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The American Military Strategy to Combat the ‘Islamic State’¹ in Iraq and Syria: Assumptions, Tactics and Effectiveness

Abstract: The American strategy to combat the ‘Islamic State’ rests on four pillars. The first is to conduct systematic air campaigns against the terrorists. The second involves increasing support for forces fighting the jihadists on the ground. The third is based on the strengthening of international cooperation in counterterrorism operations. The fourth involves the provision of humanitarian aid to civilians displaced from the territories occupied by the jihadists. This article analyzes the assumptions, tactics, the most important decisions and actions of the American administration to combat the ‘Islamic State’. It is an attempt to provide answers to the questions: why has there been a growth of extremism in the Middle East? Why is the ‘Islamic State’ a new form of terrorist threat? How does it differ from other terrorist organizations? How was the ‘Islamic State’ created?

¹ The term ‘Islamic State’ is intentionally given in quotes to emphasize that, despite the fact that IS imperiously announced the caliphate, it is not a subject of international law, only a terrorist organization. To a certain extent IS does meet the legal criteria for statehood, adopted by the Convention of Montevideo of 1933. It can be reasoned that IS has the three main components of statehood: population, territory and power. However, it is worth noting that it does not have the ability to conduct international relations and conclude agreements, which means that it has not been recognized by the international community. The fact that the authorities in the territory occupied by IS were not selected in legitimate elections, but imposed themselves by force (Sagan, Serzhanova, 2013, p. 40–42) cannot be forgotten. According to the Stimson doctrine, which prohibits the recognition of states arising in violation of the law, such a state cannot be accepted by the international community. For more information on the Stimson doctrine, see: Zenderowski 2006, p. 130–131. For more information on the attributes of statehood, see: Łoś-Nowak, 2006, p. 234–257.

What actions have been taken by the international coalition led by the United States in the fight against the jihadists in the Middle East? Is the strategy taken up by the United States effective? Does the defeat of the 'Islamic State' require the involvement of US ground forces in Iraq and Syria?

Keywords: *terrorism; Islamic State; United States; Iraq; Syria; extremism*

Introduction

When, in March 2003, the United States started the military operation in Iraq under the banner of the “war on terror”², President George W. Bush had no idea that the adverse effects of this decision would lay the foundation for a new terrorist organization, which would pose a greater challenge and threat to international security than Al-Qaeda. It seems that by June 2014, when the ‘Islamic State’ (IS)³ announced their self-proclaimed caliphate, the international community disregarded the growing strength of the organization, seeing IS as a peripheral problem of the Middle East. A series of terrorist attacks carried out in Paris on November 13, 2015 showed that the jihadists were conducting a war (Callimachi, 2015) not only in the occupied territories, but also in Western countries.

The purpose of this article is to analyze the military strategy of the United States to combat the ‘Islamic State’ in Iraq and Syria, to show the most important decisions and actions of the Obama administration. It is important to show the roots of the IS, the factors that led to the growth of extremism in the region, as well as the differences between the type of terrorist organization that Al-Qaeda is, and the character of the new terrorist threat in the form of IS. This will, in turn, enable the answering of the following questions concerning the selection of counter-terrorism measures: are the Americans using the appropriate resources and tools to combat IS? Should they be using ground forces to fight the jihadists? What is the impact of the American airstrikes on the “battle for hearts and minds” in the Arab world? Are airstrikes an effective method of combating the ‘Islamic State’?

The following hypotheses are proposed in this work: sending US ground forces to fight the ‘Islamic State’ in Iraq and Syria would be a short-term solution and would

² See more: Jackson, 2005, p. 9–16.

³ Currently in circulation are several titles for the organization: *The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria*; *The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant*; *The State of the Islamic Caliphate*; *The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham*; *Daesh* - this is an Arabic acronym meaning The Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria. The organization has changed its name several times since 2003. The last modification was made in June 2014, shortening the name to the *Islamic State* (see: Alexander, Alexander, 2015, p. XV et seq).

not lead to the complete elimination of the threat from jihadists. The involvement of US troops in a military operation on the ground in Iraq and Syria would lead to the growth of extremist attitudes in the Middle East, fueled by the IS, which would recruit new members using arguments that the Islamic world is being attacked by the West, calling all the faithful to fight in every corner of the world.

How the 'Islamic State' Came to Be?

