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ISIS – PRESENT SITUATION



ISIS – OBECNA SYTUACJA

ABSTRACT: The aim of the following paper is to discuss a present situation of ISIS, in a post-caliphate period. By analyzing group's activity in the Middle East and Sahel, the author tries to answer the question whether it has already been dead or not. The study employed qualitative research tools. The findings are derived from the critical literature and online sources (reports, statistics) review, and, also, from the author's research in the form of in-depth interviews (anonymous and not anonymous) conducted around the world with military and non-military experts from governmental and non-governmental institutions. Maybe to a lesser extent, but ISIS has been still active in the Middle East, especially in such regions as Iraq and Syria. As for the African continent, it has been developing there by recruiting more and more people and conducting terrorist attacks on a great scale. In conclusion, contrary to popular belief, ISIS has not died; but, as many sources prove, it has just moved to Africa. Together with other jihadi terrorist organisations, it is not only thriving on the African continent, but most of all, it is completely destabilizing some areas there, still being able to reach other parts of the world.

KEYWORDS: ISIS, the Middle East, Sahel, present situation, post-caliphate

ABSTRAKT: Celem poniższego artykułu jest opis obecnej sytuacji ISIS, po utracie kalifatu, poprzez analizę jego aktywności na Bliskim Wschodzie oraz w Afryce subsaharyjskiej (Sahelu). Autor postara się odpowiedzieć na pytanie czy ISIS rzeczywiście zostało pokonane. Badania przeprowadzono głównie za pomocą jakościowych narzędzi badawczych. Mianowicie, autor korzysta z dogłębnego przeglądu i analizy literatury oraz źródeł internetowych (raporty, statystyki, dokumenty rządowe, artykuły). Kolejnym istotnym źródłem informacji, są autorskie badania w formie dogłębnych wywiadów eksperckich przeprowadzonych w kilku różnych państwach w kluczowych dla autora instytucjach, w kręgach cywilnych oraz wojskowych. Wnioski z badań doprowadziły do konkluzji, iż być może w mniejszym stopniu, lecz ISIS bez

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wątpienia nadal pozostaje aktywną komórką terrorystyczną na Bliskim Wschodzie, np. w Iraku lub Syrii. Natomiast jeśli chodzi o Afrykę, ISIS rozwija tam swą strukturę, ciągle przeprowadzając ataki, głównie w północno-zachodnich państwach Sahelu. Podsumowując, w przeciwieństwie do powszechnej opinii, ISIS nie zostało pokonane, ale jak dowodzi wiele źródeł – po prostu przeniosło większość swej terrorystycznej aktywności do Afryki. Stamtąd, wspólnie z innymi dżihadystycznymi grupami, nie tylko destabilizuje subsaharyjską część kontynentu, ale również kwitnie, rozwija się oraz jest w stanie osiągnąć także inne części świata.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: ISIS, Bliski Wschód, Afryka subsaharyjska, obecna sytuacja

INTRODUCTION

ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), also known as Daesh, ISIL or IS, was designated by the United Nations Security Council as a terrorist organization that “constitutes a global and unprecedented threat to international peace and security”¹. Its history goes back to 2003, when the Bush administration declared the so called War on Terror and the invasion of Iraq began. An abrupt removal of a dictator Saddam Hussein, dismantling of the national military forces, banning thousands of Baathist party members from political and social life – all this led to total chaos, sectarian conflicts, law violations and finally a civil war. Social frustrations and a completely dysfunctional state turned out to be a perfect ground for various insurgent and terrorist groups to come into existence. At the beginning, most of those Sunni extremist groups were affiliated with Al-Qaeda. When Americans withdraw their forces from Iraq in 2011, jihadists gained even more steam. What is more, the repression of the Sunni by the Shia government with Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki as a head, led to many arrests and persecutions of Sunni leaders. It caused many people to go underground and join terrorist groups such as ISIS. The war in Syria which broke out in 2011 was the next theatre for them to grow, gain new a territory, train its warriors and fight under cover of rebels against the Assad regime. In 2014 under the leadership of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi the group proclaimed itself a caliphate, calling all Muslims to unite and come to the Middle East to pledge allegiance. The name was shortened then to the Islamic State (IS)²³. Between 2014 and 2018, we all could observe an asymmetric conflict developing between IS fighters on one side and the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS on the other⁴. The caliphate grew in power and size, at one point having under control a territory equal to the Great Britain. It was a long, bloody military campaign fought in Syria and Iraq, with some

¹ United Nations Security Council, *Resolution 2249 2015*, <http://www.securitycouncilreport.org> (access: 19.04.2020)

² O. Wasiuta, S. Wasiuta, P. Mazur, *Państwo Islamskie ISIS*, Difin, Warszawa 2018, s. 18-53.

