

## Terror or Terrorism? Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in Comparative Perspective\*

**Aureo de Toledo Gomes**

Universidade Federal de Uberlândia, Uberlândia, Minas Gerais, Brazil

**Michelle Mitri Mikhael**

Universidade Federal de Uberlândia, Uberlândia, Minas Gerais, Brazil

The article compares al-Qaeda and ISIS, which despite similar origins have developed distinct paths and goals. According to our analytical framework, this is because al-Qaeda appears to use terror as a tool to induce other audiences into particular behaviors, expecting to change the correlation of forces in its favor in the future, while ISIS is a more complex organization whose primary goal is to build a new political order in territories it occupies. The results highlight the problems of treating both organizations as terrorist groups and contribute to debates on conceptually defining terrorism.

**Keywords:** Al-Qaeda; ISIS; terror; terrorism; Islam.

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At the moment in which this article is written, al-Qaeda, ISIS<sup>1</sup> and the phenomenon of terrorism continue to receive considerable attention in the media. Al-Qaeda, for instance, recently announced to be acting in Kashmir, increasing the possibilities of tension in that region even more<sup>2</sup>. In regards to ISIS, at least since October 2016, Iraqi forces have been gaining territory in Mosul, the second-largest city of Iraq, which had been taken by ISIS on June 10, 2014<sup>3</sup>. No less important were the terrorist attacks in Berlin<sup>4</sup> and Istanbul<sup>5</sup>, which were examples of how terrorist attacks are permeating the international context as well. For many, the above events are reverberations of what policymakers and analysts have designated as the War on Terror, results of the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers and Pentagon, whose fifteen-year anniversary was last year. Even now, Al-Qaeda is active, although perhaps more fragile since the death of Osama bin Laden in 2011. Conversely, ISIS led a geopolitical reconfiguration of the Middle East from 2014 to 2017, taking advantage of the instabilities originating from the U.S. intervention in Iraq (2003) and the civil war in Syria (2011). The most concrete example of this was the occupation of a territory the size of the United Kingdom containing approximately six million people (BYMAN, 2016, p. 136).

Notwithstanding similarities vis-à-vis origin and political/ideological orientation, the misunderstandings and differences between the two groups are public. The origin of ISIS was in particular influenced by a schism between central al-Qaeda and its franchise in Iraq, which was led at the time by the Jordanian Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. It is no coincidence that the leader of al-Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri, recently has

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<sup>1</sup> Other acronyms have been used to designate ISIS, such as ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant – ISIL) or even its Arabic acronym Daesh. In this article, following Stern and Bergen (2015), we opt to use ISIS.

<sup>2</sup> Available at <<http://www.newsweek.com/kashmir-has-new-insurgent-group-al-qaeda-643348>>. Accessed on August 05, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> After more than 100 days of battle, Mosul was retaken by Iraqi forces. Available at <<http://www.nytimes.com/reuters/2017/01/23/world/middleeast/23reuters-mideast-crisis-iraq-mosul.html>>. Accessed on January 25, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> On December 19, 2016, the Tunisian Anis Amri drove a truck through a Christmas Market in Berlin, killing at least 12 people and wounding another 48. Available at <[http://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2016/12/19/internacional/1482176155\\_449814.html](http://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2016/12/19/internacional/1482176155_449814.html)>. Accessed on January 14, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> ISIS claimed authorship of the terrorist attack carried out on December 31, 2016, which killed 39 people and wounded 61 in the Reina nightclub in Istanbul. Available at <[http://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2017/01/01/internacional/1483227908\\_693066.html](http://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2017/01/01/internacional/1483227908_693066.html)>. Accessed on January 14, 2017.

denounced the extremist excesses of ISIS, which suggests that both organizations compete for supporters around the world<sup>6</sup>. One can see that, despite the initial similarities, the two groups behave differently. As a result, based on a synthesized framework, we organize this analysis around two questions: What are the logics of action for the two groups? What are the implications of these logics for their behavior?

The argument to be developed is the following: while al-Qaeda seems to use terror with the intention of inducing a certain behavior in another public that can alter the correlation of forces in its favor for the future, given that it is a weak actor vis-à-vis its principal contender, ISIS is a more complex organization that is also interested in installing a new political order in the territories that it occupies. Such logics and objectives therefore produce different behaviors despite political and ideological similarities.

The article is structured into three sections. First, we conduct a literature review about the academic production on terrorism studies, adding our analytic framework. The second section starts by examining al-Qaeda, followed by ISIS. Finally, we present our final conclusions.

### Debates about terrorism

Based on reviews from Reid (1997) and Ranstorp (2009), it is possible to identify stages in what is conventionally called terrorism studies. According to them, systematic and consistent research can be found starting in the 1970s, with Gurr (1970), Rapaport (1971) and Crenshaw (1972). To some degree, it is possible to argue that the main trigger for these investigations was the concept of urban guerrilla warfare, stemming from experiences with groups such as Baader Meinhof in Germany and the Red Brigades in Italy. Among the main findings of this group of studies was one argument about the political nature of terrorism — in other words, how the logic of action of these groups longed for the reversal of a particular status quo.

If this first stage included the publication of important work and the emergence of notable research centers, such as the RAND Corporation program on terrorism led by Brian Jenkins in 1972, the interval between the 1980s and 1990s was

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<sup>6</sup> Available at <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/al-qaeda-leader-ayman-al-zawahiri-isis-madness-lies-extremism-islamic-state-terrorist-groups-compete-a7526271.html>>. Accessed on January 14, 2007.

one of relative stagnation. According to Ranstorp (2009), the number of books and articles, the level of collaborations, and the sources of financing all declined in relation to the previous period. Furthermore, adds Reid (1997), most publications were the products of a small group of researchers, who established important conceptual and methodological milestones in the field, as well as research topics.

It is from this period that the controversial concept of new terrorism emerged. Initially developed to reflect the terrorist attacks in Lebanon during the 1980s, but reinforced by the World Trade Center explosion in 1993 and the sarin gas attacks on the Tokyo metro in 1995 (Nasser, 2014), the propagators of the idea argued that a qualitative transformation had occurred in the practice of terrorism. In contrast to the terrorism of the 1960s and 1970s, new terrorism had cultural and religious matrices. Additionally, they argued that a technological transformation had created the conditions for disproportionate actions, which could culminate in a much larger number of victims.