The roots of the 'Islamic State' can be found in the invasion of Iraq in 2003 by the American coalition. During the stabilization mission⁴ the administration of President George W. Bush made a series of wrong decisions, and one of the consequences was the creation of suitable ground for the development of extremism in the region. Two major mistakes — the liquidation of the Iraqi security forces⁵ and the banning of members of the Baathist party⁶ from working in the public service, led to a situation in which hundreds of thousands of men found themselves on the margin of social life. The removal of the Hussein regime as a method of combating terrorism caused a complex reaction, in which terrorism in Iraq blended effectively with the insurgent movement (Rogers, 2012, p. 178). The dismantling of the Iraqi forces and the so called 'debaathification' campaign not only weakened the Iraqi army, but also led to chaos, increased violence and lawlessness. In addition to having a lack of security, the civilian population was left without access to electricity, drinking water or health care, which significantly increased social frustrations. This caused the growth of national and religious conflicts. According to peace research⁷, this may be an example of "invisible"

⁴ The military operation „Iraqi Freedom” lasted from March 20 to May 1, 2003. After this time the stabilization mission began, which was to provide security in Iraq and allow the formation of a new democratic government (see: O’Hanlon 2005, p. 51).

⁵ Iraqi security forces consisted of 385,000 soldiers, 285,000 police officers and 50,000 officers in the presidential security services (see: Pfiffner, 2010, p. 80–82; Dobbins, Jones, Runkle, Mohandas, 2009, p. 53–55) .

⁶ The Baath Party at the time of Saddam Hussein’s regime served as a tool for control over society and the country. It was not only the closest associates of the dictator that were prohibited from working in public service, but also rank and file members. Anywhere from 85,000 to 100,000 well-educated and trained people lost their jobs (see: Pfiffner, 2010, p. 76–80).

⁷ The discipline of peace research began in the 1950s, whose object is the reduction and ultimately the elimination of wars, as well as gaining control of armed conflicts and resolving them by peaceful means. In contrast to related disciplines, peace research is not looking for the definition of peace, but is engaged in the promotion of peace. While other disciplines consider war as a permanent feature of the international anarchist system, peace research recognizes war in

or “dormant” conflict, growing because of economic, social and political inequality (Lawler, 2012, p. 83). As it turned out, it was only a matter of time before social frustrations in Iraq turned into violent conflict. The situation was so difficult that in 2004 civil war broke out, which almost led to the collapse of the state⁸ (Michnik 2014, p. 89–91). Iraq was at the forefront of the list of the most dysfunctional countries in the world, called by some scholars as the “black holes of civilization” (Bieleń, 2009, p. 55), whose characteristics include: civil war, the collapse of state, economic, and social order, violence, conflict between communities, fragmentation of society, the ignoring of human rights and humanitarian crises, increase in crime and corruption (Kłosowicz & Mormul 2013, p. 22–28; Sagan & Serzhanova, 2013, p. 262–265).

The dismantling of Iraqi forces contributed to the dysfunctional state of Iraq, thereby creating a suitable ground for the operation of terrorist organizations. As a result, many of them fed into the ranks of the initially small group of Sunni extremists, who operated locally under the name of Al-Qaeda in Iraq (2004–2006), as a movement of resistance against the American occupation. Jihadists conducted terrorist attacks, not only on Americans and other coalition members, but also on Shiites, seeking to escalate the conflict on religious grounds. Meanwhile, in 2006 the group changed its name to the Islamic State in Iraq (2006–2013). Even though President Bush, at the end of his second term, claimed that the Americans were able to eliminate the “safe havens” of Al-Qaeda in Iraq and reduce the level of violence (White House, 2008), the statistics show that since the US invasion in 2003, the number of attacks in Iraq had been gradually increasing⁹. Despite the assurances of US diplomatic and military officials in the media of the defeat of Al-Qaeda in Iraq (Ricks, DeYoung, 2007), the organization in the coming years continued to grow in strength. In 2010 the group consisted of about one thousand fighters, operating under the tutelage of Al-Qaeda. Joining the organization enabled jihadists to not only benefit from access to advice and support, but also to training centers, networks and prestige (Hanne & Flichy de La Neuville, 2015, p. 21).

the context of its task to eliminate it. Thus peace research is the study of the necessary conditions for peace. For more information see: Lawler, 2012, p. 74–81.

⁸ A failed state is not clearly defined. In the literature, there is a multitude of terms which tries to describe it, such as failed state, collapsed state, failing state, weak state, disintegrated state, crisis state, fragmented state, fragile state. „The term failed state describes a state of total disintegration of social bonds and the dismantling of the governmental infrastructure, involving economic catastrophe of the state, poverty, hunger, humanitarian disasters and violations of basic civil liberties and human rights”. For more, see: Dudkiewicz, 2012, p. 67–86.

⁹ Iraq was at the top of the list of countries suffering from terrorist attacks between the years 2002–2011 (see: Terrorist attacks mapped..., 2012).