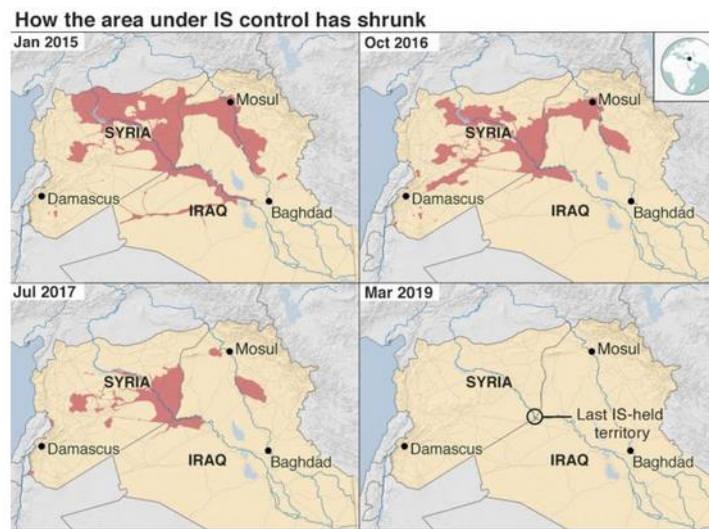
³ C. Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, Oxford University Press, New York City 2015,, s. 221-279.

⁴ US Department of State, *The Global Coalition to defeat ISIS*, <https://www.state.gov> (access: 19.04.2020)

decisive battles worth mentioning here. Namely, a key year appeared to be 2017, when the international coalition managed to change the course of the conflict and finally recaptured from the terrorists' control two strategic towns: Mosul and Raqqa. Since then, despite several victories, IS gradually started to lose power, land and resources (see Map. 1).

Map 1

Land under IS control between 2015-2019



Source: BBC News, <https://www.bbc.com> (access: 19.04.2020)

Finally, in December 2018, a leader of the Global Coalition to defeat ISIS, the United States and President Donald Trump in person, announced that the Islamic State caliphate was destroyed and the U.S. troops would start to withdraw from the region⁵. However, available sources such as qualitative reports, statistics, different officials' opinions and also, the author's own research, prove something contrary – the fact of a territorial victory over ISIS in Syria and Iraq does not necessarily mean that it has been defeated.

ISIS IN THE MIDDLE EAST – PRESENT SITUATION

There is no one, officially used definition of the Middle East; thus the author decided to use the definition proposed by the Encyclopedia Britannica, which includes in the Middle East such countries

⁵ The New York Times, „Trump to Withdraw U.S. Forces From Syria, Declaring ‘We Have Won Against ISIS’“, <https://www.nytimes.com> (access: 19.04.2020)

as: Turkey, Cyprus, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Iran, Israel, the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, Jordan, Egypt, Sudan, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Yemen, Oman, Bahrain, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Afghanistan and Pakistan⁶.

To examine ISIS activity in the Middle East during the last several months, the author has analyzed the words of some important US officials. To start with, on October, 2019, Russel Travers⁷, the US national counterterrorism chief, during his testifying before the Homeland Security Committee just after killing the ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi stated that ISIS still had a “deep bench”, and that fact would have no significant influence on their terrorist capability: “I don’t think it will have much impact. If there were significant attacks that were in the planning, that planning will continue. It won’t have that much effect.” What is more, probably to the general astonishment, he added that still “within Syria and Iraq, there are at least 14,000 ISIS fighters”.⁸ It must be mentioned that it was said at the time when President Trump was informing the world about defeating ISIS, its leader was dead and the public opinion was sure that the organizations’ days were coming to an end.

