



საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობების კვლევითი ფონდი  
GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

**44**

**THE ISLAMIC STATE AND THE “GREAT GAME”  
IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

*GEORGE SANIKIDZE*



**EXPERT OPINION**

**2015**



საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი  
*GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES*

## **EXPERT OPINION**

**GEORGE SANIKIDZE**

**THE ISLAMIC STATE AND THE “GREAT GAME”  
IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

**44**

**2015**



The publication is made possible with the support of the US Embassy in Georgia.

Editor: Jeffrey Morski  
Technical Editor: Artem Melik-Nubarov

All rights reserved and belong to Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form, including electronic and mechanical, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Copyright © 2015 Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies

ISSN 1512-4835  
ISBN 978-9941-0-8155-2

The Middle East has not only accumulated a number of longstanding unresolved issues but has also served as a hotbed for international terrorism. Recently, the so-called “Islamic State” issue has become the most pressing. The principal objective of the present work is the study of the essence of IS, predisposing factors and the future prospects of its existence. In addition, it should be emphasized that the discussion of the Islamic State is unfeasible without the consideration of other confrontations, regional, Western and Russian interests; as well as the clear-cut “paradoxical alliances” prevalent in the Middle East today. Naturally, one cannot ignore the Caucasus where fertile ground for Islamic radicalism abounds.

## **The Islamic State – Brief Historical Overview**

A predecessor to the Islamic State was the *Jama’at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad* or the “Organization of Monotheism and Jihad,” a terrorist militant group founded in 1999. The *Jama’at* chapters in the Diyala and Salahuddin provinces to the north of Baghdad were headed by the current leader of IS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The group, which came to operate under al-Qaeda, took part in the 2003 deposition of Saddam Hussein’s regime and the insurgency following the country’s occupation by the United States. In 2006, the group joined other insurgent Sunni groups to form the Mujahedeen Shura Council which, in October 2006, declared the establishment of the Islamic State of Iraq.

In 2004, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi founded the Iraqi branch of al-Qaeda. Al-Zarqawi made a name for himself by partaking in a number of terrorist attacks (including the car bomb attack outside the Imām ‘Alī Holy Shrine in Najaf, which claimed 95 lives). “For al-Zarqawi, his anti-Shia campaign fulfilled both the objective of jihadist/Salafist purity as well as the tactical objective of rendering Iraq ungovernable by the Shia dominated government.”<sup>1</sup> In June 2006, al-Zarqawi was killed during a targeted air raid carried out by the United States. Abu Ayyub al-Masri became the next leader of the group and, in October 2006, declared the establishment of the “Islamic State of Iraq” with al-Baghdadi as one of its leaders. In April 2010, al-Masri was killed as a result of a joint US-Iraqi military operation.<sup>2</sup> Following his death, al-Baghdadi became the sole leader of the “State.”

In August 2010, al-Baghdadi sent his militants to Syria after the outbreak of civil war there in March. They were joined by Syrian radical Islamists, forming the so-called “al-Nusra Front.” The group gradually gained control over Sunni-populated regions in Syria (Al-Raqqa, Idlib, Deirez-Zor and Aleppo).<sup>3</sup>

In April 2013, a statement was made announcing the official merger of the Islamic State of Iraq and the al-Nusra Front under the name of the “Islamic

State of Iraq and Syria” (ISIS) or the “Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant”<sup>4</sup> (ISIL). (In Arabic: *ad-Dawlah al-Islāmiyah fī ‘l-‘Irāq wa-sh-Shām*, acronym: Da’ish or DAESH).

In May 2014, ISIS militants occupied the key Iraqi cities of Mosul and Tikrit which laid the groundwork for ISIS-maintained control over various territories. Shortly thereafter, ISIS gained control over a number of Syrian territories, eradicating the border between Syria and Iraq.

On June 29, 2014, the group proclaimed itself to be a worldwide caliphate with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi being named as Caliph. From then on, the group became officially known as the “Islamic State” (*ad-Dawlah al-Islāmiyah*). The after the announcement, 1.2 million Iraqis were forced to abandon their homes. Before this period, not much was known about the Islamic State. “Media coverage stemming from the American War on Terror in Iraq certainly made headlines while ISIS remained relatively unknown.”<sup>5</sup> The situation was radically altered after footage depicting mass killings by IS was spread online.

In September 2014, the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) announced that the number of Islamic State militants exceeded 31,500 and continued to grow on a daily basis. Beginning from this period, the US commenced air strikes on IS positions. However, these initial operations did not cause any notable damage to the “State” which continued its expansion. As of March 2015, the group had gained control over a territory with a population of 10 million in Syria and Iraq<sup>6</sup> (in early 2014, the number of inhabitants in IS-controlled territories did not exceed 1.5 million).