The literature produced up to that point was heavily criticized. For some, the conclusions reached were naïve descriptions, speculative comments, and prescriptions without either theoretical or empirical bases (GURR, 1988). For others, the field was static, with the same hypotheses and definitions always continuing to be analyzed and assimilated (REID, 1997). No less important, Silke (2004) questioned the insulation of researchers in this period, restricted to secondary sources and without the necessary engagement with fieldwork.

The growth in academic production about terrorism came from the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. According to estimates made by Ranstorp (2009, p. 17), while there had been just over 100 peer-reviewed articles published in 2001, the number rose drastically by 2007, when there were more than 2,300 citations. Furthermore, Silke (2009, p. 34) adds that, before 2001, 1,310 books with the expression 'terrorism' had been published, but by June 2008, that number had risen to 2,281 volumes<sup>7</sup>. No less curious is what Silke (2009, p. 41) calls our attention to — in the 10 years before the September 11 attacks, little research had been conducted on al-

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<sup>7</sup> Through the CAPES journal portal ([www.periodicos.capes.gov.br](http://www.periodicos.capes.gov.br)), we looked to update the number of articles on terrorism. Using the word 'terrorism' in the title and subject as a filter and an interval of 01/01/02-12/31/16, we found 3,608 publications. We did not update the authors' numbers because they either did not make explicit the databases they used, or we did not have access to them.

Qaeda, with just two articles about it published in the top journals in the field ('Terrorism and Political Violence' and 'Studies in Conflict and Terrorism'). Given the urgency that the situation seemed to have imposed, certain topics gained special attention. Many looked to use the September 11 attacks as an empirical proof of new terrorism, echoing, to some degree, Huntington's questionable thesis of the Clash of Civilizations. Others looked to associate so-called failed states with terrorism, incentivized by the defense that the U.S. government made of that causal relationship (BUSH, 2002). Finally, there was a considerable group of studies that imposed more methodological rigor on the area. Among these studies, the works of Piazza (2006, 2008) — which questioned the connection between terrorism and failed states — and Pape (2005) — about suicide terrorism — deserve special notice (PAPE and FELDMAN, 2010).

The literature produced after September 11, despite the increase in financing and greater public interest, was heavily criticized. Among the main accusations were that: 01. Most of the conclusions still depended more on secondary sources than on primary ones, particularly research from the field; 02. The literature's focus was restricted to certain topics, especially those that were more policy-oriented, providing intellectual justifications for controversial counterterrorism practices perpetrated by the U.S. government; 03. The tendency to treat terrorism as something unprecedented and exceptional (JACKSON, 2008; RAPHAEL, 2009).

It was no coincidence that such criticisms opened the way for a fourth stage in terrorism studies, interested above all in critical analyses centered on the nature of terrorism, as well as terrorism and counterterrorism policies (SMYTH et al., 2008).

Among the questions posed to the post-September 11 work, one is of particular interest: the conceptual debate about the phenomenon of terrorism. Jackson (2008, p. 172) argues that there exist no less than 200 distinct definitions of terrorism in the literature. Moreover, Silke (2004, p. 207) concludes from 490 articles published between 1990 and 1999 that only 1.6% of them could be understood as theoretical discussions whose objective was to build a concept of terrorism. One explanation for this lacuna stems from the fact that many analysts avoided such debates by adopting the definitions of states and international organisms, which conceptualize terrorism as violence committed exclusively by non-state actors (JACKSON, 2008).

Such definitions have very little analytical use because they do not provide sufficient criteria for us to distinguish between terrorism and any other criminal act, for example. As Wight (2009) clarifies, terrorism cannot be understood, as a social and political phenomenon, solely through approaches that reduce it to a matter of individual psychology. Privileging individual motivations is to overlook structural factors, whether material or ideational, that constitute and contribute to the affirmation of the phenomenon. Paraphrasing Waltz (1979), Wight (2009) argues that a theory about terrorism should explain why such a phenomenon occurs and indicate some of the conditions that make it more or less probable, not predict when a terrorist attack will occur.

The route outlined by Wight (2009; 2015) is to interrogate terrorism starting with its relationship with the modern state. According to the author, the consolidation of the state can be understood as a long trajectory of appropriation and accumulation — of territories, people, and resources — reached through the use of violence. The success of these processes of monopolizations culminated in the acceptance of that political entity as the most legitimate, but it hides the fact that it comes from a violent history and that terrorism and other forms of non-state violence were reactions to such monopolies. In sum, the argument developed is that terrorism is a form of political violence among many others — war, insurgency, genocide, etc — whose emergence should be understood as the response to a specific sociopolitical conjuncture.

To refine the distinction between terrorism and other forms of political violence, we need to understand their strategic logics. This encompasses evaluating if acts of terror are directly or indirectly linked to the desired political changes. Within this arena of debate, we propose a distinction between two types of arguments. On the one hand, there is the idea of a direct link between the use of terror and political change. We can find this idea, for example, in the seminal work of Pape (2005), which discusses the strategic logic of suicide terrorism, and Kydd and Walter (2006), which is about terrorism strategies.

According to Pape (2005), terrorism can be understood as the use of violence by a non-state organization to intimidate a certain audience. Likewise, Pape (2005) emphasizes that, in general terms, the purposes of terrorism are recruiting more supporters and putting their opponents under duress. From this, it follows that most

campaigns of terrorism look to accomplish both of these objectives, but that there is a need to balance them and prioritize certain objectives vis-à-vis specific conjunctures. Such a necessity to prioritize culminates in different forms of terrorism.

We have, then, 'demonstrative terrorism', which looks for publicity for a certain cause. Second, the goal of 'destructive terrorism' is to coerce opponents through the threat of death and to mobilize support for its cause. Here, Pape (2005) argues that terrorists look to inflict damage on members of the target-audience, running the risk of losing others' sympathy, which is not necessarily the case with demonstrative terrorism. 'Suicide terrorism' looks to coerce the target-audience without taking into consideration if it will cause hostility, not only in relation to the act, but also vis-à-vis other observers. A distinctive trait of this type of terrorism is that the terrorist does not expect to survive the mission. Furthermore, Pape (2005) argues that the majority of terrorist attacks are not isolated acts committed by fanatical individuals, but rather parts of larger campaigns conducted by groups with the aim of achieving a certain political goal.