At the end of 2011 there were two important events that intensified the activities of jihadists in the region. The first was the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq. The second was the severity of the repression of Sunnis by the government of Nuri al-Maliki. Backed by the US administration, Prime Minister Maliki was to bring about a consensus between the minority Sunni, Shiite and Kurdish groups. Rather than continue to build a multi-ethnic state, once the Americans left Iraq, Maliki began to arrest and persecute the Sunni minority (Karon, 2011), who in fear of the police and Shia soldiers, were increasingly willing to become members of the ranks of the IS. Attempts at demonstrations and anti-government protests ended in violent intervention by the Iraqi forces. Sunni leaders were arrested and murdered. The actions of Maliki's government created favorable conditions for the growth of jihadist groups (Hanne & Flichy de La Neuville, 2015, p. 21–23). Retreat from Iraq by the Americans removed the last barriers that deterred the escalation of the conflict.

Another event that allowed jihadists to expand their activity and gain more territory was the civil war in Syria. In 2013 the organization changed its name to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. In such favorable conditions, they could train new members, practice new techniques during clashes with the Syrian army, and even benefit from the mistakes of Western countries, which supported rebels fighting against the regime of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad by generously handing out rifles and grenades (Hanne, Flichy de La Neuville, 2015 p. 26). As early as March 2013 there was information in the media that the Americans were in charge of military training of Syrian rebels. The Department of State initially denied the reports, saying that aid for the rebels included mainly medical kits and food rations, and to a lesser extent, firearms and ammunition. The head of American diplomacy assured the public that the supply of arms would only go to rebels, not extremists (Borger & Hopkins, 2013).

A report by the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) declassified in 2015 shows that in August 2012, military intelligence informed the authorities in the White House about the consequences of supporting the rebels in Syria. The report warned that the situation was dangerously moving in the sectarian direction. The document openly stated that one of the terrorist groups that supported the Syrian opposition was Al-Qaeda in Iraq. The organization was identified as one of the main driving forces of the rebellion in Syria. Even then there were warnings that this could lead to an 'Islamic State' (Department of Defense Memo, 2015). In the opinion of the former director of the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) — Michael Flynn, the threat was not ignored by the White House, but was part of a deliberate strategy on the part of the US government to sponsor radical jihadists, with the aim of overthrowing the regime of al-Assad (Hoff, 2015).

Already at this stage, the American tactics based on military training of Syrian rebels proved to be inefficient and unreliable. As acknowledged by US authorities, the Pentagon spent over \$500 million for a program which provided military training to 5,000 Syrian rebels to fight the jihadists. Ultimately, only 100 people received training, learning advanced skills of combat, of which only 4 or 5 began to actively fight against IS (Ackerman, 2015). Most focused on the fight against the regime of al-Assad. The American tactic to arm rebels and send them to fight against IS also encountered some problems. Although US authorities initially denied it, they finally confirmed the press reports about the transfer of US arms, ammunition and armored cars from Syrian rebels to jihadists in exchange for safe passage (Amman, 2015). Some researchers suggest that the problem was much bigger and applied not only to the interception of US equipment and weapons by jihadists. Researchers also believe that rebels who had completed US military training went on to join the ranks of jihadist groups (Hanne & Flichy de La Neuville, 2015, p. 26). In the end, it was concluded that the training program for Syrian rebels was ineffective, and the Obama administration gave up its continuation (Shear, Cooper, Schmitt, 2015).

In February 2014 there was a rift between Al-Qaeda and the 'Islamic State' of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Various reasons were given, one being the methods used by ISIS, which paradoxically were too violent for the members of Al-Qaeda; as well as differences in goals – while Sunni ISIS leaders fought Shiite, Al-Qaeda wanted to unite all Muslims. There was also a struggle for power between the leaders of the organization, none of whom wanted to surrender their authority. This applies especially to a leader of ISIS named Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who wanted to have full authority and act according to his own rules without consultation with the headquarters of Al-Qaeda (Sly, 2014). The split did not weaken the IS. On the contrary, in the coming months the organization began to grow in strength. New groups joined the jihadists, carrying out further military offensives using heavy weapons and combat vehicles acquired in Syria and from the military bases of the Iraqi army. The combat capabilities of ISIS increased to such an extent that jihadists could make simultaneous attacks on several fronts (Hanne & Flichy de La Neuville, 2015, p. 39 et seq). They gained control over even more cities¹⁰, but only after the battle of Mosul did ISIS gain publicity in the media around the world. This was not only due to the fact that a couple hundred

