COMBINED JOINT
TASK FORCE OPERATION
INHERENT RESOLVE

COMBINED JOINT TASK FORCE: OPERATION INHERENT RESOLVE

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ABSTRACT

The terrorist group known as ISIS has, since 2014, advanced through considerable terrain in Iraq and Syria, consolidating its territorial power in these regions in a unique manner, differently from other previous jihadist groups. Born from the civil war in Syria and the unresolved politic-sectarian crisis in Iraq, the collapse of state authority in these two countries has allowed ISIS to bring a new kind of menace to the Middle East region – one that threatens the very existence of the modern state regional order. Within the context of Middle Eastern regional players' different interests, the U.S. has summoned a coalition of the willing to initiate an airstrikes campaign – named as Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) – against ISIS targets in order to degrade and ultimately destroy the terrorist group. Therefore, such operation has the current objective of facing ISIS and drawing effective operational plans to infringe enough damage to the terror organization.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Middle East is currently facing the expansion of the terrorist group known as ISIS[1]. Born from the civil wars in Iraq and Syria, such group has named itself a new caliphate, establishing a kind of governorate in territories it now dominates in Syria and Iraq. Both countries, therefore, are facing a new threat— a terrorist organization in control of a considerable territory — that might spread even further in the region. Due to the weaknesses involving not only the Iraqi government but also the civil war in Syria, instability is a real threat to the whole Middle East.

Facing the group's growth, the United States created an international coalition to fight ISIS in September 2014. The strategy went further than only supporting local forces, and it has encompassed airstrikes in Iraq and Syria in order to jeopardize ISIS and other terrorist groups capacities and to help ground allied actors to regain territory. Nevertheless, the situation is not simple at all, since it involves a wide range of different countries and organizations, whose interests are multiple, fighting the same enemy in both countries, therefore creating two distinct political situations. Thus, the strategy to defeat ISIS is not simply a military question, but a very complicated political game that, unless checked, might spread over the regional borders.

2 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: THE SITUATION IN IRAQ AND SYRIA

2.1. IRAQ

The territory of Iraq — former Mesopotamia —, known as the cradle of the civilization, has always been disputed by several conquerors throughout the centuries. Iraq rests between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, where the first empires have developed, and where many contributions to humankind were advanced, such as writing, science and literature (Tripp 2002). Despite having shown prosperity in the course of the centuries, Iraq has faced growing instability from its independence — in 1932 — onwards, mostly because of its oil fields. It holds

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1   Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham, also known as Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), or simply Islamic State (IS). In Arabic, the group is known as ad-Dawlah al-Islāmiyah fil-Irāq wash-Shām or Daesh.

nowadays the fifth position within the major international oil reserves. The country established itself, however, as one of the major components of the regional balance of power in the Middle East due to its economic and military capacities. It has borders with Syria, Iran, Turkey, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, and it also is a passageway from Syria to the Persian Gulf and from the East to the West (Marr 2011).

Iraq is divided between many ethnoreligious groups within its population. The predominant ones are the Shia (60%, mainly located in the East, near the border with Iran) and Sunni (37%, split between Arabs [20%], more towards the West, and Kurds [17%], located in the North), as seen on Image 1 below.

Image 1: Iraq's ethnoreligious distribution
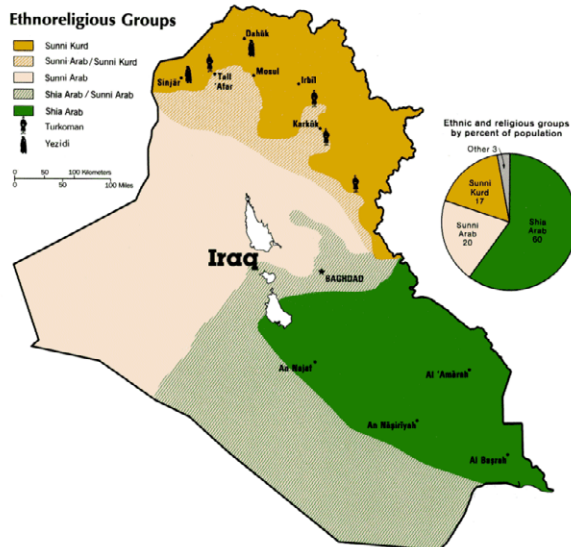
Source: The Global State 2015

Between 1979 and 2003, Saddam Hussein's government marked a period of nationalism and secularism for Iraq. Leader of the Iraqi Ba'ath Party, Hussein implanted a personalist regime that, at least until 1991, brought development to the country. However, the leader entered in a few wars that showed poor results (versus Iran) and have put him against the international community (invasion of Kuwait), which ended up strangling Iraq through economic sanctions. In addition, Hussein, a Sunni, has marginalized during his rule the Shia population, the

majority in the country, as well as the Kurds in the north[2] (Bandeira 2013).