According to Kydd and Walter (2006), terrorism works not only because of the fact that it induces fear in target populations, but above all because it makes governments and individuals respond in the way that terrorists want. In this sense, terrorists would be too weak to impose their will directly through force. However, they would at times be strong enough to persuade audiences to do what they want because they are capable of altering the perception of these people, mainly when they are able to impose high costs and show a high degree of commitment to their cause.

Based on this argument, Kydd and Walter (2006) lay out five strategic logics for terrorism. First, we have 'the strategy of attrition', where terrorists look to persuade the enemy that they are strong enough to impose costs if a certain political orientation is maintained. There is also 'intimidation', when they look to convince a population that they are capable of punishing disobedience and that the government will not be able to stop them. The 'strategy of provocation' consists of inducing the enemy to respond to terrorism with violence, hoping that this will then make the population come to support the terrorists. 'Spoiler attacks' are efforts to convince the audience that moderate terrorists are weak and do not deserve support, making peace agreements more difficult. Finally, the strategy of 'outbidding' consists of the use of

violence to convince the public that the terrorists have greater chances of victory than rival groups, and therefore deserve their support.

Conversely, we also have the argument that the link between acts of terror and political change is indirect, exemplified in Diniz (2004) and Mendes (2014). Understanding terrorism as a social phenomenon implies discussing it in terms of its means and ends. In regard to the means used, one can usually characterize terrorism as the use of, or the threat to use, force. However, such an understanding is incomplete, given that the means used by terrorism is the use of, or the threat to use, force in a specific way: terror. Terror, therefore, is analytically different from force. In a war, for example, force has weight in and of itself given that destruction caused by it affects the balance of forces among contenders. The destruction caused by terrorism has little weight in relation to the numerical or material balance of forces in play (MENDES, 2014). The principal means of terrorism is, therefore, the psychological effect of generating fear in the population.

In regard to objectives, Diniz (2004) understands terrorism as a political phenomenon, arguing that its final objective is the altering of a given status quo. However, with the intention of avoiding generalizations, and the comparison of unlike situations to one another, Diniz (2004) differentiates what he calls "the non-terrorist political use of terror from the terrorist political use of terror" (DINIZ, 2002, p. 210).

The main difference between these two concepts lies in the link between the act and the intended political objective. In the case of the non-terrorist political use of terror, the side that makes use of terror looks to directly influence the behavior of its target. The strategic bombardment of Japan during the Second World War, which made explicit use of terror, could be considered an example of this practice (MENDES, 2014). Concerning the terrorist political use of terror, on the other hand, this link is indirect. Assuming that the entity making use of terror does not currently have the capacity to achieve its objectives, the use of terror is an attempt to alter the correlation of forces in its favor in the future, raising awareness for its cause and/or denouncing the abuses perpetrated by its opponent. As we understand it, this analytical distinction is important, because it allows us to distinguish between terrorist actors by the use of terror. Furthermore, it does not exclude 'a priori' a certain grouping from being understood as a state actor.



Anchored in such a distinction, we present below the delimiting axes for a comparison between al-Qaeda and ISIS.

**Table 01.** Axes of analysis

Context of origin:	Verify what led to the groups' emergence
Objectives:	Evaluate what status quo it seeks to alter
Methods of action:	Analyze the means used to achieve its objectives and their link — direct or indirect — with those objectives

The next section will analyze al-Qaeda. Afterwards, we will outline ISIS.

## Al-Qaeda<sup>8</sup>

### Context of origin

The formation of al-Qaeda cannot be separated from the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. During the period of 1973-1978, Afghanistan was governed by Daoud Khan, who ended the monarchical regime, declaring the country a republic. Despite initially having the support of Communists, Daoud Khan began to pivot to the right in 1977, in the light, above all, of a deep recession that was affecting the country. The search for higher external revenue and the decrease in Afghanistan's dependence on the Soviets were two factors that led the Afghan government to open conversations with Iran, encouraged by the U.S., which resulted in US\$2 billion being directed to Kabul over a period of 10 years (EWANS, 2002).

This conjuncture exacerbated the opposition to Daoud Khan, uniting diverse factions of the Communist Party. The final straw for the coup d'état was Daoud Khan's attempt to remove all Communists from the Army, the main institution for controlling the country. As a result, Moscow, afraid of being jettisoned from the political scene in Afghanistan, arranged for the unification of the Communists and the removal of Daoud Khan. Thus, after the assassination of Daoud Khan and his entire family, the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan emerged between April 27-30, 1978.

From its beginning, the new government initiated several reforms inspired by the Soviet model, with the intention to modernize the country. The new laws, however

<sup>8</sup> Given the purposes of the article, a more detailed history of al-Qaeda is outside our scope. For this, we suggest Coll (2004).

— above all, those pertaining to marriage and agrarian reform — were not well-received by the population, and any demonstration of opposition or dissatisfaction was brutally put down by the government (COLL, 2004).

The year of 1979 was the stage for other important events in the Middle East as well. The Iranian Revolution happened in January, deposing Shah Reza Pahlavi and installing a Shiite theocracy in the country. In November, an attempt to capture the Great Mosque of Mecca by groups opposed to the Al Saud monarchy marked the first big revolt against the Saudi government since its establishment. In light of this international juncture — it was feared that Afghanistan could be on the path to an eventual Iranian solution — and fearing the domestic collapse of the Communist regime in Kabul, the USSR invaded Afghanistan on December 24, 1979 (SAIKAL, 2004).

The presence of a foreign power on Afghan soil was an important catalyst for the formation of a resistance. Despite the geopolitical interests involved in weakening the presence of the USSR in the region (above all, the U.S. and countries such as Saudi Arabia and Pakistan) (COLL, 2004), there was symbolism around this occasion. It had to do with a Communist state invading a Muslim country, providing airs of war to the defense of Islam. As a result, in August 1988, during a private meeting in the city of Peshawar, bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri and Abdullah Azzam<sup>9</sup> founded al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda had the purpose of channeling combatants and funds to the Afghan resistance but, after the withdrawal of Soviet troops, it began to accompany the struggles of Muslims around the world, including rebellions against regimes considered apostates (BYMAN, 2015a)<sup>10</sup>.