¹⁰ The first major city taken over by jihadists was Fallujah, which had a population of 300,000 residents. Another strategic victory was Ar Raqqa, which created a strategic route for the movement of weapons and jihadists between Syria and Iraq. With the victory in Mosul, IS seized control of the whole province of Najnawa. Further successes of the jihadists increased the occupied territory with the cities of: Baiji, Tall Afar, Al-Awja, Tikrit, Rawa, Rutba, Al-Kaim, Rabia, allowing Jihadists free movement between the two countries (Hanne, Flichy de La Neuville, 2015, p. 36–40).

jihadists conquered the second largest city in Iraq, or because they defeated tens of thousands of Iraqi security forces, which after a few days of fighting fled the city¹¹. Larger media interest resulted from the jihadists' implementation of Islamic law in the occupied territories, and public executions of both the local population and kidnapped foreigners. Brutal violence in the form of beheadings, burning people alive, and crucifixion were filmed and published on the Internet as part of the group's propaganda efforts (McCoy, 2014; Stathis, 2015, p. 13 et seq).

At the end of June 2014, the Sunni extremist group imperiously proclaimed a caliphate, led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, calling on all Muslims around the world to unite under their banner. There was also the latest modification to the name of the organization, which was shortened to the IS. The self-proclaimed caliphate was rejected not only by the international community, but also by other terrorist organizations, including Al-Qaeda (Mandhai, 2014).

The 'Islamic State': a More Dangerous Successor to Al-Qaeda?

After the attacks carried out on September 11, 2001 in the United States, Al-Qaeda was seen as the major enemy and terrorist threat for the USA. Changes in the priorities of the White House, in terms of threats to national security, can be seen in the analysis of strategic documents at the beginning and end of Barack Obama's term in office. In *The National Security Strategy of 2010*, American counter-terrorism services were to focus on the fight against Al-Qaeda (National Security Strategy, 2010, p. 4). In a updated version of the document from 2015, next to Russian aggression and the spread of nuclear weapons, it is the jihadists from the 'Islamic State' that are mentioned as one of the greatest threats to international security (National Security Strategy, 2015, p. 2).

The reason the IS, and not Al-Qaeda, are seen as the greatest threat to American security is because of the intense propaganda campaigns occurring over the Internet¹², where jihadists encourage supporters to carry out independent attacks on Western countries, including the USA. As is characteristic of terrorist organizations as non-state participants (actors)¹³, they focus their activities on reducing the importance of national borders, as well as rapidly increasing the role of computers in everyday life.

¹¹ According to the press, during the Battle of Mosul only 800 jihadists fought against thirty thousand Iraqi soldiers (see: Chulov, Le Havre, Ackerman, 2014).

¹² See: Górak-Sosnowska, 2015.

¹³ "In the literature, there is a widely accepted international relations division of participants into two groups: state participants (only the state) and non-state (nations, international organizati-

For terrorist organizations, the realm of cyberspace has become a natural environment for their operations (Ożarowski, 2012, p. 201–205).

Since the rift between Al-Qaeda and the IS, certain features of IS distinguish it from other, previously known terrorist organizations. In contrast to the IS, Al-Qaeda has a decentralized and distributed structure, which can be compared to a network or grapes, which means that the breakdown of one part does not result in the liquidation of the entire organization (Neumann, 2009, p. 1 et seq.) The leader of Al-Qaeda does not have direct control over the members of the organization and does not manage their daily activities. The IS, in turn, has a centralized and hierarchical structure headed by a caliph and his group of advisors, and individual spheres of IS activity are assigned “ministers”. The leader of the organization is responsible for direct supervision of the militants and the occupied territory (Barrett, 2014, p. 24 et seq.).

The aim of IS is to capture and control an increasing amount of territory and develop state structures, with specific judicial, tax, health, educational and social systems, and to become the center of political power and religion for all Muslims in the world. Another important feature that distinguishes the IS from other terrorist organizations is the number of members. It is estimated that the IS consists of about 50,000 militants (Hanne & Flichy de La Neuville, 2015, p. 93). Although Al-Qaeda also boasts a membership of thousands of members, its structure is decentralized, and its factions are spread all over the Middle East, Southeast Asia, Africa, Europe, and Central Asia (Bajoria & Bruno, 2012). This translates into the very nature of the organization, where in contrast to Al-Qaeda, IS is not only able to perform terrorist attacks in various places around the world, but because it has its own army, the organization can carry out full-scale military operations, fighting against conventional armed forces (Cronin, 2015, p. 87–98). The organizations also differ in terms of their financing systems, which in the case of Al-Qaeda relies on the support of external donors or “money laundering”. IS is characterized by financial independence, which allows for the sale of crude oil on the black market, not only in Iraq and Syria, but also in Turkey and Jordan. According to press reports, this activity brings lucrative profits for the organization, ranging from \$1 to \$3 million a day. It is also worth mentioning other sources of income for the jihadists, which include tax revenues, profit from ransoms paid for hostages, stolen banking resources, automobiles, jewelry, antiques, machinery, and even animals (Theron, 2015; Swanson, 2015).