The Islamic State soon amassed supporters in other regions of the Islamic world. As of June 2015, ISIS maintained official branches in Libya, Egypt (Sinai Peninsula), Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Algeria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nigeria and the North Caucasus. Outside of Iraq and Syria, IS has actual control over areas only in Sinai and Libya. In Libya, the Cyrenaica Province (Wilayat Barqa) has been established, duplicating the Iraqi and Syrian Islamic State governing model. ISIS also has members in Morocco, Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Israel and Palestine although there are no official branches in these countries.

This brief historical review will conclude in highlighting the new reality which followed the “establishment” of the Islamic State (“establishment” being placed in quotation marks due to the fact that it pertains to a more abstract rather than an actual entity with state attributes, firmly in control of territories albeit relating to a model of the Islamic State in the early Middle Ages).

By proclaiming the establishment of the Islamic State, al-Baghdadi not

only stressed the notion that international jihadism had a new hub and leadership, but also merged two virtually unrelated conflicts: the civil war in Syria and the *de facto* civil war in Iraq. This act was an expression of the internalization of the two civil conflicts. For a number of opposing sides, this also ensured the emergence of a common enemy in the Islamic State. Al-Baghdadi demonstrated that the Islamic State's ambitions go far beyond the Syrian and Iraqi civil wars and aim to establish a new political order in the Middle East.

### **The Ideology, Political Structure and Modus Operandi of the Islamic State**

IS aims to establish a state based on its own version of Islamic law which would exert control over public and even private life as well as cleanse the territories of Syria and Iraq from the "infidels" (or, at least, turn them into second-class citizens). It appears that this target has been set since 2004. The leaders of this State should be religious clerics under a Supreme Leader – the Caliph, who is believed to be a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad. To provide evidence of the above, in June 2014, the Islamic State published a document according to which its leader, al-Baghdadi, is indeed a successor of Muhammad.<sup>7</sup> As Caliph, al-Baghdadi calls for devotion from all pious Muslims worldwide. As per Muslim law, the only canon defining the Muslim way of life is the *Shariab* bestowed by God. Any secular government in Muslim countries seeks to replace Allah as the "Supreme Legislator" and the adoption of human-made laws constitutes blasphemy. Upon the establishment of the Islamic State, the following was proclaimed: "The legitimacy of all emirates, groups, states or organizations has been abolished together with the expansion of the Caliphate's authority and the entrance of its troops into these regions."<sup>8</sup>

The ideology of the Islamic State is grounded in the so-called Salafist movement. This is an allegedly conservative, but simultaneously extremist, interpretation of Islam. Jihadist Salafists condone violence in the name of religion and declare anyone who fails to accept this interpretation as infidels and renegades. Religious police strictly monitor the observance of the obligation to prayer. Non-Sunni religious buildings are demolished.

The Islamic State seeks to establish throughout the territory under its control an education system based on its vision which entirely consists of the version of Islam preached by IS. Music, sports and numerous other subjects have been extracted from the curriculum. After the occupation of Mosul, IS leaders banned the teaching of art, music, national history [and] literature from the school curriculum while patriotic songs [were] declared blasphemous.<sup>9</sup> Music has been banned in vehicles, events, shops and public places.

The Islamic State is conducting an active recruitment campaign across the Middle East and on a global scale. Reasons for joining ISIS are varied – some do so out of belief, others out of a desire to collect a reward and still others simply have no choice. As per CIA estimates, approximately 3,000 citizens of Western countries, including 100 – from the US, 500 – from the UK and 700 – from the rest of Europe, currently fight among the IS armed forces. The foreign fighters reach Syria and Iraq generally via Turkey. One interesting fact is noteworthy: polls show that more French Muslims lend their support to ISIS than Palestinian Arabs residing in the Gaza Strip.<sup>10</sup> This fact once again demonstrates that the integration of Muslims into Western European societies has frequently proven unsuccessful. Palestinian sentiments can also be easily explained – their primary objective is the establishment of a Palestinian state rather than becoming a part of an obscure religious entity.

The Islamic State ensures the financial support of its recruits whose remuneration ranges from USD 1,000 to 10,000. The recruits also receive assistance in obtaining passports, airline tickets, etc. It has been estimated that the September 11<sup>th</sup> attack was worth approximately USD 500,000 while ISIS controls much larger sums.