After the Soviet debacle in Afghanistan, bin Laden returned to Saudi Arabia. However, he found U.S. troops who had been installed there since the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, an act he considered unacceptable because it implied the presence of foreigners in sacred Muslim lands. This was how his already-explicit opposition to the U.S. increased, as well as his antagonism to the Saudi regime, and it led him to get involved with groups opposed to the Al Saud monarchy. As a result of these acts, bin

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<sup>9</sup> Professor at the King Abdul Aziz University in Saudi Arabia and a respected scholar of Islam. One of the intellectual mentors of Osama bin Laden, he died after a car bomb in Peshawar, Pakistan, in 1989.

<sup>10</sup> An apostate is a person who renounces a religion, political belief, or principles. In traditional Islamic law, apostasy is considered the conscious abandonment of Islam by a Muslim by means of his words or actions.

Laden became a 'persona non grata' in the country, with exile (initially in Sudan, between approximately 1991 and 1992) the only option remaining for him (COLL, 2004).

In Sudanese territory, bin Laden and al-Qaeda found the essential conditions to develop the group by means of an agreement with Sudan's government. On the one hand, through his personal fortune, bin Laden contributed to the construction of infrastructure projects in Sudan. On the other hand, the Sudanese government provided them with, for example, training camps and other conditions for their operations (MIGAUX, 2007). The honeymoon between Khartoum and al-Qaeda, however, did not last very long, because bin Laden's activities began to draw the attention of the Persian Gulf monarchies. Therefore, Middle Eastern countries' pressure on Sudan increased, particularly for bin Laden's expulsion. With the imposition of international sanctions in 1996, the Sudanese government saw no other option but to ask bin Laden and his comrades to leave the country (BYMAN, 2015a).

Al-Qaeda's next destination was Afghanistan, at the time dominated by the Taliban regime. According to Stern and Bergen (2015, p. 179), al-Qaeda subordinated itself, at least formally, to the Taliban through a commitment agreed to by bin Laden and Mullah Omar, the Taliban's leader at the time. At the beginning of 1997, the Taliban authorized the opening of training camps in Afghanistan for al-Qaeda's use. Estimates highlight that between 10,000 and 20,000 volunteers were trained after bin Laden gained control of those spaces (9/11 COMMISSION REPORT, 2004, p. 67). This aid, however, was not free: US\$20-30 million of al-Qaeda's annual pre-9/11 budgets would fill the Taliban's coffers every year (BYMAN, 2015a, p. 22).

After the 9/11 attacks, the pressure on the Taliban to turn over bin Laden increased extraordinarily. In response to the regime's refusal to do so, Operation Enduring Freedom was launched on October 7, 2001. On November 13, 2001, the Taliban fell, but neither its main leaders nor bin Laden were found. It is estimated that al-Qaeda lost at least 80% of its members and training camps (BYMAN, 2015a, p. 42). However, even though its capacity to act was harmed, al-Qaeda played prominent roles in other terrorist attacks, particularly an attack on a synagogue in Tunisia, an explosion in a nightclub in Bali (both in 2002), explosions in train stations in Madrid in 2004, and metro stations in London in 2005. Finally, in May 2011, bin Laden was assassinated by U.S. troops in Abbottabad, Pakistan, bumping al-Zawahiri up to the top of al-Qaeda.

## Objectives

The origin contexts above synthesize evidence that the rise of al-Qaeda came from a turbulent relationship between the West and the Muslim world. As a result, the status quo that they intended to alter was one of asymmetry in which, from the perspective of contemporary militant Islamist groups, Islam was being continually and constantly attacked by Western countries, particularly by the interference of the U.S. and its allies in the Middle East. It was no coincidence that al-Qaeda proposed three main goals. First, it was to serve as a terrorist group in and of itself. Second, it was to act as an organizer, recruiter, and logistical provider for other militant Muslims, incentivizing them to fight beyond Afghanistan. Furthermore, al-Qaeda was to be the vanguard of the resistance, unifying and leading the jihadist movement and providing it with purpose and direction (BYMAN, 2015a).

It is, however, important for us to avoid analyses that tend to understand Islamist militants, above all the most violent ones, as nothing more than contemporary expressions of obscurantisms whose primary target is Western modernity. According to Esposito (2005), movements and groups such as al-Qaeda are manifestations of contradictions of modernity itself which had Europe as a spearhead and was projected to the world not only through technical/scientific, military, and economic dominance, but also through European colonization.

One can therefore argue that, at least since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Muslim world has seen itself as being in decline, particularly in relation to European countries. Given this scenario, several thinkers have connected this situation to the deviations of Muslim governments from Muhammad's teachings. One of the most well-known movements coming from this juncture was Wahhabism, founded by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1792). Basically, Wahhab proclaimed that the solution to the social and political problems of the time was a return to the eternal and infallible sources of Islam: the Qur'an and the Sunnah<sup>11</sup>. More recently, especially from the 1950s and 1960s on, we have the influence of Sayyid Qutb. Qutb became the main ideological leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, articulating a vision of Muslim society divided between two distinct and irreconcilable fields: the believers and the unbelievers. Likewise, Qutb

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<sup>11</sup> The fundamental and canonical sources of Islam are the Qur'an and the Sunnah (examples) of Muhammad, brought together in collections of records of his words and feats. For discussions about Muslim fundamentalism and political Islam, see Roy (1994).

considered the assertion of an Islamic state indispensable because it would be through it that God's designs on the Earth would be realized (ESPOSITO, 2005).