2.1.1. THE IRAQ WAR (2003)

In 2003, shortly after 9/11, Western countries started to oppose to non-state military actors in the Middle East, classifying them mostly as terrorists. Within this context, President George W. Bush launched his freedom agenda, based on the Bush Doctrine[3], and accused Saddam Hussein of possessing nuclear, chemical and biological weapons, besides supporting terrorism worldwide. The plan was to invade Iraq, capture Hussein, and free the country from chemical weapons and from the terrorist threat, since all of these factors were, allegedly, a threat to the U.S.'s peace and stability. However, it is important to say that none of Bush's claims had any type of proof, even though Bush has supposedly made his decision based on U.S. Intelligence reports that showed strong evidences that Iraq had armed itself with chemical weapons (Bandeira 2013, Podhoretz 2005).

Iraq was, nevertheless, invaded and Hussein's government was overthrown. From that point on, the United States had to rebuild the Iraqi State so that some type of democracy could be established according to the freedom agenda, even though the Pentagon had no plan whatsoever for the country's stabilization (Cordesman 2006). The U.S. created a provisional administration to govern Iraq, the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), which outlawed the Ba'ath Party and refused to work with any of its members, even the more experienced and capable ones, putting Shias into power and dissolving the Iraqi Army, predominantly Sunni. These decisions left many capable men suddenly unemployed, besides creating sectarianism and marginalization of much of the Sunni people (Bandeira 2013).

The Dawa Party (Shia) rose to power, as Nouri al-Maliki became the elected Prime Minister. Maliki, an exiled Shia who had plotted to overthrow Saddam Hussein's regime, came into office aiming to change the power dynamics in Iraq in order to undermine Ba'ath's influence (Ajbaili 2014).

2.1.2. IRAQ'S CIVIL WAR (2006-2008)

The aforementioned Sunni marginalization led to the creation of many in-

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2   Iraqi Kurdistan is a federal region in the North of Iraq. It has its own President and Parliament. The Kurds share a different culture than the one from the rest of Iraq.

3   The Bush Doctrine was President George W. Bush's array of foreign policy principles, such as fighting terrorist groups, attacking enemies overseas, and advancing liberty and hope worldwide (Bush 2010). Robert Jervis (2003) also cites the importance of the country's domestic regime and the use of preventive wars by the U.S. as a way of guaranteeing peace and stability worldwide.

surgent groups that started to rebel against the new government, particularly the al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), an anti-Shia group whose creation was mainly permitted by the U.S. invasion. This group, originated in the context of a failure in the reconstruction of Iraq and the exclusion of a part of its society, wanted to consolidate its forces in the west of Iraq's territory, in the Anbar province, by convincing the Sunni people to rise against the Iraqi Shia government (Cordesman 2006).

After attacks against many Shia shrines in early 2006 by the AQI as a means to retaliate the Shias and the U.S. troops, a wave of unprecedented violence was set off. It caused a great number of civilian deaths and marked the apex of Iraq's invasion and also a peak of sectarianism in the country: the Civil War. The Shia population in Iraq saw what was happening not as the Sunni reacting against the government oppressing them, but as an attempt to reestablish the old Sunni domination (Cockburn 2015).

The AQI, however, suffered a widespread backslash when the Sunni Awakening was formed — a U.S.-backed group of moderate Sunni people in Anbar province not in favor of al-Qaeda, willing to end both the Civil War and the clashes between Sunni and Shia. It was promised by the Iraqi government that the Awakening members would be incorporated in the government and in the armed forces (Nordland 2009). In addition, the United States started sending even more troops to contain the Civil War and to deal with the strengthening of the militias, which became known as the Surge. These measures gradually started working, and the country faced relative stability until the U.S. withdrawal in 2011 (International Crisis Group 2008).