The next top American governmental, seeming to have a convergent opinion, is Nathan Sales⁹ – a Counterterrorism Coordinator Ambassador – who in November, 2019 publicly acknowledged that destroying a physical caliphate did not mean the end of fighting: “ISIS remained a growing and evolving threat even as it lost territory in Syria”, “terrorist fighters are always looking for the next battleground,” Sales told reporters during a briefing to unveil the department's 2018 Country Reports on Terrorism. He added: “And I think we're concerned about the possibility that jihadis who've been defeated in Syria might relocate elsewhere, whether you're talking about ISIS Khorasan in Afghanistan or moving into the Sahel”¹⁰. Looking at the current tide, it seems impossible not to agree with him – as the world can observe ISIS thriving in Africa or active in Afghanistan and in Asia¹¹.

Even more disturbing seems to be an opinion of Masrour Barzani¹², Prime Minister of Iraqi Kurdistan. Taking into account the fact that he is a practitioner, a person at the theatre of operations, directly involved in combating ISIS, it is hard to doubt the credibility of his insight. According to Barzani, ISIS not only does exist, but it is even more capable to fight now than years ago: “ISIS is still

⁶ Encyclopedia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Middle-East> (access: 26.04.2020)

⁷ Homeland Security Republicans, <https://republicans-homeland.house.gov> (access: 19.04.2020)

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ CNN Politics, “US State Department warns ISIS grew and evolved worldwide as it lost territory in Syria”, www.cnn.com (access: 19.04.2020)

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ Asia Times, “ISIS fading in Mid East, thriving in the Philippines”, <https://asiatimes.com> (access: 19.04.2020)

¹² The Atlantic, “The inconvenient truth about ISIS”, <https://www.theatlantic.com> (access: 19.04.2020)

very much intact. Yes, they have lost much of their leadership. They have lost many of their capable men. But they've also managed to gain more experience and to recruit more people around them. So they should not be taken lightly." More importantly, during the interview with The Atlantic, Barzani mentioned two very warning figures - one of 20,000, meaning the current number of ISIS fighters, and the second of 60 meaning monthly ISIS attacks in Iraq only¹³. To make it sound even more serious, he said that in February this year.

The Kurdistan prime minister seems not be alone in his 'inconvenient' opinion about a substantial threat posed by ISIS, as the author managed to reach two other Middle East practitioners who clearly affirmed the Barzani's assessment of a situation. The first was Hoshyar Siwaily¹⁴, a Kurdistan Democratic Party politician, who frankly stated that the international coalition had not been fully successful in stabilizing and securing the already liberated areas. Not to remain groundless, Siwaily cited an example of 900 Iraqi citizens who after having lost their homes, were placed in the camps in the Kurdistan region. After some time, when the coalition regained the land and seemed to stabilize surrounding areas, they were told they could safely go back home. However, what happened next was a surprise to all, because, as the politician said, the refugees instead of living their lives at large, decided to return to existence in the filthy and overcrowded camps. They had no choice – the reality outside turned out to be too dangerous to start a normal life. As for the ISIS activity in Kirkuk, Siwaily mentioned that only during the first eight months of 2019, there were about 450 ISIS terrorist attacks¹⁵.

The next ISIS expert interviewed was a top intelligence analyst¹⁶ from a governmental institution (a strictly anonymous source) who stated that the course of action the world was observing then – continuous ISIS attacks and its widespread activity around the globe - came as no surprise for those deeply studying the subject of terrorism. According to him, three years before its crucial military defeats in 2017, Daesh already had been preparing its post defeat strategy¹⁷. So, it seems obvious that the present scenario realized by ISIS is not just an accidental combination of events, but a well-knit strategy put in action.