In order to showcase the peculiarities of the recruitment process, it would be interesting to draw parallels between al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. The two ultra-radical groups utilize different methods to attract new recruits. In order to join al-Qaeda, candidates must go through an extended process, frequently lasting several years in order to gain in-depth knowledge of the group's ideology, before they are deemed fit to carry out the jihad mission.

The recruitment process in the Islamic State is much simpler but, at the same time – much more dangerous. An ISIS recruit could be a normal youth who supports, let us say, Real Madrid or FC Barcelona, or a fan of pop stars. Such recruits frequently go unnoticed by state security services until they become directly involved in terrorist activity.<sup>11</sup> For this reason, it is exceptionally difficult to control the ISIS recruitment process.

Today, special emphasis is placed on online monitoring of radical groups whose web-pages serve as the primary source of “religious education” for young Muslims in the West.

The Islamic State also seeks to incorporate state attributes. Throughout the territories under its control, ISIS implements tax-collection; it runs shops, hospitals and various public services as well as schools and religious courts based on its interpretation of Islam.

In order to manage the “State,” organize its armed forces and increase

fighting efficiency, ISIS is in need of experienced personnel. Toward this end, the mass defections of members of the Ba'ath Party, which served as the pillar of Saddam Hussein's regime, to the extremist group proved to be a major asset. Ba'athists constitute an anti-Kurdish, anti-Iranian and anti-Shiite force in Iraq. Their 35-year rule ... gave rise to a new, ideologically processed generation, to a certain extent able to find common ground with the Islamic State.<sup>12</sup> The engagement of Ba'ath officers into jihadist ranks significantly improved the tactical and combat capabilities of the latter. However, certain issues emerge in this regard as well. Ba'athist groups have nothing in common with extremist Islamists. The alliance of IS with the former Ba'ath Party officials and military officers is based on temporarily concurrent interests and should not be considered as robust in the long-term prospect. Moreover – tensions were already emerging in early 2015 between Islamic State leaders and Ba'athist operatives appointed by them.

Maintaining established positions and the pursuit of strengthening and expansion of control calls for considerable funds. In this regard, numerous questions remain unanswered.

In most cases, the origins of a significant portion of IS revenue remain unclear. Several governments (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, even Turkey) have repeatedly been accused of funding ISIS on both unofficial and official levels (Iran, Syria). However, in this case, nothing can be ascertained given Saudi Arabia's intense controversy with the Syrian and Iranian authorities. Although, it should be noted that the Arab states, especially Saudi Arabia and its Persian Gulf allies (Turkey – to a lesser extent), saw in the Syrian civil war an opportunity to put an end to Iranian influence in the region. The secular Free Syrian Army (FSA) soon gained political and financial support from the aforementioned countries. Assistance also began to flow from Islamic "charity" organizations. A part of this aid ultimately found itself in the hands of radical Islamist groups, including the current leaders of the Islamic State.

The Islamic State collects taxes across the areas under its control (these charges being an especially heavy burden for non-Muslim repression survivors who are required to bear additional costs – the *jizya*<sup>13</sup>). Full control is imposed on the banking sector. Private property is frequently seized. Oil is also a significant source of revenue. "One US treasury official had estimated that ISIL earns \$1 million a day from the export of oil."<sup>14</sup> For instance, IS has gained control of the al-Omar oil field in Syria which produces a daily quota of approximately 75 barrels. Most of the oil is being illegally sold in Turkey.



Besides the fact that IS militants engage in the demolition of non-Sunni cultural monuments in Syria and Iraq, they also proceed to sell cultural artifacts on European markets. “It is estimated that ISIL raises US \$200 million a year from cultural looting.”<sup>15</sup>

Naturally, the Islamic State’s relations with other radical groups, primarily al-Qaeda, are a significant issue. It must be stressed from the outset that these two groups oppose each other and this controversy has a lengthy history. From the beginning, crucial differences existed between the strategies backed by al-Qaeda and al-Zarqawi. Bin Laden sought a Sunni and Shia union “against the global alliance of the infidels” while al-Zarqawi argued that apostate Shiites and moderate Sunnis presented a greater danger than the “distant enemy” – the US and its allies.<sup>16</sup> It should be noted that al-Qaeda was initially marked by a clear anti-Shiite sentiment. For instance, in 1988, bin Laden himself led Taliban fighters to quell a Shia insurgency in the Pakistani province of Gilgit which led to a massacre of hundreds of Shia civilians. However, in early 1990s, the situation changed and bin Laden spoke of the necessity for cooperation between Shia and Sunni jihadists, numerous examples of which prevail. In 2005, al-Qaeda’s second-in-command, Ayman al-Zawahiri, even sent a letter to al-Zarqawi urging him to refrain from slaughtering the Shia.