Other features that distinguish IS from Al-Qaeda are the methods and means of operation of the two organizations. One of the tools used by jihadists to promote their

ons and movements, trans-state actors and sub-state actors). Terrorist organizations can be counted among the participants known as militarized non-state actors”. (see: Ożarowski, 2012, p. 203).

mission and recruit new members is the internet, especially social media. Compared to Al-Qaeda, the IS has a clear, noticeable advantage when it comes to supporters and members who are able to publish tens of thousands of posts per day. IS conducts extensive internal and external propaganda. By limiting access to external information for the population living in areas occupied by the jihadists, and through the dissemination of their own local newspaper, they wish to control the captured territories and prevent rebellion. For this reason they have also introduced public executions and punishments, where civilians are witnesses to terrorists carrying out the beheading, burning, stoning, and crucifixion of the local population. Propaganda aimed outside the organization is transmitted through the internet in the form of publicized executions, training materials, demonstration of strength in the form of processions by armed jihadists, waving the flag of the IS to both show members as ruthless and determined, and to encourage volunteers to join. These have become elements of the image war IS is fighting in order to compete with other terrorist organizations, including Al-Qaeda, in order to attract more members. IS leaders have found an effective way to recruit new fighters, promising them adventure, access to weapons, provision of sex slaves. Ideological aspirations of both organizations are the same, except that the Jihadists were able to realize the plans they had set forth, which in the case of Al-Qaeda remain in the conceptual realm for the present moment. In contrast to IS, Al-Qaeda sees the establishment of a global caliphate as a long-term goal that cannot be achieved without the creation of adequate conditions and strong pillars¹⁴, which are to guarantee its survival. According to some researchers, the promotion of the idea by Al-Qaeda to create a caliphate is used as a motivational tool to fight, not a direct objective of the organization (Glenn, 2015).

The American Military Strategy to Combat the 'Islamic State'

On August 7, 2014 President Barack Obama authorized a military operation involving limited airstrikes targeted at jihadist positions in Iraq. It is worth noting that such measures were taken with the consent and at the request of the Iraqi government. On the one hand, US forces were to support Iraqi forces, and on the other, to provide humanitarian aid to civilians, airdropping water and food. In announcing the decision,

¹⁴ „The first stage: Expel the Americans from Iraq. The second stage: Establish an Islamic authority or emirate, then develop it and support it until it achieves the level of a caliphate over as much territory as you can spread its power in Iraq, i.e., in Sunni areas. The third stage: Extend the jihad wave to the secular countries neighboring Iraq. The fourth stage:...[This is] the clash with Israel, because Israel was established only to challenge any new Islamic entity”. See more: Glenn, 2015.

Obama emphasized that he had consulted with other governments and the UN. The President assured the public of the fact that the United States would not engage in another war in Iraq. He also ruled out the option of using American ground forces. Not only due to the fact that another long-term operation of such a large-scale would strain the US budget, but Obama believed it would be ineffective in solving the crisis. The President stressed that the only solution was lasting reconciliation and the development of a consensus between religious and ethnic minorities in Iraq, as well as the strengthening of Iraqi security forces. The divisions in the country created a suitable ground for the development of terrorism. Obama appealed to the Iraqi authorities to form a new government which would represent the interests of all Iraqis, not just specific social groups (White House, 2014a).

At the beginning of September 2014, US authorities announced the creation of a broad international coalition to fight the 'Islamic State'. In the end, 65 countries made a commitment to fight against these terrorists. The actions of the international coalition were to focus on: providing military support for the allies fighting the jihadists; obstructing the flow of foreign fighters; eliminating the sources of financing for the organization; and providing humanitarian aid. Some countries would provide military support through the provision of weapons, equipment, provision of advice and training. Others were directly involved in the air campaign against the jihadists (Department of State, 2014)¹⁵.

The Resolution 2170 of the UN Security Council from 2014 was to serve as the legal basis for the actions of the international coalition. This resolution called on all Member States to help stop the flow of foreign fighters into the ranks of the jihadists and suppress the financing of extremist groups in Iraq and Syria through more effective border control, and to improve the exchange of information and cooperation between specific government organizations (Security Council, 2014a).