Consequently, it does not seem unreasonable to us to state that the political objectives of al-Qaeda reflect, to some degree, the political and ideological imagery coming from this complex context. They were certainly influenced by the ideas of Qutb, who considered the West to be a historical enemy of Islam, and that jihad<sup>12</sup> (which was understood by him to be an armed struggle) was the only way out of that situation. Bin Laden and his comrades saw government actors' deviations from Muslim teachings and foreign actors' interference as the causes of decadence in the Muslim world. It is no coincidence that the U.S. was always prominent in the public pronouncements of al-Qaeda. In 1992, al-Qaeda published a 'fatwa'<sup>13</sup> calling for jihad to combat the U.S.'s occupation of Saudi Arabia and other Muslim lands. In addition, in a 'fatwa' published in 1996, it criticized Saudi Arabia and the U.S. presence in the Arabian Peninsula, relating local struggles to the global anti-U.S. struggle.

In that same 1996 'fatwa', there were countless accusations against the Saudi regime, which in addition to having allowed infidels to enter the Holy Land — the most sacred places for Muslims, Mecca and Medina, are in Saudi Arabia — also suspended Islamic law, wasted the oil wealth of the country, and ignored the Palestinian cause, among other crimes (BYMAN, 2015a). Furthermore, it also declared al-Qaeda's support for the conflicts in Chechnya, Bosnia, and Palestine. However, for bin Laden, the first step was to defeat the U.S. so that victory could then be achieved in these local conflicts (COLL, 2014).

To sum up, we can conclude that the political objective of al-Qaeda, reflecting in part the political and ideological orientations of fundamentalist Muslim imagery, is to revert what they consider to be the Muslim world's situation of submission vis-à-vis the West. The initial goal would be to concentrate efforts against the U.S., considering it the main cause of the missteps of the countries of the regions. The next step would then be

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<sup>12</sup> Jihad is a term with many possible meanings, usually divided between lesser and greater jihad. Greater jihad refers to the effort or struggle of the believer to stay faithful to God's designs. Lesser jihad is a combination of external efforts to protect the community and the faith from external attacks (NASSER, 2014).

<sup>13</sup> According to Roy (1994), a 'fatwa' is a legal decision, issued by a religious authority, that discusses topics not mentioned in traditional Muslim sources. It also clarifies the most correct interpretation of Islamic norms.

to overthrow the apostate regimes, creating the conditions for the emergence of authentic Muslim governments.

### **Methods of action**

The definition of the U.S. as the primary target of al-Qaeda points to an asymmetry of forces between the contenders: it deals with an organization that, in 2001, had 70,000 members spread out in cells in at least 60 countries (WILLIAMS, 2002, p. 06) versus the main military power of the world. It is our framework that lets us define al-Qaeda as a terrorist group. According to Diniz, "terrorism is intrinsically, and not just empirically, a stratagem of the weak" (DINIZ, 2004, p. 212). We then have the use of terror with the intention to alter the correlation of forces, but it is not expected that the terrorist act in itself will directly alter the result in favor of the group.

The statement above can be evaluated by looking at the concrete impacts of the terrorist attacks. By way of illustration, it is estimated that the execution of the 9/11 attacks cost about US\$500,000 (BYMAN, 2015a, p. 32) and culminated in the death of 2,977 people, along with the additional cost of US\$40 billion relative to the insurance of the Twin Towers and nearby buildings (BAUMANN, 2014, p. 90). Note, therefore, that significant damage was caused, but that the correlation of forces between the U.S. and al-Qaeda was certainly not affected.

Besides, the statement cited above can also be evaluated through the prism of al-Qaeda's finances. Most of their resources are directed to carrying out terrorist attacks<sup>14</sup>, but they also subsidize affiliated networks, as well as provide resources for cells spread out through other countries and for the families of terrorists who have been imprisoned or killed. With relation to revenue, al-Qaeda seeks to not restrict itself to just one sponsor country. Initially, the personal fortune of bin Laden financed their actions<sup>15</sup>, but after their expulsion from Saudi Arabia, bin Laden had his personal resources blocked by the government.

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<sup>14</sup> According to data assembled by Byman (2015a, p. 111), other terrorist attacks provoked by al-Qaeda were also relatively cheap. According to Byman, the attack on the USS Cole destroyer in 1998 costed US\$10,000, just like the attacks in Madrid (2004). The cost of the attacks on the London metro were somewhere around 8,000 GBP.

<sup>15</sup> It is estimated by something around US\$1 million were sent annually by his family, above all from 1994 on (9/11 COMMISSION REPORT, 2004, p. 170).

As a result, al-Qaeda had to diversify its sources of income. From then on, the most notable sources were donations raised from Muslim groups and millionaires from Arab countries who were sympathetic to the jihadist cause (9/11 COMMISSION REPORT, 2004). Furthermore, in addition to being a propaganda tool, the Internet showed itself to be capable of being an efficient means for obtaining resources because al-Qaeda and various other groups began to use it to raise and transfer resources (JACOBSON, 2010). We should also draw attention to the financing coming from criminal activities; according to reports, kidnapping has become an important source of resources and, at least since 2008, the sum raised from it adds up to about US\$125 million<sup>16</sup>.

Despite these diverse sources of financing, this total would not sustain a direct confrontation with the U.S.; it does, however, allow for the funding of terrorist acts. We therefore have more important evidence that the link between the acts and al-Qaeda's political objective is indirect, which allows us to categorize al-Qaeda as a terrorist group in the terms we have proposed here.

## ISIS<sup>17</sup>

### Context of origin

If the origin of al-Qaeda was a response to the Soviet invasion to Afghanistan, the rise of ISIS is related to the U.S. military intervention in Iraq in 2003. Of particular relevance to the initial history of the group is the trajectory of the Jordanian terrorist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, whose brutality earned him the title 'Sheikh of the Assassins' (BYMAN, 2016, p. 131). Zarqawi even went to Afghanistan to fight against the Soviets, but returned to Jordan at the end of the conflict, ending up participating in groups opposed to the government. However, he was arrested in 1992 after batches of explosives were found in his possession. It was during his time in prison that Zarqawi had his first contact with Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, one of the most important contemporary jihadist preachers, who would end up becoming his intellectual mentor (WARRICK, 2015).

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<sup>16</sup> Available at < <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/30/world/africa/ransoming-citizens-europe-becomes-al-qaedas-patron.html>>. Accessed on January 28, 2017.