Contradictions between the future Islamic State and al-Qaeda gradually increased. In early 2014, al-Qaeda ultimately announced that it was severing all ties with ISIS. The move was not a surprise – both groups have claims to the “leadership” of the Islamic world while their specific objectives, strategies and methods of action differ.

In general, there is not only a lack of unity within radical Islamist movements but, on the contrary – sharp confrontation abounds. Currently, five different opposing forces can be identified in Syria: Assad’s government, the Islamic State, the secular Free Syria Army, al-Qaeda-affiliated radical Islamist groups and jihadist groups with no links to either al-Qaeda or IS.

It is currently evident that ISIS is firmly in control over certain areas. The group seeks to attract new combatants and establish branches in a number of countries, which is indicative of its global ambitions, as well as its aim to replace al-Qaeda in the international jihadist movement. Thus, the following is clear – the Islamic State is becoming the center of the global terrorist movement.

The Islamic State gained infamy through mass killings, filmed and circulated via social networks by the terrorists. They wanted to demonstrate their power and ensure that the world had a full understanding of their message – just how far they were willing to go in order to reach their objective.

This reality has been well-known since August 2014 when footage of the beheading of a number of Western journalists was broadcast online. Despite the fact that the journalists did no harm to the “State,” they became pawns in the IS game which it used to show to the rest of the world that it was unafraid of any threats emanating from any country.

Of course, terror, as a media strategy, is not an invention of the Islamic State leaders (this brings to mind the dissemination of footage of the execution of the Afghan President Najibullah by the Taliban in the early 1990s). However, in the era of universal access to the Internet, such constantly repeated acts have a much wider resonance and impact. The Islamic State also does not spare the so-called “apostate” Sunnis.

The killings are supplemented by the widespread release of footage depicting the demolition of non-Islamic and non-Sunni cultural monuments. The message is clear – everyone and everything that does not coincide with their perception of Islam must be destroyed. The surviving “face extremely severe conditions under such rule”. A significant number of Christian and Yezidi young women have been forced into sex slavery.

Upon the conclusion of this section, the problems currently experienced by the Islamic State should also be highlighted. First and foremost, it is the existence of a united front against the group, having brought together previously implacable adversaries. Secondly, it is noteworthy that the Islamic State does not control any seaports which raises significant issues in terms of arms supplies. Moreover, it should also be noted that the Islamic State has no air force. All of the above calls into question the future prospects for its very existence.

### **The Islamic State – A Challenge for the Existence of Iraq and Syria**

The Islamic State virtually “emerged” from two civil wars in Iraq and Syria. Unrest in Iraq commenced upon the deposition of Saddam Hussein’s regime. The Sunnis could not come to terms with their virtual removal from government which created fertile ground for the spread of radical Islamist ideas. Sectarian and ethnic confrontations (Sunnis versus the Shiites and Kurds) acquired dangerous proportions. Today, the very existence of Iraq as a state is already dubious. *Washington Post* analyst, Fareed Zakaria, expressed an opinion that nowadays Iraq exists only as an idea, not a nation.<sup>17</sup>

Unrest in Syria began at a much later time. This was where the “Arab Spring” instigated the biggest turmoil. Syria is an anomaly in the Sunni-dominated politics of the Arab world. While the majority of the population are Sunnis, the country has been ruled by the Assad’s Shia Alawite fam-

ily for almost half a century. The Alawites constitute only 12% of Syria's population.

The internationalization of civil war in Iraq and Syria precipitated an exceedingly difficult political environment, amplifying the contours of the Sunni-Shia antagonism. "Syria today is less a nation than it is a collection of warlords and their petty fiefdoms. Assad, his support from Iran notwithstanding, has become little more than just another one, albeit the largest, of those warlords."<sup>18</sup> In the long term, Islamic State fighters, who have no consistent weapons suppliers and are forced to limit themselves to whatever they seize in the battlefield, will find themselves at a disadvantage in confrontations with Syrian and Iraqi government forces, which do not lack supporters, as well as in clashes with other groups. However, the weakening of the Islamic State will not lead to the end of the civil war in Syria and is unlikely to put a stop to the political instability in Iraq.

Iraq's domestic stability is inherently linked with the outcome of the Syrian civil war. Sunni combatants in Syria lend their firm support to Iraqi Sunnis. There is no doubt that the Baghdad government will be unable to defend its border with Syria and establish peace in West Iraq without the support of the Iraqi Sunni community. As long as violence continues in Syria, and as long as the Iraqi Sunni community feels marginalized, it will be impossible to attain peace.