¹⁴ Interview with Hoshyar Siwaily, conducted by the author Ewa Fronczak.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

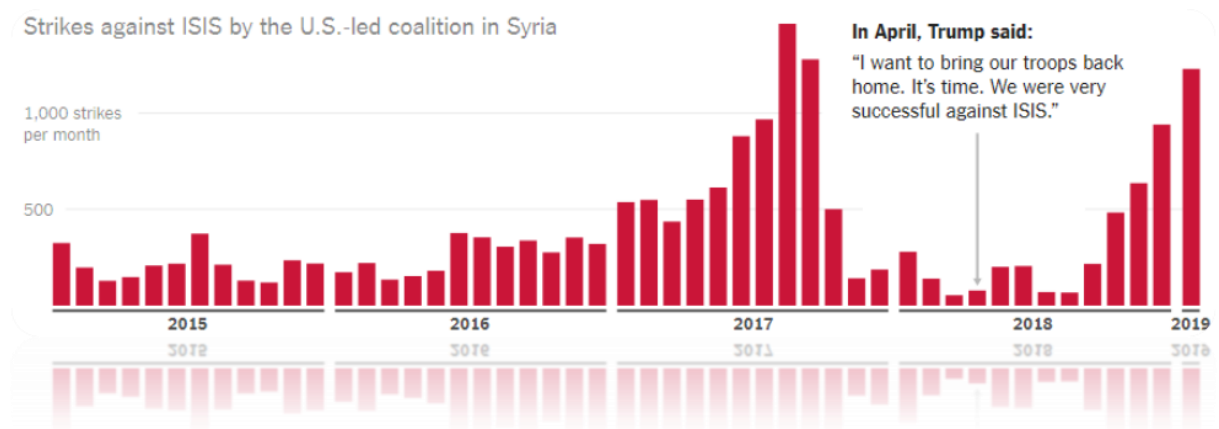
¹⁶ Interview with an anonymous source, conducted by the author Ewa Fronczak.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

For some people, there is nothing more convincing than maps, figures and statistics. So, the first one to be analyzed is a graph published by The New York Times, and it shows the strikes against ISIS by the U.S.-led coalition in Syria (Fig. 1).

Figure 1

Strikes against ISIS by the U.S.-led coalition in Syria



Source: The New York Times, <https://www.nytimes.com> (access: 22.04.2020)

There would be nothing strange in the graph, if not one issue. Namely, taking into account the fact that President Trump in December, 2018 claimed the coalition had won against ISIS, it seems reasonable to raise a question about a pick in the strikes against ISIS at the beginning of 2019. If the organization had already been defeated, why to increase the number of strikes? Is there any logic in intensifying raids on a terrorist organization which had been already dead?

Figure 2

Countries having IS terrorist attacks in 2019, up to July 27

Figure Four: Countries ACLED Reports as Having Islamic State Terrorist Attacks in 2019, up to July 27.



Country	Terrorist Attacks	Fatalities
Iraq	338	682
Syria	211	577
Egypt	88	231
Libya	9	38
Yemen	24	58
Afghanistan	33	131
Pakistan	12	28
India	2	2
Somalia	3	3
Mali	13	91
Burkina Faso	2	1
Niger	30	73

Source: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, <https://acleddata.com> (access: 22.04.2020)

Another informative analysis comes from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, an American data collection, analysis, and crisis mapping institution, which published a map (Fig. 2) of the countries attacked by ISIS in the first half of 2019. As the numbers clearly indicate, the most frequently targeted states were Iraq and Syria; but this fact, on its own, does not seem to surprise anyone. However, what might be surprising, is the numbers of attacks. For instance, in Iraq there were 338 of them and in Syria 211, which gives roughly 50 attacks a month. It must be stressed here that they were conducted by a terrorist group which had reportedly been defeated.

Moving on to official documents and reports, there are two reports that constitute a credible and comprehensive source of information on ISIS activity around the world. The first one prepared by the Pentagon’s Lead Inspector General was revealed in the first months of 2020¹⁸, and its main message to the public seems to be – do not declare a victory over an organization which is still alive and in a pretty good condition. To support that statement, the authors provide us with numerous data and figures. For instance, the report underlines that despite of a territorial victory over ISIS, they continue information warfare and recruitment of followers in a virtual world: ” “ISIS has continued to disseminate its propaganda on Twitter, Facebook, and Telegram, and U.S. Central Command

¹⁸ US Department of Defence, <https://media.defense.gov> (access: 20.04.202).

reported that this propaganda revolved around two main themes: ISIS's persistence in the face of adversity, and retaliation through a global insurgency." Although the frequency of ISIS attacks in Iraq and Syria decreased within the last quarter of 2019, the Department of Defence analysts highlight the fact that the group has "continued to carry out attacks and operations"¹⁹ in that region.