<sup>17</sup> A detailed historical panorama of ISIS is outside the scope of this article. For this subject, we suggest Stern and Berger (2015).

After leaving prison in 1999, Zarqawi returned to Afghanistan, seeking the support of bin Laden in order to build his organization. In a meeting with leaders of al-Qaeda, Zarqawi asked for financial help to begin his activities, even though, at that moment, he had refused to swear loyalty (McCANTS, 2015). Furthermore, bin Laden and Zawahiri disagreed with the extremist views of Zarqawi, particularly with his emphasis on attacking Shiites, who the Jordanian accused of betrayal. Despite their differences, both groups managed to work together, above all because of the fact that Zarqawi operated in the Levant — a region that spans from Jordan to Syria — where al-Qaeda was fragile.

The U.S. military intervention in Iraq in 2003 was an important watershed moment in this story. Chosen by then-President George W. Bush to command the provisional authority of Iraq, Paul Bremer took two decisions that contributed to increasing the destabilization of the country. Upon dissolving the Iraqi army and firing all members of the Baath party from public service positions, Bremer created more than 100,000 unemployed Baathists, supplying skilled human resources to the insurgency (STERN and BERGEN, 2015, p. 19).

In 2004, taking advantage of this situation, Zarqawi swore loyalty to bin Laden, giving birth to al-Qaeda in Iraq. This association brought benefits for both groups. While the use of the name al-Qaeda made Zarqawi gather support and notoriety among Iraqi jihadists, al-Qaeda began to become a powerful associate in the region (McCANTS, 2015). Despite these gains, the relationship continued to be permeated with divergences because bin Laden and Zawahiri were pressing for terrorist attacks focused on U.S. targets as opposed to attacks on Shiites and Sunnis who were considered apostates.

After the death of Zarqawi in June 2006 and a series of attacks on al-Qaeda in Iraq when Sunni tribes allied with the U.S., the group was almost annihilated. Bin Laden and Zawahiri looked to intervene, advising the remnants to discard the objectives and tactics designed by Zarqawi and to seek the support of the local population. The decision taken, however, went contrary to that advice. Shortly before his death, Zarqawi had founded a council composed of various jihadist groups acting in Iraq because he recognized that it made no sense for al-Qaeda in Iraq to compete with them. This council then announced the formation of the Islamic State of Iraq, leading Abu Hamza al-Muhajir, Zarqawi's successor, to swear loyalty to this new body, which was led by Abu Omar al-Baghdadi. The tactic of attacking civilians continued to be used, with an average



of 53 people killed every 24 hours by the group in 2006 (STERN and BERGEN, 2015, p. 27).

However, in 2010, the Islamic State of Iraq seemed to have its days numbered. The U.S. had been able to eliminate Abu Omar al-Baghdadi and other members, weakening the group despite the emergence of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as a new leader. Two events, however, ended up helping the Islamic State of Iraq survive. First, after the withdrawal of U.S. troops in 2011, the Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki began to persecute Sunnis in the country; the prime example of this was the imprisonment of Vice President Tariq Hashimi because of accusations of terrorism. Later, in the parliamentary elections of 2014, Maliki ran on an electoral platform that portrayed him as a candidate capable of defending Shiites from a Sunni counter-revolution (COCKBURN, 2015, p. 88). Such a stance galvanized Sunni resistance, throwing it into the arms of extremist movements acting in the country, especially the Islamic State of Iraq.

The second event was the emergence of the civil war in Syria in 2011. If the sectarianism between Sunnis and Shiites in Iraq was of the utmost importance in allowing for the regrouping of the Islamic State of Iraq, the Syrian context allowed al-Baghdadi to expand his operation radius. The border between Syria and Iraq had always been porous, which allowed jihadists to penetrate Iraqi territory. Jihadist groups now returned to Syrian territory and destabilized the country even more. The Islamic State of Iraq took advantage of this situation and entered the conflict, especially through the Jabat al-Nursa organization, which was formed in January 2012. Even so, Jabat al-Nursa opted to follow guidelines from central al-Qaeda, that is, to garner the support of the local population, cooperating with other groups and avoiding brutality (BYMAN, 2016).

This formed, therefore, the framework for the schism between al-Qaeda and ISIS. On April 09, 2013, Baghdadi announced the fusion of Jabat al-Nursa with his group, creating the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL or ISIS) and awarding himself the title of leader of both organizations. The leaders of Jabat al-Nursa appealed to Zawahiri, and on February 02, 2014, al-Qaeda repudiated this unification, denying any relationship with ISIS and absolving itself from responsibility for any of its actions (STERN and BERGEN, 2015, p. 43). Finally, on July 04, 2014, after taking large portions of Syrian and Iraqi territories, Baghdadi declared the formation of a new caliphate, occupying the position of caliph himself.

## Objectives

Like Al-Qaeda, the origin contexts cited above point to the relevance that U.S. interference in the Middle East, and the military intervention in Iraq, in particular, had on ISIS's emergence. Likewise, the status quo that it so longed to alter was also one of asymmetry between Muslim countries and the West. The difference, as one will see, rests in the justifications for the goals sought by ISIS, as with the means of action, which will be explored in the next section.

Like al-Qaeda, ISIS also was significantly influenced by Wahhabi teachings, which rejected any religious innovation, warned against cultural influences, and argued that only some Muslims were faithful believers (McCANTS, 2015, p. 151). In ideological terms, however, the biggest difference between the groups was perhaps the apocalyptic bias of ISIS. According to McCants (2015, p. 22), a good part of its members shares the idea of the Mahdi, a prophetic figure that will lead all Muslims in a battle against the infidels. It deals with a process of purifying Islam, to the degree that some chosen ones will determine who should be extirpated from the political community, as well as those from outside it who threaten that same community. Furthermore, Baghdadi, in addition to having a degree in Islamic studies from the University of Baghdad and having worked as an Imam in Baghdad and Fallujah, considers himself to be a direct descendant of the prophet Muhammad, which would legitimize even more his interpretation of Muslim teachings.

