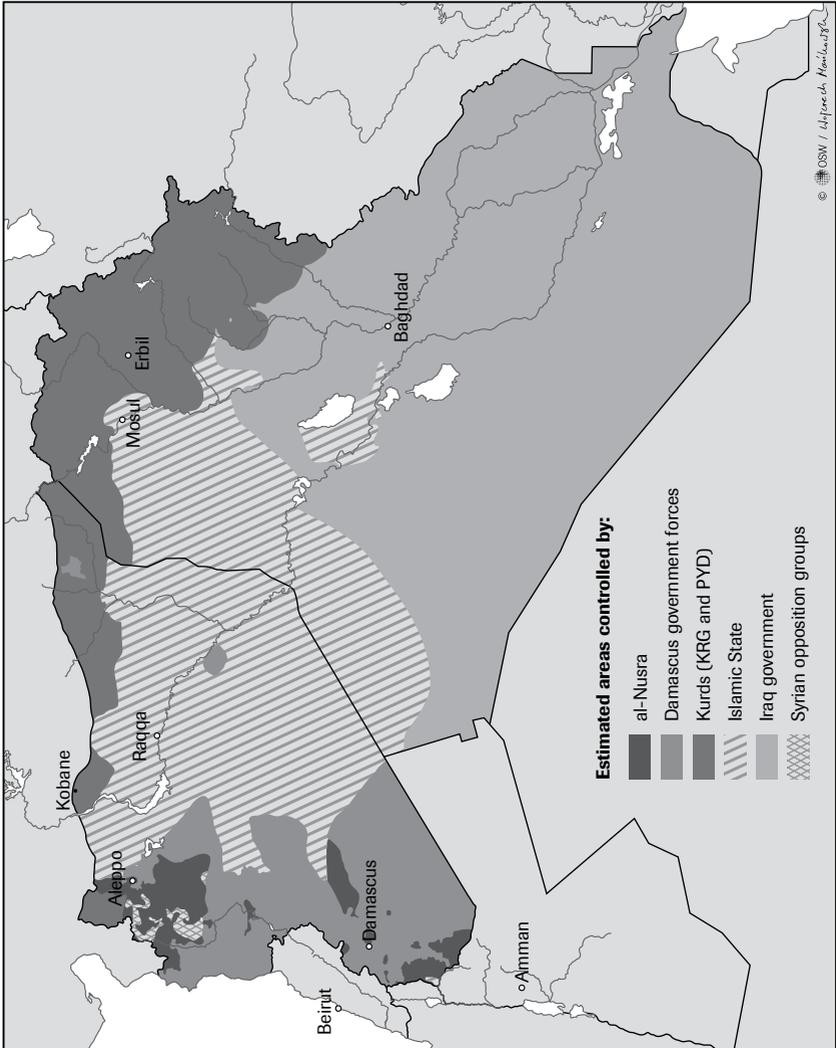
3. Middle East – ethnic map



- Iranians
- Kurds
- Turks
- Azerbaijanis
- Arabs
- Jews

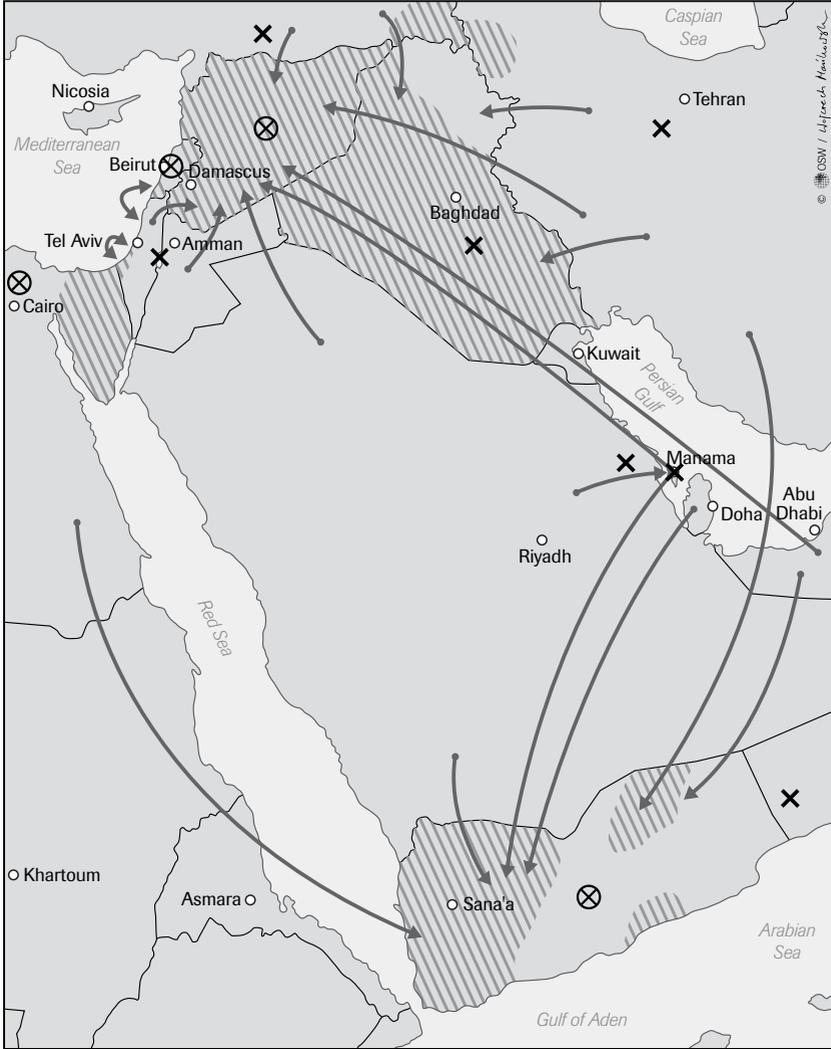
Source: Author's estimates based on The Gulf/2000 Project; http://gulf2000.columbia.edu/images/maps/Mid_East_Ethnic_sm.png

4. Islamic State and situation in Syria and Iraq (spring 2015)



Source: Author's estimates based on Institute for the Study of War and media publications (BBC, *The Economist*, etc.)

5. Middle East instability and military conflicts (2005-2005)



-  Areas affected by military operations and conflicts
-  Countries in which a coup or violent socio-political conflict has taken place
-  Foreign military interventions/operations in the region

Source: Author's estimates

6. Middle East - the problem of state control over its territory



Extensive and long-term loss of control by the central government over an area



Short-term problems with control of an area

Source: Author's estimates