The second report worth mentioning is a report submitted to the UN Security Council by the UN Monitoring Team in February this year.²⁰ Similarly to the DoD report, the UN report leaves no doubts as for ISIS vitality: "Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), following its loss of territory, has begun to reassert itself in both the Syrian Arab Republic and Iraq, mounting increasingly bold insurgent attacks, calling and planning for the breakout of ISIL fighters in detention facilities and exploiting weaknesses in the security environment of both countries." The report also addresses the issue of a security vacuum that developed after a partial U.S. withdrawal. Unfortunately, it led to an inadequate level of security at the Iraq-Syria border, which allowed for an easy flow of ISIS fighters between those two fragile states. As for the regions of the increased ISIS activity within the last months, the report focuses on the Euphrates river area – the Dayr al-Zawr and Hasakah Governorates. The document also points out the present "spike in attacks targeting the United States led coalition and local non-state armed groups"²¹, which is discussed in the next paragraph.

The first four months of 2020 have been the time of the intensified ISIS activity. According to a map used by a Middle East institute expert (Map 2), in Central Syria the group was able to conduct several attacks over a span of just seven April days.

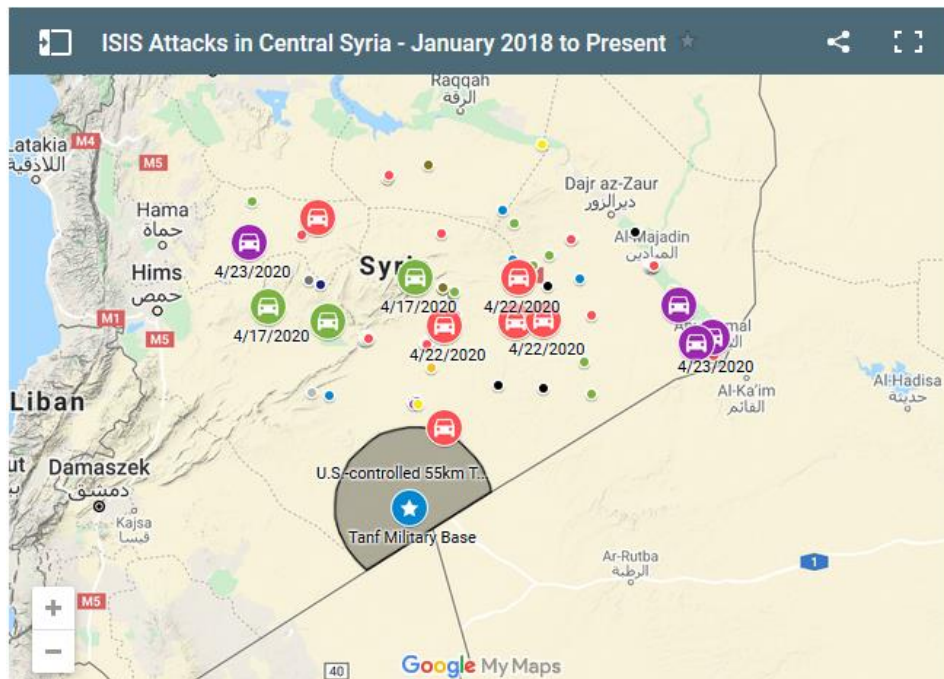
¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ United Nations, <https://undocs.org> (access: 20.04.2020)

²¹ *Ibidem*.

Map 2

ISIS attacks in Central Syria – January 2018 to present



Source: Middle East Institute, <https://www.mei.edu> (access: 26.04.2020)

As the Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Centre portal informs²², especially in the Euphrates valley the Islamic State has been taking advantage of the current COVID epidemic and it is actively involved in the operations against SAA and SDF forces. A range of fighting techniques used seems to be quite wide: IEDs, shooting attacks, targeted killings, ambushes, attacks against military camps²³. One of such attacks took place on January 13, when terrorists carried out a deadly attack on an Iraqi security post at the Syrian border, killing one serviceman. Moreover, several days later, they attempted a similar attack in the same area. The timing of these incidents was not accidental, as they happened in atmosphere of high tensions between Iran and America caused by the General Soleimani killing. It cannot be denied that the terrorists perfectly exploited the period of a suspension of anti-ISIS operations in the region²⁴. Even today, on April 26, 2020, the fight in Syria is still going on, as the Syrian Arab Army (SAA), alongside the National Defense Forces (NDF), are involved in an anti-ISIS large scale campaign in desert areas in the east of the country where ISIS underground cells have found a perfect refuge and built new strongholds²⁵.

²² Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Centre, "Spotlight on Global Jihad", <https://www.terrorism-info.org> (access: 26.04.2020)

²³ *Ibidem*.

²⁴ CNN Politics, <https://edition.cnn.com> (access: 26.04.2020)

²⁵ Global Research Centre, <https://www.globalresearch.ca> (access: 26.04.2010)

At the same time, ISIS have been attacking and establishing its strongholds across whole Iraq; for example, in Hamrin and Makhmour, the mountainous region west of Kirkuk where fighters find perfect conditions to train and regroup. In that area, during an Iraqi led air assault operation on March 9, two U.S. servicemen were killed. The Iraqi special operations forces, backed by the international coalition, have been trying to track and eliminate ISIS militants, who took refuge in the country's hardly penetrable mountain ranges, since their physical caliphate was definitely put to an end ²⁶.

Not only military members are on a list of ISIS's targets. The same month, on 6 March, gunmen and suicide bombers killed about 30 civilians and injured dozens of others in a Sikh temple in Kabul, Afghanistan²⁷. This deadly assault took place "amid widening competition with the Taliban, fractures in the Afghan government and growing political chaos in Kabul".²⁸ In the reality of a drawdown of the American mission in Afghanistan, the Afghan branch of the Islamic State, known as the Islamic State in Khorasan Province, has been trying to expand its presence. Undoubtedly, a continuous feud among factional political elites or ethnic and religious enmity, is nothing else but a perfect ground for extremist ideology to prosper among more and more disappointed civilians²⁹.

ISIS IN THE SAHEL – PRESENT SITUATION

It is necessary to explain that by the Sahel the author refers to the countries listed in a UN definition: Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Gambia, Guinea Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Nigeria and Senegal³⁰. The Sahel, as the region characterized by extreme climate shifts, droughts, swaths of underdeveloped and ungoverned territories, religious and ethnic divisions, seems to be especially vulnerable to jihadist ideology. To make it worse, a potential terrain for terrorists to spread their malign ideology, and size of population to brainwash, is incomparably bigger than in the Middle East. As Gen. Dagvin Anderson, the head of the US military's Special Operations arm in Africa, correctly points out: "The rural territory at risk is so large it could fit multiple Afghanistans and Iraqs"³¹. A question that may arise here is whether such a threat is going to be just a local one, or whether it will become a global threat soon. Taking into account a fact that the U.S. military have been planning to reduce their presence in Africa, a black scenario is becoming more and more viable.

²⁶ Reuters, World News, <https://www.reuters.com> (access: 26.04.2020)

²⁷ The Guardian, World, <https://www.theguardian.com> (access: 26.04.2020)

²⁸ World Politics Review, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com> (access: 26.04.2020)

²⁹ *Ibidem*.

³⁰ United Nations, "The Sahel: land of opportunities", <https://www.un.org> (access: 26.04.2020)

³¹ The Independent, <https://www.independent.co.uk> (access: 2.05.2020)

To trace back the history of ISIS in the Sahel, it is necessary to go back in time to 2015, when Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahraoui (a former member of the al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb) and his followers pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant³². As a result, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) was created. The group has mainly operated in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, and together with the al-Qaeda-linked Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) they are big terrorists actors in the region. Since its formation, ISGS and other ISIS affiliated groups have been increasingly active in sub-Saharan Africa³³. In recent years, a violence spiral has sharply increased as terrorists were able to expand their reach and recruit more and more followers from the poor and frustrated African young males. According to the United Nations³⁴, attacks have increased fivefold in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger since 2016, with more than 4,000 deaths counted last year.

