



Security Policy Working Paper, No. 13/2017

# The Asymmetric War of ISIL

## Implications for Counter-Terrorism

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**According to the so-called Islamic State, its fight against Western nations is justified by the necessity of defending the caliphate also in Paris or Berlin. In this context, the terrorist organization follows the logic of an asymmetric war. The concept of a decentralized jihad as a method of conducting attacks, which cannot be prevented, as well as media activities play a significant role in this. Among the necessary countermeasures, prevention is particularly important.**

For decades, the objective of a joint empire of all Muslims under the leadership of a spiritual and secular ruler, which will implement the commandments of God in all areas of life, has been the core of jihadist desires. When the leader of the so-called Islamic State (ISIL), Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, proclaimed the caliphate on 29 June 2014 with immediate effect, the ISIL succeeded in turning this utopia into a concrete project for the here and now. Since this day, the maintenance and expansion of the caliphate has been the defining characteristic of ISIL. This has two significant consequences for the strategic situation of the terrorist organization. Firstly, ISIL has a clear regional focus. A caliphate is a state, and a state needs a territory. Even if ISIL intends to eventually gather all Muslims worldwide in a joint empire, this territory is at the moment – still – located in Iraq and Syria. Secondly, this means that the fight of ISIL is not conducted anywhere in the world, but has the same regional focus. The fight of ISIL is intended to consolidate and expand its territory. Contrary to the perception propagated in the general public of the Western nations, the primary battlefield therefore of ISIL is not situated in Paris or Berlin, but in Rakka and Mosul. On the contrary: In view of a more sober assessment of their forces, of which – against an also popular opinion – terrorists are capable, ISIL would have every reason to not attract the attention of a militarily far superior opponent, which will consequently endanger the survival of the organization and the survival of its central ideological project – the caliphate.

There is a simple reason for the fact that ISIL has taken up arms against the Western nations: It responds to the fact that the West, in form of a coalition led by the United States and involving numerous European nations, has taken military action against ISIL since August 2014.<sup>1</sup> Thus, ISIL is forced to defend the project of a caliphate also against the United States, France and Germany or to perish without resistance. Faced with this choice, ISIL chose to take up battle. Since the late summer of 2014, particularly since Adnani, then spokesman of the organization, called on his supporters to kill citizens of the Western nations – even if only by smashing their heads with a rock or running them over with a vehicle – ISIL for its part has been at war against the nations of the international military coalition.

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<sup>1</sup> See Security Policy Working Paper [No. 21/2016](#) of the Federal Academy for Security Policy.

## Terrorism as form of asymmetric warfare

In this war, one condition has been clear from the onset: ISIL faces an opponent who is by far superior in technological, material and financial terms. In addition, it is an opponent who focuses on air-to-ground combat. Therefore, ISIL cannot fight its western opponents on the battlefield itself with the limited military resources at its disposal. Consequently, the only option of the organization is to rely on asymmetric means in this conflict. In important aspects, the situation of ISIL – fighting against the US and against European nations, facing an overwhelming opponent and an existential threat, then turning to asymmetric warfare – is thus similar to the situation of al-Qaeda in the years after the attacks of 11 September 2001. At that time, several jihadist theorists coming from the environment of the al-Qaeda leadership responded to the new situation and developed guidelines for the fight against the US and the West, which were based on conditions of extreme asymmetry.<sup>2</sup> Their deliberations are partly still relevant today – on the one hand because these guidelines are also studied in ISIL circles, and on the other hand because their contents can be transferred seamlessly to today's fight of ISIL against the West due to the parallel conditions. In addition, they correlate to a high degree with the actual courses of action of the ISIL. The following central considerations (highlighted in the respective paragraphs) from the writings of jihadist theorists seem to be particularly relevant for putting ISIL's actions against the West in an appropriate context.

**1. The Caliphate as the ultimate goal:** The jihad is aimed at establishing a state, the political and social life of which is based exclusively on the commandments of God. Under no circumstances will this aim be put up for discussion. In the end, the territory of this state is intended to become an empire comprising all Muslims – the caliphate.