The rift between the two neighbors is no longer apparent today. "There are no borders, border guards, passports or armies separating Iraq and Syria anymore."<sup>19</sup> In the absence of checkpoints, terrorists move freely from one country to the other.

The situation in Syria and Iraq will lead to highly significant demographic consequences for the entire region. Once a relatively ethnically homogenous autonomous region, Iraqi Kurdistan (whose independence, according to numerous analysts, is not so distant) has been receiving large numbers of Arab refugees, currently accounting for almost a third of Iraqi Kurdistan's population (numbering at 5.2 million before the war).<sup>20</sup> The region used to be known for a clearly defined Kurdish identity whereas the wave of Arab refugees, paradoxically, fits into the framework of ISIS's antinationalist Pan-Islamist vision.

### **The Islamic State and the World**

The countries of the region, as well as the West and Russia, have a unified position in terms of the Islamic State. A declaration signed by the governments of 59 countries scrupulously establishes the common basic objectives targeted at ISIS:

- Supporting military operations, capacity building and training
- Stopping the flow of foreign terrorist fighters
- Cutting off ISIL/Daesh's access to financing and funding
- Addressing associated humanitarian relief and crises
- Exposing ISIL/Daesh's true nature (ideological delegitimization)<sup>21</sup>

Thus, they have a common enemy, but do not have common interests, which goes far beyond the borders of Iraq and Syria and encompasses the entire region. Concurrently, in order to coordinate efforts, even former enemies are obliged to compromise. In this regard, perhaps, the most distinct example is the warming of relations between the US and Iran, culminated in the signing of the comprehensive agreement on Iran's nuclear energy program. Naturally, the discussion of the agreement is not the purpose of the present paper, it must nevertheless be noted that the necessity of joint efforts to combat the Islamic State largely contributed to concessions from both sides (especially the US).

Analysts have expressed the view that while the United States has invested billions of dollars and thousands of lives since 2003 to bring Iraq into its orbit, today it is Iran that appears to have achieved that goal, albeit with far less costs.<sup>22</sup>

Iran has also always provided assistance to Assad in terms of armed forces, equipment and funds. In combating the Islamic State (with some success), the Syrian army is joined by the Lebanese "Hezbollah" which has close ties to Iran and which, in turn, also supports and lends assistance to Iraqi Kurds in the fight against ISIS.

Russia has also emerged as a party against the Islamic State. Iraq does not hold a particularly significant place in Russia's strategic interests; however, a completely different situation prevails in terms of Syria. Assad's regime has in fact only two supporters – Iran and Russia (other countries opposing the Islamic State generally back the Free Syrian Army).

Russia has maintained long-standing close ties with Assad's regime. The Tartus Port is still home to a Russian naval facility – the only Russian military base outside of the former Soviet Union. Russia is also the key weapons supplier to the Syrian government (directly or via Iran).

The principal regional opponents of Assad's regime are Israel and Saudi Arabia. At the same time, they are strongly opposed to Iran. Israel views Iran's hypothetical strengthening as a major threat to its own security while Saudi Arabia is concerned that Iran's consolidation will upset its leading positions in the region and threaten Sunni dominance. Hence, it is

no surprise that both aforementioned countries expressed strong criticism towards the Obama administration in relation to the nuclear deal reached with Iran.

Turkey's role in the Syrian civil war is rather ambiguous. From the outset, the country lent its support to the FSA. On the other hand, the Turkish government refused to allow the United States to carry out air strikes against Syria from its air base. Turkey was rather concerned about Kurdish involvement in the fight against the Islamic State and was hesitant about granting the *peshmerga*<sup>23</sup> forces the right to enter Syria through its territory in order to assist the Kurds (eventually agreeing to the arrangement).

Turkey's strained relations with Iraqi Kurdistan and Syrian Kurds are not unexpected given the current problems relating to Kurds in Turkey proper. Ankara is particularly concerned about the emergence of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) which has been declared a terrorist organization in Turkey. It is believed that approximately three thousand PKK fighters are deployed in Iraqi Kurdistan. Turkish armed forces have repeatedly invaded Iraqi Kurdistan in pursuit of PKK combatants; there have even been clashes with the *peshmerga* forces in border regions.

PKK engagement in the fight against the Islamic State can result in its removal from the list of terrorist organizations by the United States which is cause for great concern for Ankara. Turkey's main headache is that the growing links between Iraq and Syrian Kurds, Kurdistan regional government's aspirations towards independence and the perpetual unrest in Syria may indeed culminate in the establishment of a Kurdish state and the revival of Turkish Kurds' demands to either become part of the new state or establish a wide Kurdish autonomy within Turkey.