As for the modus operandi of ISIS linked groups in the Sahel, it has several characteristic features³⁵. First of all, it is quite different from the one used by such groups in the Middle East. There are for example no “caliphates” being declared, because it may attract too much attention from the West security forces. They rather prefer to devote time to training, gathering followers and plotting attacks. What is more, the terrorists’ strategy has become more complex and organized. With a goal of penetrating a country deeper and deeper, they have been “ambushing army bases, dominating villages with surprising force, destroying infrastructure, assassinating local leaders and emptying key army posts in coordinated strikes to separate people from the government”³⁶. Next, militants have been targeting mainly impoverished communities by offering mounts of cash or by force after destroying villages. In order to reach their fanatic goals, they do not restrain from provoking ethnic conflicts in exchange for protection. Last, but not least, the extremely porous borders of West Africa favor not only internal mobility within a group, but also an increased cooperation with other jihadi groups³⁷.

A perfect example of such cooperation is the latest fusion of Al-Qaida and ISIS affiliated groups in West Africa, a phenomenon broadly reported by the worldwide press in April, 2020³⁸. Gen.

³² United Nations, “The Islamic State In the Greater Sahara”, <https://www.un.org> (access: 29.04.2020)

³³ *Ibidem*.

³⁴ United Nations, “Amid unprecedented violence. Escalation of terrorist attacks in West Africa”, <https://www.un.org> (access: 29.04.2020)

³⁵ The Washington Post, <https://www.washingtonpost.com> (access: 2.05.2010)

³⁶ *Ibidem*.

³⁷ The Independent, <https://www.independent.co.uk/> (access: 2.05.2020)

³⁸ The Washington Post, <https://www.washingtonpost.com> (access: 2.05.2020)

Anderson³⁹ emphasizes a local aspect of that collaboration and comments on some aspects that make it possible. Firstly, it is a “result of ethnic/tribal ties in the region that includes Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso”. Secondly, terrorists’ allegiances in the Sahel are more fluid than those in the Middle East, and they are strengthened by practical concerns rather than ideological matters. Finally, nothing consolidates better than a common foe – the West and local governments⁴⁰.

Finally, the last argument for the vitality of ISIS not only in Iraq and Syria, but also in Africa, will be the working of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS⁴¹. It is an international coalition of 80 countries and institutions, formed on September 10, 2014 under the US leadership. The Coalition, together with its military branch the Operation Inherent Resolve, is a main political body responsible for the counter-ISIS policy worldwide⁴². So, till the last Coalition meeting on November 14, 2019, it had never mentioned Africa as its target area of operations. It was then, when for the first time the Coalition pointed to the Sahel as the next, after the Middle East, region of a growing terrorist threat. Despite obvious lingering, the West at last decided to focus its attention at that hotbed of Islamist ideology – the Sahel – and the whole world could hear those long-awaited words of US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo who said: “ (...) there’s a growing concern about the ISIS threat outside of Iraq and Syria” and “ (...) we agreed at the working level that West Africa and the Sahel would be a preferred initial area of focus for the Coalition outside of the ISIS core space.”⁴³

CONCLUSIONS

What does it mean to defeat ISIS – a terrorist organization of the 21st century representing a new, modern face of terrorism? An organization which exists not only in reality, but also in a virtual world? An organization which does not need a territory to be active and conduct deadly attacks around the globe? An organization which after losing its all territorial caliphate is long since ready for the next phase of its existence underground? As present events prove, regaining land and killing the main leader has not been enough. All the sources cited in the paper, documents, reports, articles, officials, clearly show that ISIS terrorist activity has not weakened. On the contrary, some alert about its possible reemergence in the Middle East, and others, in ISIS vitality in Africa, see a real threat to the

³⁹ The Military Times, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news> (access: 2.05.2020).

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁴¹ U.S. Department of State, <https://www.state.gov> (access: 3.05.2010).

⁴² *Ibidem*.

⁴³ US Department of State, “Secretary Michael R. Pompeo At the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS Small Group Ministerial”, <https://www.state.gov> (access: 3.05.2020).

rest of the world. Taking everything into consideration, there seem to be some basic issues to be faced by the so called West: what has failed in the so far War on Terror strategy, how effective has it been or how counterproductive has it been?

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