The American strategy to combat the 'Islamic State' was based on four pillars. The first assumed the deployment of systematic air campaigns against the terrorists, in order to assist Iraqi security forces fighting on the ground. Even then, the US president announced that the airstrikes may be extended to Syria. The second pillar assumed increasing support for forces fighting the jihadists on the ground. This was connected with sending nearly 500 American strategists to the Middle East to provide Iraqis and Kurds intelligence support, training, as well as the necessary equipment and armament. The third pillar was based on the strengthening of international cooperation

¹⁵ Most countries were not directly involved in the air force attacks on the terrorists. Over 90% of airstrikes in Iraq and Syria were conducted by the Americans themselves (see: McInnis, 2015, p. 1 et seq.)

in counter-terrorism operations. It was meant to help with various issues, starting from the elimination of funding for IS by strengthening intelligence cooperation, to stopping the influx of foreign volunteers, some of whom come to the Middle East to fight within the organization and then return to Western countries, planning to carry out terrorist attacks in their own territories. The fourth pillar assumed humanitarian aid to civilians displaced from the territories occupied by jihadists (White House, 2014b).

Immediately following the announcement in September 2014, the American air campaign was extended to Syria. The targets of the airstrikes were buildings occupied by IS leaders, training grounds and arsenals, among others. Although the army of al-Assad also fought against the jihadists in Syria, the Obama administration indicated that it would not cooperate with the regime. It is worth mentioning that unlike in Iraq, where American airstrikes were carried out with the consent and at the request of the Iraqi government, the operation in Syria carried out by the Americans had no such legitimacy for its actions. This could have been met with the defensive reaction of Al-Assad's forces, considering that US aircraft entered the airspace of Syria illegally. Given that the jihadists were also a threat to the Syrian government, the Americans assumed that the airstrikes would be met with the passive reaction of the regime (Whitlock, 2014). Moreover, Washington stressed that the UN envoy in Syria had been informed of the plans before the operation began. The Syrian government, however, gave no formal approval for US intervention in the conflict. Despite this, the Obama administration claims that the airstrikes are legal, since they are carried out in defense of Iraq. In a letter to the UN Secretary General, the regulations indicating its legality were presented. The arguments were based on a principle enclosed in the Charter of the United Nations, which gives states the right to defend themselves, including through the use of force in the territory of another country, in a situation when the threatened state does not want or is not able to respond to the attacks. The letter stated that Iraq had the right to defend itself against the IS, which used the territory of Syria as a safe haven, from where they attacked neighboring territories. Considering the fact that the Syrian Government had failed to stop the threat, and Iraq had asked the US for help in the defense of its country (Security Council, 2014b), according to the US administration, the airstrikes were of legal nature (Security Council, 2014c). Some researchers indicate that, from the point of view of international law, the US operation was illegal, but in general it is considered rational (Farrell, 2014; Tibori-Szabo, 2016, p. 73 et seq). In the end, the actions of the Americans in Syria did not elicit a military response from the regime. Consent was of a conditional nature — as long as the Americans shot at targets associated with the IS and not with Al-Assad, the military regime would not respond (Lynch, 2014).

From the beginning of the operation in October 2014 to February 2016, there have been a total of 10,113 airstrikes conducted on targets associated with the jihadists: 6,763 in Iraq and 3,350 in Syria. Most were conducted by Americans (7,753 airstrikes in total: 4,611 in Iraq and 3,142 in Syria), while the rest of the international coalition is responsible for 2,360 bombings: 2,152 in Iraq and 208 in Syria. Aside from the United States, the following countries took part in airstrikes in Iraq: Australia, The United Kingdom, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Jordan, and the Netherlands. In Syria, the US could count on air support from Australia, Bahrain, France, Jordan, Canada, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the United Kingdom and the United Arab Emirates. The actions of the international coalition led to the destruction of more than six thousand jihadist targets, five thousand buildings, one thousand oil installations, nearly one thousand checkpoints, as well as nearly five hundred armored vehicles and tanks (Department of Defense, 2016).

The second element of the US military strategy, which is the training of Iraqi and Kurdish security forces and providing military equipment, including heavy machine guns and ammunition, is designed not only to enable defense against the attacks of jihadists, but also effective retrieval of occupied territories and hostages, and the eventual defeat of terrorists. So far, the international coalition has trained more than 30,000 Iraqi personnel, including Iraqi troops, Peshmerga, police and border forces, and other tribal fighters. As written earlier in this work, the training program of moderate opposition forces in Syria has been suspended for the time being. In the territory of Iraq there are about 3,700 personnel from the United States with advisory or training position. In addition to conducting trainings, the Americans assist local forces in Iraq and Syria, providing logistical support and intelligence. They also help in retrieving hostages and in the capture of high-value IS leaders. For this purpose, in the territory of Iraq and Syria, the US has deployed Special Forces personnel. Since August 2014, the United States has spent more than \$ 7 billion for operations against the IS, nearly 50% of this amount was spent on airstrikes, more than 20% on ammunition (Mills, 2016, p. 5, 14, 23).