**Course of action on the part of ISIL:** Apart from the Taliban (and the special case of Saudi Arabia), ISIL has undertaken the – up to now – most important attempt to establish a theocratic state in accordance with Islamist concepts. The fundamental importance of this objective is not changed by the fact that ISIL has announced the caliphate prematurely and will probably soon have lost its territory after two and a half years of war. The caliphate is the ideologically motivated final objective which is in the focus of all actions of ISIL. As long as ISIL continues to exist in any form, it will try to work towards this objective.

**2. Withdrawal of the West:** The fight for the theocratic state is conducted on two fronts: against the “near enemy” – that means the nations within the Muslim world, and against the “far enemy” – that is the West. In the first case, the aim is to bring about a condition of anarchy by continuously using massive violence. If this condition of anarchy is achieved, it is intended to gradually establish islands of Islamic rule. In the second case, the aim is to force the Western nations – by means of terrorist attacks – to stop their support for the regimes in the Arab World and for the fight against jihadist groups.

**Course of action on part of ISIL:** Originally, the classic al-Qaeda concentrated exclusively on the fight against the far enemy. ISIL chose the other way and focused on the establishment of a state territory. Only the the US' and the coalition's air war forced ISIL to also engage the far enemy. Consequently ISIL can achieve its ultimate aim only if it previously succeeds in preventing the far enemy from acting against the project of the caliphate. In the conflict with the West, the strategic objective of ISIL is simply to induce the West to discontinue its fight. Only then will the actual fight for its own territory be at all possible for ISIL.

**3. War of attrition:** As there is no equality of arms between the far enemy and the jihadists, the terrorists have basically two possibilities. Either they acquire weapons of mass destruction in order to provide effective deterrence by employing these weapons against Western targets or by threatening to do so, or they resort to asymmetrical means. The aim is to continually conduct new attacks in order to gradually undermine the willingness of the opponent to continue the conflict. In this context, jihadists think that they will have an advantage in the long term because the worldly, materialistic culture of the Western nations leads

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<sup>2</sup> These adherents of al-Qaeda include particularly Abu Bakr Naji and Abu Musab Al-Suri.

them to the opinion that the paramount purpose of Western nations and societies is basically to ensure life and well-being of their citizens. If these objectives are endangered by repeated, bloody attacks and if vital goods are not at stake, the West will – according to the opinion of the jihadists – withdraw from a conflict.

**Course of action on part of ISIL:** Jihadists have already considered the employment of weapons of mass destruction, and – in view of ISIL’s strong ability to mobilize – it is possible that the organization has at least the necessary competent personnel at its disposal. Up to now, however, there have been no indications that ISIL would be able to employ weapons of mass destruction against European or American targets. On the contrary, it should be noted that the current strategy relies on conducting as many attacks as possible even if they are very simple. These attacks are always justified with the war of the “crusaders” against ISIL. This shows that ISIL wants the Western societies to pay the price for their war. ISIL will only see a reason for stopping these attacks if it is no longer engaged by military forces. Until then, it will try to drive the costs to be paid by the Western societies for the war higher and higher until these societies will no longer be willing to pay the price.

**4. Decentralization of the jihad:** At a time when the fight against terrorism is conducted by means of a massive employment of police and intelligence assets, a hierarchically organized and centrally controlled terrorist organization would be particularly prone to security problems. If Western agencies succeed in breaking into a group, further success will rapidly be achieved because of the close organizational cohesion. With regard to this, a jihadist organization is also forced to act as isolatedly as possible. Thus, however, it loses the contact with the population and potential supporters. In addition, it is difficult to recruit new members. These problems can be countered by reconsidering this form of organization and by fighting, instead, with isolated cells, which act independently, establish themselves autonomously and are not aware of each other. It is practically impossible to predict and prevent attacks conducted by cells of this type or individual perpetrators. At the same time, it is no longer possible to localize the war, but the frontline is everywhere where supporters can be recruited, a cell is formed, or an individual perpetrator decides to attack.