This vision of the world presents relevant implications, above all about the definition of enemies of the caliphate. Among its list of antagonists, ISIS believes that it must begin to eliminate those who are closest, such as the Shiites and Kurds, for example. In this sense, al-Baghdadi draws from the same belief as Zarqawi about the necessity of a strong territorial base in the Middle East, without which his struggle will fail (NAPOLEONI, 2016). In the last instance, the objective of ISIS, according to Stern and Bergen (2015), is the formation of a transnational caliphate that needs, however, a local starting point. The U.S. and other European countries certainly are on the list of targets, as are the apostate monarchies of the Persian Gulf, the Alawite regime of Syria, and the Shiite governments of Iraq and Iran. It is for this reason that ISIS's resources and actions are dedicated primarily to these local and regional theaters, or, as Zarqawi used to say, "the road to Palestine passes through Amman" (cited in WARRICK, 2015, p. 65).

All told, the political objective of ISIS is also the reversal of the situation of the Muslim world's submission. However, in contrast to al-Qaeda, such a reversal has, as stages, the territorial affirmation of ISIS, which implies the definition of local and regional enemies. This is to be carried out without overlooking, however, the threat that external actors such as the U.S. offer to the fulfillment of such objectives.

### **Methods of action**

To reach the objectives delineated above, it is possible to argue that ISIS has, roughly, two types of main strategies, each of which is related to one of its tasks. With relation to the territorial consolidation of the caliphate, the strategy used is to build a state while its transnationalization involves other means, among them the terrorist political use of terror.

Both the U.S. military intervention in Iraq and the civil war in Syria can be considered destabilizers of a political order in the Levant region. It does not seem unreasonable to us to state that these events created the conditions for a political revolution, understood here in the terms of Stinchcombe (1999), as "a rapid change, at times erratic, in the relative power of social classes, ethnicities, regions, political parties, military groups" (STINCHCOMBE, 1999, p. 51), among others. Stinchcombe (1999) defends the argument that revolutions end as long as the governments that emerge from them are able to brake the rhythms of changes in relative power and reduce the uncertainties about who and what policies will govern in the long term. Taking this path, it seems to us that the events above allowed for ISIS to undertake a war of conquest on the territories and incite a political revolution in the region. The conquest of a territory the size of the United Kingdom is a more concrete example of this. The second step, however, is understanding which strategies for political stabilization ISIS used.

Appropriating Stinchcombe's (1999, p. 62) typology for ourselves<sup>18</sup>, ISIS is stabilizing its domain through what Stinchcombe designates 'totalitarianism'. In general, totalitarian regimes stabilize themselves by imposing power bargains between classes,

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<sup>18</sup> This typology presents the additional following ideal types. 'Conservative authoritarianism' is a regime that maintains many of the pre-revolution elite's privileges. 'Independence' is the situation exemplified when a colony achieves independent-country vis-à-vis its old metropolis. 'Occupation governments' are those imposed by victorious parties after a conflict. 'Democracies', in turn, are governments in which a group of citizens, through legal means, can defeat the current government and define its substitute. Finally, 'caudillismo' is when the government of a certain country is successively filled by notable figures that can only stabilize it provisionally.

parties, ethnicities, etc. through authoritarian methods, maintaining the privileges of old elites. At the same time, they incorporate old structures of power with a new political apparatus, interested above all in a continuous ideological transformation.

For the case in point, the organization structure of ISIS is based on the idea of 'wilayat', or provincial subdivisions with their own governors and administrative units that, to some degree, replicate governmental structures (STERN and BERGEN, 2015, p. 51). This has to do with an organization with a reasonable level of sophistication, that counts on an itinerant judiciary system and police force that execute their sentences in public (NAPOLEONI, 2016, p. 72). Such an institutional design has as a goal not only the control of the areas it has seized, but also that of minimizing the impact that the occasional death of one of its leaders could have on the functioning of the organization.

In addition to political bargains with the population for the establishment of a new government structure, another strategy of the foremost importance is the provision of services. According to Napoleoni (2016, p. 18), reports from residents of territories under ISIS domination have indicated that the arrival of the group has coincided with improvements in administration and in the daily functioning of its villages. ISIS has renovated roads and highways, improvised free community kitchens and looked to guarantee the supply of energy. Furthermore, it has also provided social programs, such as vaccination campaigns (NAPOLEONI, 2016, p. 60). These actions are evidence not only of a preoccupation in establishing legitimacy with the populations of the occupied territories, but they also point to efforts to control the territories because, for example, the repair of highways is fundamental for the movement of troops.

However, we cannot forget another facet that has made ISIS become known worldwide: the episodes of abuse and violence perpetrated in its territories. There are many cases of children recruited for combat who, in their training, learn, among other things, to decapitate people (STERN and BERGEN, 2015, p. 211). No less revolting are the occurrences of abduction and slavery, targeted primarily against ethnic and religious minorities. According to data from August 2014, at least 7,000 women have been captured (STERN and BERGEN, 2015, p. 216). Furthermore, the population that lives in the dominated territories is obligated to adopt ISIS's radical worldview or face death by execution (NAPOLEONI, 2016, p. 16).

These and other examples allow us to state that ISIS's strategy of local control entails the provision of services and the non-terrorist use of terror, that is, that the use

of terror is directly linked to the objective of controlling the local population in the present moment. The construction undertaken by ISIS echoes the analogy of Tilly (1985) about the formation of European states: it has to do with a protection racket that extracts resources from the population to protect it from threats — be they real, imaginary, or even results of the actions of the government itself.

With respect to the transnationalization of the caliphate, Stern and Bergen (2015, pp. 281-282) emphasize a strategy that has seven main stages: 01. Establish a presence in societies marked by sectarian, tribal, ethnic, and political tensions; 02. Accentuate these divisions by making use of calculated terrorist attacks, creating internal conflicts or even external confrontations between potential adversaries with the purpose of undermining morale and strength; 03. When the military control of territories is possible, extract all resources possible in order to finance additional expansion; 04. Use, in a planned way, propaganda to air an image of strength; 05. Inspire local leaders and other organizations to swear loyalty to the caliphate; 06. Indoctrinate recruits with the apocalyptic world view of ISIS; and 07. Inspire lone-wolf attacks, that is, attacks from individuals who are sympathetic to the cause, even if not necessary directly linked to the organization.