The issue of support for Syrian insurgents also impacted relations between Turkey and the US. Ankara wishes for the United States to be consistent in removing Assad from power and for the US and its allies to implement aerial attacks on Syrian armed forces. In 2014 and the first half of 2015, US air strikes were predominantly targeted at the Islamic State. Washington was initially stringent in terms of attacks carried out by Assad's forces on the civilian population and even imposed a "red line" – in case of the use of chemical weapons, the US would become directly involved in the conflict. Ostensibly, the use of chemical weapons did indeed take place although it is still unclear as to whom the culprit was. Subsequently, the United States assumed a rather ambiguous stance in terms of the future of Assad's government. Turkey fears that in order to provide assistance to Iran in the fight against the Islamic State, Washington will shelve the plans for the deposition of Assad's regime.

Thus, the countries opposing ISIS have differing views of the region's future; and these views, in many cases, are not even clearly defined.

Iran wants to maintain the incumbent regimes in both Syria and Iraq by which it hopes to increase its own influence and become the regional leader. In order to reach this objective, Iran does not hesitate to reach out to "the Great Satan" – the United States.

Saudi Arabia aims to topple Assad's regime and ensure Sunni return to power in Iraq. Through achieving these objectives, it hopes to isolate Iran (there are numerous other conflicts between these two countries – civil war in Yemen, clashes in the Persian Gulf, etc.).

The deposition of Assad's regime is also within Turkey's interests. However, Turkey's principal interest rests in obstructing the establishment of a Kurdish state (at least on Syrian territory) and, by extension, the maintenance of existing borders.

Russia, much like Iran, wishes to preserve the current Syrian government and the country's integrity by which it also hopes to reinforce its positions in the Middle East.

Israel's principal objective is to prevent the strengthening of Iran's positions. Even in the case of the persistence of Assad's regime, Iran's influence on Syria and Lebanon is likely to increase further which is why Israel is vehemently opposed to the rapprochement between the US and Iran.

The principal political actor – the United States, maintains a rather ambiguous stance. Its former bitter enemy – Iran has virtually transformed into its key ally in the fight against the Islamic State. The US backs the current Iraqi government it installed; that is, the preservation of the domination of the Shiite majority which fully corresponds to Iran's interests.

The United States no longer has a clearly defined negative stance towards Assad's regime. In spite of the regime's repressive nature, the Syrian army is currently the only force capable of successfully confronting the Islamic State.

The Kurdistan issue presents a separate challenge. Numerous analysts believe that, sooner or later, Iraqi Kurdistan will become an independent state although all of the countries involved in the current events are reluctant to officially define a clear position on this issue.

The situation at hand, in the opinion of the author, can indeed be dubbed "a Great Game" in the Middle East when the actors involved will not stop at anything to change their positions if it benefits their interests. With such a troubled region, alterations in political directions are also not ruled out in the future.

## The Islamic State and the Caucasus

It was impossible for the Caucasus, as a region bordering the Middle East, to remain outside of the events linked with the Islamic State.

From the very beginning, ISIS designated Russia as one of its principal enemies due to its support for Assad's regime as well as its persecution of Islamists in Chechnya and Dagestan. The conflict in the North Caucasus continues and "given the turbulence of Russian politics and the unpredictable dynamics of the Muslim world, its sudden aggravation is possible."<sup>24</sup> For over twenty years, Russia has been waging war in the North Caucasus and is unaware of how to bring it to an end.

Today, numerous Caucasian Muslims enlist themselves among the ranks of IS militants. According to various sources, their numbers range from 700 to 2,500. It is estimated that up to 100 Muslims have left Georgia to fight for the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (mainly from the Pankisi Gorge although also from Ajara and ethnic Azerbaijani regions in East Georgia).

A "wandering jihadist" has become a new profession. They have perfectly mastered the art of border crossing. They are well-armed and skilled in warfare. Their brutality is vast and their morale – high.