American airstrikes are correlated with those of the Iraqi army on the ground, providing reconnaissance, surveillance and attack capabilities, and are designed to help friendly local forces regain territories seized by IS. This of course is not easy, considering that in addition to fighting against the IS, interests of local groups often contradict one another. The key in combating the jihadists is gaining control over the two main strongholds — Mosul in Iraq and Raqqa in Syria, which will cause the terrorist organization to break into smaller groups that will be easier to isolate and defeat, and eliminate the main transport routes for fighters, weapons and supplies (Tilghman, 2016).

Thus, it is worth noting that the US strategy to fight against the IS has a much broader character than a military operation in Iraq and Syria. Effective control of jihadists requires the US administration to think about how to effectively stop the spread of the hostile ideology of IS. This is crucial in the fight against jihadists, who are spreading propaganda, recruiting new members and inciting violence in the name of higher values, the battle between good and evil, the Islamic world against the “damaged” West, who want to impose their rule on others. As stated by President Obama, “our campaign to prevent people around the world from being radicalized to violence is ultimately a battle for hearts and minds” (Obama, 2015). The US President rightly pointed out that “ideologies are not defeated by guns — they’re defeated with better ideas” (see: Siddiqui, 2015).

Thus, the strategy for fighting IS should focus not only on defeating the jihadists on the ground, but also on discrediting their ideology to prevent the radicalization of more people. Given the statistics, which show that since 2011 the IS has recruited more than 20,000 new members, the organization’s tactics are very effective (see: Fernandez, 2015). Recruits believe that killing innocent people and sacrificing their own lives will be rewarded in paradise, and death as a martyr will guarantee this for them. Jihadists argue that the apocalypse is coming, the final start, giving fighters a simple choice — either they play an important role during the war to receive the glory of eternity in paradise, or their life has no meaning or purpose. With this rhetoric, jihadists are able to recruit people from different corners of the world through the Internet, inculcate the ideology and instruct them on how to carry out an assassination. Today, to become a terrorist, one does not need to complete a training camp located in a remote area in the mountains; access to the Internet is enough, where potential attackers have no major problems finding instructions for the assembly of homemade bombs. The effectiveness of this method proves how important it is to conduct an online campaign to combat dangerous ideology. But it should be noted that the “battle for hearts and minds”¹⁶ requires the international coalition to do more, not only on the internet. As pointed out by Fawaz A. Gerges “the most effective means to degrade ISIS is to dismantle its social base by winning over the hearts and minds of local communities” (Gerges, 2014, p. 343), and this requires close cooperation with local Sunni communities.

At the same time, a key issue is stabilizing the situation in the Middle East, including finding a diplomatic solution to the civil war in Syria, which would heavily hit the

¹⁶ “Winning hearts and minds means gaining the trust of a population by gaining its respect, not by imposing values or a biased view, but by bringing them security and, above all, development capabilities” (see: Valeyre, 2012, p. 13).

sources of funding for jihadists, but also in a broader perspective, as Gerges points out, would leave terrorists without their ideology, their deeper message. Jihadists prey on civil war, the breakdown of the state, paralysis, fear and poverty. Thus the stabilizing of the situation, the ending of the crisis, bringing about the reversal of social conditions is an important link in the fight against the IS (Gerges, 2014, p. 343).

The basic question remains: are the tactics being used, based mainly on airstrikes, an effective method for combating the IS? Taking into account the specificity of the actions and tactics used by the jihadists, with them remaining among the civilian population, in urban areas, surrounded by numerous buildings, airstrikes are difficult to carry out without the risk of killing civilians. It seems that the jihadists learned from the tactical mistakes of other organizations such as Al-Qaeda, where more than 70% of their leaders were killed by drone strikes and Special Forces operations. Attacks from the air in the case of Al-Qaeda were easier to carry out, because the terrorists were usually hiding in rural areas located far away from large population centers (Cronin, 2015).