One can see more clearly that it is in this sphere of activity that the terrorist political use of terror is employed. Some of the stages highlighted above, primarily the second, fourth, and seventh, make use of terror to try to transform in the future the correlation of forces on behalf of ISIS.

Like with the case of al-Qaeda, we can also compare ISIS's complexity through the prism of its finances. As opposed to bin Laden's al-Qaeda, which to a large degree depended on donations, there are reports that Baghdadi's organization administers various financial resources, especially stemming from the annexation of production centers and oil fields. The exportation of petroleum, for example, generates something around US\$2 million per day, without even mentioning the fact that ISIS collects taxes on companies that negotiate in its territories, just as with kidnappings of foreigners (NAPOLEONI, 2016, p. 26). It is estimated that ISIS' resources reach the figure of US\$2 billion (NAPOLEONI, 2016, p. 27), which allows for a reasonable degree of independence for action.

Given ISIS's ambitious goals, it needs human resources, particularly soldiers, to carry them out. The total number of militants is difficult to pin down. Some assert that,

in 2016, this number was approximately 25,000 men<sup>19</sup>, while others guarantee that, at least in 2014, the total of soldiers was being underestimated, with the real number being somewhere in the vicinity of 200,000<sup>20</sup>. Even if we take the more conservative estimate, we are dealing with a number that is far from insignificant. Furthermore, the cost of a soldier for ISIS is just US\$41/month, a smaller number when compared to the US\$150/month expended by the Iraqi government (NAPOLEONI, 2016, p. 58). We should also add foreign combatants to these numbers. According to Napoleoni (2016, p. 89), it is estimated that at least 12,000 combatants act together with ISIS's ranks, with 2,200 of them coming from Europe, attracted by the possibility of contributing to the creation of a new political order in the Middle East.

### Final Considerations

Table 02 presents our comparative framework, based on the analysis carried out on this article. From the synthesis it presents, we can weave together considerations about the implications of this comparison.

The first of these is about the main conceptual difference between al-Qaeda and ISIS. According to an ISIS combatant in an interview with the New York Times, the main difference is that "al-Qaeda is an organization and we are a state"<sup>21</sup>. Through the prism adopted here, such a difference is derived from distinct political objectives, despite the two organizations mirroring the desire to reverse a status quo of the submission of the Muslim world to the West. As a result, equating both groups as terrorist would be imprecise.

ISIS is a more complex organization which ultimately aimed to reconfigure the Levant's borders. It is no coincidence that there have recently been debates interested in determining what would be the best denomination for ISIS: "a hybrid and insurgent terrorist organization" (STERN and BERGEN, 2015, p. 11) or a "quasi-state sponsor of terrorism" (BYMAN, 2016, p. 144). Furthermore, with different objectives and logics of action, the two groups have different behaviors. While al-Qaeda privileges terrorist

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<sup>19</sup> Information available at <<http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2016/02/04/size-isis-army-remains-same-since-last-year-us-official-says.html>>. Accessed on January 27, 2017.

<sup>20</sup> Information available at <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/war-with-isis-islamic-militants-have-army-of-200000-claims-kurdish-leader-9863418.html>>. Accessed on January 27, 2017.

<sup>21</sup> Available at <<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/01/world/middleeast/isis-threatens-al-qaeda-as-flagship-movement-of-extremists.html>>. Accessed on January 27, 2017.

attacks that are relatively cheap and have the goal of transforming the correlation of forces in the future, ISIS — given its ambition to have a regional foothold — makes non-terrorist use of terror while also, however, incentivizing the terrorist use of terror, above all in Europe. Such a consideration reinforces the arguments against ideas that argue for a direct causality between religion and terrorism.

**Table 02.** Al-Qaeda vs. ISIS

	Al-Qaeda	ISIS
Context of origin	1979 – Soviet invasion of Afghanistan	2003 – U.S. military intervention in Iraq 2011 – Civil war in Syria
Objectives		
Medium-term	Attack U.S. targets	Territorial consolidation of the caliphate
Final	Create the conditions for the emergence of Muslim regimes	Formation of a transnational caliphate
Methods of action		
Strategy	Medium-term objective: Terrorist political use of terror	Medium-term objective: Provision of services and the non-terrorist political use of terror for territorial consolidation
	Final objective: Not specified	Final objective: 1. Establish presence in other societies 2. Accentuate tensions 3. Extract resources 4. Propaganda 5. Attract other leaders 6. Indoctrinate recruits 7. Lone wolves
Financing	Personal fortune of bin Laden Donations Criminal activities	Their own resources Taxing Criminal activities

A second consideration is relative to combat. As we have seen, terrorism is a response to a specific sociopolitical juncture and it is therefore not possible to ignore the influence that foreign interference has had on the formation of both groups. In the case of al-Qaeda, fighting involves fewer strategies of militarization and more investments in understanding what are logistic necessities, such as how to recruit and train militants and how to cut off financing channels. With respect to ISIS, recent reports<sup>22</sup> indicate that the group lost a significant portion of its territory and resources. From a regional point

<sup>22</sup> Available at <<http://news.ihsmarkit.com/press-release/aerospace-defense-security/islamic-state-territory-down-60-percent-and-revenue-down-80>>. Accessed on August 05, 2017.

of view, one can argue that the goal of consolidating the caliphate is collapsing, but it would be hasty to argue that the group is definitively finished. As mentioned before, ISIS has two fronts of combat, and it is the regional one that is under threat now.

This brings us to one last point, which is relative to the danger posed by both groups. Byman recently (2015b) defended the argument that al-Qaeda and its affiliated networks continue to be a threat to U.S. territory, whereas ISIS is a bigger danger to the stability of the Middle East and U.S. interests elsewhere. However, if ISIS continues to lose territory, it would not seem unreasonable to predict that ISIS could also privilege a stance closer to that of al-Qaeda, incentivizing more terrorist attacks on Europe and the U.S.

Consequently, the comparison set out here incentivizes a certain research agenda even more, such as, for example, the recruitment of militant (domestic and foreign) and the actions of lone wolves, along with reinforcing the argument that terrorism is not something that has emerged spontaneously from the Middle East. On the contrary, it is intimately linked to the functioning and the contradictions of the contemporary international system.

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