In June 2015, the Islamic State issued a statement on the establishment of the Caucasus Vilayat (the Wilayat Qawqaz). So far, there is conflicting information on whether the "Vilayat" is an ally to the "Caucasus Emirate" or whether IS aims to establish a single "virtual" state or if we are dealing with a confrontation between radical Islamists.<sup>25</sup> There is evidence that the majority of the leaders of the "Caucasus Emirate" are negatively predisposed to IS fighters. The Islamic State is not yet popular and powerful enough in the North Caucasus. However, analysts do not rule out the possibility of the escalation of destabilization in the region according to the Syrian scenario; that is, a war among the jihadists.<sup>26</sup>

And finally, what threat does the Islamic State pose to Georgia? I share the view that "Georgia, as a territory, is not an object of direct interest in the absence of appropriate conditions – especially a multitude of supporters."<sup>27</sup>

However, unfortunately, it happens so that Georgian citizens, young people (even children), find themselves via Turkey in IS-controlled areas and enlist in the ranks of the militants. This, of course, is a serious problem although, naturally, it does not entail a mass event – Georgia is a small country and such sentiment is uncommon among the local Muslim community.

I also partially agree with the idea that the radicalization of Muslim youth

is triggered by the social and economic problems currently prevailing in the Pankisi Gorge. However, the economic factor is not the only culprit. Other significant aspects also come into play which may also, perhaps, have certain parallels in Western countries (one cannot say that in the West socio-economic issues provoke Muslim youth to go to war). First and foremost, generations being raised under these new circumstances have memory issues arising from the Russian war in the North Caucasus and the resettlement of refugees to Pankisi and, with them, the introduction of new Islamic ideas (generally, the radicalization of Islam in the North Caucasus is specifically linked with Russia's policies).

The second issue is the Internet, social networks and web-sites exhorting radical ideology which are easily accessible to young people. The implications of such exhortations are such that young people in Pankisi develop the will to fight in the name of Islam for completely obscure purposes.

It is essential that the government develop targeted policies to be adopted without panic, through concerted effort and much work. Although, it should be noted that there are no ready-made solutions and "recipes" – otherwise, the West would have already certainly employed them. The government, taking into account the specificities of the mountain culture, must act with the support of the elders, rely on the authority of the older generation residing in the region and, most importantly, make serious steps towards improving socio-economic issues. In educational terms, undoubtedly, the quality of schooling must be improved. However, at the same time, Muslim youth should be able to obtain information and education regarding their religion and history from objective sources rather than from extremists and various social networks.

## **Final Notes**

It is clearly too early to speak of writing a realistic history of the Islamic State. Circumstances change virtually every day. Little is known beyond the information covered by the media. Although, the existing reality still offers the opportunity to draw certain conclusions and make careful assumptions.

The emergence of the Islamic State has fundamentally altered the reality in the Middle East. Part-radical jihadist and part-revolutionary, IS has brought under its control a territory the size of Great Britain with a population of up to 10 million; "it is rapidly transforming its domain into a twenty-first century reincarnation of a thirteenth century Islamic caliphate."<sup>28</sup> In this process, IS became an unprecedented political conglomerate with its own army, currency, passports and a revolutionary strategy for the



establishment of a new Islamic Caliphate, which must initially encompass the Muslim world, followed by the extensive area starting from the Iberian peninsula, including India and, ultimately, extending across the entire world. Syria and Iraq have become not only immersed in a civil war but also transformed into the epicenter of Sunni-Shia rivalry which threatens to embroil the entire Muslim world in the conflict. With its unfathomable cruelty and genocidal mass killings, the Islamic State is altering the political landscape in the Middle East and leads to the reconciliation of sworn enemies such as the United States and Iran.

However, in addition, IS is in a fragile situation. Its leaders do not possess realistic plans for the governance and political structure of the “State.” In the absence of a sea port and air defense, it will be increasingly difficult to succeed in a fight against much more well-armed forces.

Although, even in the case of the collapse of the Islamic State, it will be unfeasible to overcome the instability in either Syria and Iraq, as well as the general Middle East, in the short term. The Shia-Sunni divide could give rise to a regional bipolar world, with Iran and its supporters on one side, and Saudi Arabia and its backers – on the other. The West will in turn be tasked with a constant search for compromise between the two parties. With the exception of coinciding positions with regard to the Islamic State, the countries involved in this “Great Game” are, so far, facing insurmountable obstacles.