The American tactic, based on airstrikes on positions of jihadists in Syria and Iraq, is effective in eliminating the enemy, and causes no risk of death to soldiers from the international coalition. The effectiveness of their results is mainly due to the fact that IS forces do not have weapons to counter airstrikes. Although US raids are undoubtedly a great support for local forces fighting IS on the ground, as they not only destroy objects controlled by jihadists, including command centers, but also the main sources of financing for the IS — refineries, transit routes and vehicles, as well as eliminate more than a thousand IS fighters a month, their negative impact should also be assessed. According to information made public by the US administration, since the beginning of operations, as a result of airstrikes and dropped bombs, only 55 civilians have been killed. Other sources, such as Amnesty and Airwars, indicate that the airstrikes have killed at least 500 civilians, mostly children, women and the elderly. A growing number of dead among the civilian population weakens the position of the coalition in the fight against the jihadists, as it reduces the credibility of its moral mission. By killing civilians, and then hiding these facts, Americans are losing in this regard the “battle for hearts and minds” in the Arab world¹⁷.

From June 2014, when jihadists announced the establishment of the caliphate, Iraqi and Kurdish forces managed to recover more than 40% of the territory of Iraq and 20% of Syria. Although this is mainly due to the work of ground forces, without the support of the international coalition from the air, they would not have experienced such significant victories. Despite this, the jihadists still control the key

¹⁷ For more on this topic see: Graham-Harrison, 2016; Bearak, 2016; Walsh, 2013.

cities of Raqqa in Syria, and Mosul in Iraq. The loss of territory was certainly painful for the organization. A smaller territory means a loss to the organization's budget, due to lower revenues from taxes and fines. Other losses for the jihadists include, among others, the strategic Syrian town of Tal Abjad on the border with Turkey and the Iraqi cities of Tikrit and Baijiu, which is associated with loss of control over a refinery. A major blow to IS was the loss of control over the stretch of motorway between the jihadists' Syrian fort — Raqqa and the Iraqi city of Mosul, which greatly complicated supply lines. Despite the loss, over the years the terrorists succeeded in gaining new areas, such as the historic Syrian city of Palmyra and the city of Ramadi, capital of the Anbar province, which is the largest province in Iraq (*Islamic State lost ...*, 2015).

While the majority of American people expressed disapproval over the way Barack Obama has fought terrorism in the Middle East, assessing it as insufficiently aggressive, even postulating to send ground forces to fight IS (CNN / ORC poll, 2015), both the president and the US military claim that their strategy to combat the IS is effective. The evidence for this is not only the regaining of significant territory, or the killing of thousands of jihadists, but also the fact that during clashes with Iraqi forces, it is becoming more frequent for IS fighters to withdraw rather than continue fighting, which in turn is indicative of the effectiveness of the training of Iraqi soldiers by US forces. American officials also believe the airstrikes on infrastructure and oil tankers transporting oil by jihadists have been successful, since they have reduced daily production of oil from 45 thousand barrels to 34 thousand (Scarborough, 2016; Collinson, 2015).

Critics of the US strategy against the IS, especially the Republican side of the American political scene, criticize Obama's passive and overly cautious approach. They claim that he should take decisive action in Syria and Iraq, including sending US troops to fight the jihadists on the ground, otherwise the scenario of the terrorist attacks in the United States on the scale of 9/11 may be repeated. They stress that the current strategy does not significantly weaken IS, but instead inspires them to conduct terrorist attacks outside of Syria and Iraq. Critics are calling for more aggressive use of military force by the US to degrade the potential of IS and weaken their control over the jihadist occupied territory (Blanchard, Humud, 2016; Collinson, 2015).

A relevant question for this analysis is whether the sending of US ground forces would solve the problem of the IS? In the short term — yes. However, Congress would have to agree upon on a long-term American military presence in the Middle East. The best reason for why this is necessary is given with the example of the moment US troops left Iraq at the end of December 2011. It was then that the jihadists began to grow in strength. A short-term mission does not solve the problem, which will only return after the withdrawal of US troops. On the other hand, the pres-

ence of Americans on the ground would certainly be used by the jihadists to spread propaganda that Islam was again being attacked by the West, which would facilitate the recruitment of new members to the organization.

A permanent defeat of the IS is possible, but requires cooperation between different ethnic and religious groups, especially between Sunnis and Shiites. Without political reconciliation, the effectiveness of any military operation will be short-lived. Americans should provide adequate support in the form of training, military consultation¹⁸, equipment, weapons, logistics, intelligence and strategic airstrikes on IS targets and help organize wider international cooperation in combating the financing of the organization and the permeation of foreign fighters into the ranks of IS. However, the main burden of defeating the jihadists rests on the local ground forces, who should be the most determined to fight, and as seen in the battle of Mosul, at moments this determination is missing.

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¹⁸ In February of 2016, there were about 3,700 US soldiers in Iraq, whose job was to advise and train Iraqi security forces, gather intelligence on jihadists and protect American workers and property (see: Blanchard, Humud, 2016, p. 23).

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