**Course of action on part of ISIL:** Since ISIL has started to attack Western nations in the late summer of 2014, it has been using these means. In September 2014, ISIL for the first time called upon all Muslims worldwide to attack Western targets. This first call was followed by numerous further calls, which partly included instructions as to which procedure was particularly appropriate. Thus, ISIL relies to a high degree on the mobilization of individuals and/or groups of individuals who are no members in the strict sense. Due to the lack of organizational coherence, it is frequently hardly possible to recognize in advance where the next attack will come from. Even if a potential attacker can be arrested in time, this will not necessarily provide indications of further threats.

**5. Propaganda:** However, also a decentralized jihad needs an overall framework and, at least, fundamental principles. Otherwise, it will only result in unconnected attacks without message and without the possibility of achieving political benefit. This overall framework is provided by propaganda. Propaganda will not only gain new supporters, but also tell them what to do and provide the ideological justification for this. Despite all the decentralization, the organization requires a unit which is identical to or cooperates closely with the leadership, makes the leadership’s guidelines public, and recruits new supporters.

**Course of action on part of ISIL:** More than any terrorist group, ISIL has during the past few years conducted extremely professional communication activities, which exactly fulfill these tasks of promotion, instruction, ideological integration, and formulation of messages to the enemy. These activities are still going on, even if they are presently reduced due to the military pressure. This situation will remain unchanged. As only some computers, internet access and computer-affine personnel are required for this purpose, it is not likely that it will ever be possible to really interrupt ISIL’s propaganda.

## Conclusion and Outlook

In summary, it can be said that ISIL must be regarded as a revolutionary movement which aims at overthrowing the existing order of the Islamic world and at establishing a caliphate. At present, however, ISIL is forced to conduct this fight not only against the rulers in the Arab region, but to also bear up against the West. Therefore, it will necessarily conduct its fight in an asymmetrical manner, in this case by attacking the civilian population in Europe and North America. In this context, it intends to gradually undermine the conflict readiness of the Western societies until these societies will finally surrender. For this purpose, ISIL relies particularly on a decentralized jihad. Its professional and intensive propaganda activities provide the umbrella required for this strategy.

The modern communication technology has given ISIL the opportunity to further develop the original method of a decentralized jihad and to connect it with a central control. The employment of encrypted messenger services, like WhatsApp, enables personnel of ISIL to individually contact potential perpetrators and to accompany them on their way to – and even during – the attack. This method has been running like a central theme through the attacks of the past two years. The virtual leaders are staying in Syria or elsewhere and remain out of reach of the security forces.

As long as the West fights against ISIL, the organization has no reason to refrain from attacking nations of the international military coalition. On the contrary, patience is an important element of a strategy of attrition. Since decentralized jihad has proved to be a method of terrorism which can hardly be prevented and – in addition – is practically at no cost for ISIL, further attacks are to be expected during the next few years, even after the end of the caliphate. Probably, additional *modi operandi* will also be used, depending on the inventiveness of the perpetrators and the virtual masterminds behind the attacks. It is likely that some of these methods, like the employment of drones, have already been tested in the war zone of Iraq and Syria. Therefore, it is impossible to prevent attacks; efforts can only be made to minimize their number. In this context, the military engagement of ISIL can only be a first step. Almost 16 years of counter-terrorism with a strong military orientation have shown that terrorism cannot be defeated permanently by means of this approach.

As long as there are people who can be convinced that Europe and the United States wage war against the Muslim world and/or the Islam, there will also be people who will conduct attacks. States' instruments of force will be necessary to counter the hard core of the extremists. However, effective counter-terrorism must begin much earlier and use softer methods in order to prevent more and more people from being convinced by the arguments of the terrorists. Therefore, the aim must be to counter the narrative of the alleged clash of cultures in a credible manner and with effective publicity. This requires a variety of different measures, ranging from statements of leading national representatives (like "Islam belongs to Germany" as former Federal President Christian Wulff said) to refugee policy (the foreclosure of a rich society against people who are in existential distress gives rise to hatred) and a successful integration (language, kindergarten, school, education and training). Public debates tend to emphasize a cultural clash between the Islam and Europe, on the other hand reproduce the conflict-oriented thinking of extremism, and provide a fertile breeding ground for terrorism.

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