## References

- 1 Joseph V. Micallef. *Islamic State: Its History, Ideology and Challenge*. Kindle Edition. Antioch Downs Press, 2015.
- 2 Jordan Keller. *ISIS. Origins of Terrorism, Historical Events and the Individuals Behind the Largest Terrorist Threat of Our Time*. Kindle Edition. Amazon Digital Services, Inc. 2015.
- 3 See: [www.theweek.com/articles/443835/abu-bakr-albaghdadi-man-who-caliph](http://www.theweek.com/articles/443835/abu-bakr-albaghdadi-man-who-caliph)
- 4 Levant - (It. Fr. –land of the rising sun) the eastern Mediterranean shoreline with its adjacent regions.
- 5 Jordan Keller. *Op. cit.*
- 6 Stephanie Nebehay. “Islamic State-controlled parts of Syria, Iraq largely out of reach: Red Cross,” [www.reuters.com/article/2015/03/13/us-mideast-crisis-syria-icrc-idUSKBN0M921N20150313](http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/03/13/us-mideast-crisis-syria-icrc-idUSKBN0M921N20150313)
- 7 Abu Mohammad. Letter dated July 9, 2005 (PDF). Office of the Director of National Intelligence, [www.web.archive.org/web/20110522153638/http://www.dni.gov/press\\_releases/letter\\_in\\_english.pdf](http://www.web.archive.org/web/20110522153638/http://www.dni.gov/press_releases/letter_in_english.pdf), See p. 2 and following pages.

8 *Op. cit.*

9 Richard York. *Know Thy Enemy: Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant*. lulu.com, 2015, 18.

10 Joseph Spark. *Atrocities Committed By ISIS in Syria & Iraq: ISIL/Islamic State/Daesh*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2014.

11 Mshari Al-Zaydi. "Opinion: The Rapid Spread of ISIS," [www.aawsat.net/2015/07/article55344314/opinion-the-rapid-spread-of-isis](http://www.aawsat.net/2015/07/article55344314/opinion-the-rapid-spread-of-isis)

12 Simon Gureshidze. "Islamic State (Iraq-Syria-Central Asia-Georgia)," [www.iliauni.edu.ge/uploads/other/13/13226.pdf](http://www.iliauni.edu.ge/uploads/other/13/13226.pdf), p. 38.

13 *Jizya*— according to the Sharia, a per-capita tax imposed on non-Muslims paid as "ransom" for the preservation and protection of life.

14 Richard York. *Op. cit.*, 32.

15 Richard York. *Op. cit.*, 22.

16 See Springer Devin. *Islamic Radicalism and Global Jihad*. Georgetown University Press, 2009.

17 [www.fareedzakaria.com/2015/05/28/iraq-exists-only-as-an-idea-not-a-nation/](http://www.fareedzakaria.com/2015/05/28/iraq-exists-only-as-an-idea-not-a-nation/)

18 Joseph V. Micallef. *Op. cit.*

19 Abdulrahman Al-Rashed. "Opinion: Iraq and Syria—One Country, One War." June 14, 2015, [www.aawsat.net/2015/06/article55343956/opinion-iraq-and-syria-one-country-one-war](http://www.aawsat.net/2015/06/article55343956/opinion-iraq-and-syria-one-country-one-war)

20 James M. Dorsey. *Re-configuring the Middle East: IS and Changing Demographics*, [www.mideastsoocer.blogspot.nl/2015/07/re-configuring-middle-east-is-and.html](http://www.mideastsoocer.blogspot.nl/2015/07/re-configuring-middle-east-is-and.html)

21 Joint Statement Issued by Partners at the Counter-ISIL Coalition Ministerial Meeting, [www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2014/12/234627.htm](http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2014/12/234627.htm)

22 Iran gathers power in Iraq as US further sidelined, [www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/03/iraq-tikrit-battle-popular-mobilization-shiite-iran-support.html#](http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/03/iraq-tikrit-battle-popular-mobilization-shiite-iran-support.html#)

23 *Peshmerga* - Iraqi Kurdistan's armed forces.

24 Yevgeniy Aronov. "The Islamic State in the North Caucasus." December 11, 2014, [www.svoboda.org/content/article/26736904.html](http://www.svoboda.org/content/article/26736904.html)

25 IS declares the establishment of a "province" in North Caucasus, [www.lenta.ru/news/2015/06/24/caucasus/](http://www.lenta.ru/news/2015/06/24/caucasus/)

26 Abdullah Rinat Mukhametov. "Islamic State and the North Caucasus," [www.dagestan-post.ru/novosti/5567-islamskoe-gosudarstvo-i-severnyj-kavkaz](http://www.dagestan-post.ru/novosti/5567-islamskoe-gosudarstvo-i-severnyj-kavkaz)

27 Ruslan Baramidze. "Islamic State and the Muslim Community in Georgia," [www.ge.boell.org/ka/2015/07/07/islamuri-saxelmcipo-da-sakartvelos-muslimuri-temi](http://www.ge.boell.org/ka/2015/07/07/islamuri-saxelmcipo-da-sakartvelos-muslimuri-temi)

28 Joseph V. Micallef. *Op. cit.*