2.1.3. THE U.S. WITHDRAWAL AND MALIKI'S GOVERNMENT

By 2010, agreements between the United States and the government of Iraq regarding the American presence in the country still had not been reached, mainly because Baghdad did not want to grant immunity to U.S. soldiers. This, alongside U.S.'s failures on the ground in stabilizing the country and the high costs of the war and the number of casualties, caused President Barack Obama to announce the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq in October 11, 2011 (Bandeira 2013).

Notwithstanding, the United States withdrew most of its troops, leaving Iraq in the middle of a hibernated but unresolved sectarian turmoil. The Shia Prime Minister — Maliki, reelected in 2010 — in spite of claiming loyalty towards the U.S., shared close ties with Iran, a U.S. enemy that benefited from Iraq's deba'athification. Iran started to keep strong economic and diplomatic relations with Iraq as well as nurturing many allied figures inside the country (Heydarian 2012).

Maliki, from the U.S. withdrawal onwards, centralized power on himself, repressed political dissidents, mainly Sunni, did not keep his promise to them, and even intensified the sectarianism. The Sunni anger against Iraqi government started to rise again (Al-Ali 2014; Burke 2014). Therefore, Maliki's former promises of union between all religious sects began to crumble, and the Prime Minister lost virtually all support he once had (Bandeira 2013).

2.2. SYRIA

The Syrian territory, bordering Turkey, Iraq, Jordan, Israel and Lebanon, is a land that has been occupied by several civilizations through history. In the twentieth century, after the First World War, Syria became a French mandate, and the posterior French withdrawal left Syria amidst a series of military coups. In 1970, Hafiz al-Assad, a member of the socialist and reformist Ba'ath Party and the minority Alawi sect (even though Assad regime is a secular one), seized power in a bloodless coup and brought political stability to the country. Following the death of President al-Assad, his son, Bashar al-Assad, became Syria's President, bringing economic growth and relative stability to Syria (CIA 2015). In 2007, a referendum to Bashar al-Assad's re-election for another seven-year term was set, and the President supposedly got 97.6% of the electors' approval, in a demonstration of the President's legitimacy (Aji 2007).

Syria's most predominant ethnoreligious groups are the Sunni (about 74%, mostly spread throughout the country), which includes the Kurd population of 9%, located next to the borders with Iraq and Turkey; and the Alawi (about 13%), a Syrian branch of Shia (CIA 2015).

Image 2: Syria's ethnoreligious distribution
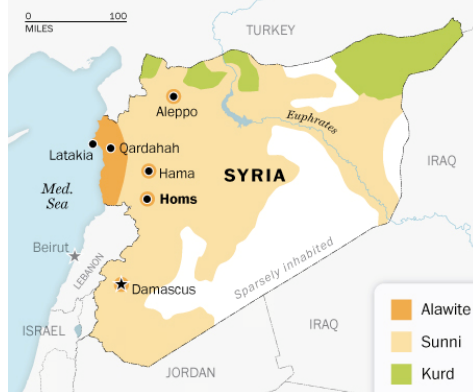
Source: The Washington Post 2015.

2.2.1. THE SYRIAN UPRISING AND CIVIL WAR

As a result of the Arab Spring, which erupted around 2011 in the Middle East, the Syrian government also started being pressured by protesters. The escalation of manifestations seeking democracy and an end to political imprisonments made the government respond with repressive measures, violence and torture (Bandeira 2013). That made the protesters claim for a full regime change, and also the international community to condemn the Syrian government. Later on, Syrian government's forces supposedly started using chemical weapons to contain the conflict. The United States, supporting Assad's opposition, was aiming to get a justification to intervene in the Syrian conflict (Bandeira 2013).

As stated by Visentini and Roberto (2015), the Syrian conflict is related to the power balance in the Middle East, involving the so-called Resistance Axis in one side and the U.S. and its allies on the other side. The Resistance Axis, a group of countries and non-state military actors, namely Iran, Syria, Lebanese Hezbollah and Palestinian Hamas, is opposed to the U.S. goal to expand its influence in the region. Washington's regional allies, namely Saudi Arabia, Israel, Egypt and Jordan, on the other hand, support such aim. According to the authors, the Syrian conflict was used as a proxy war[4] by these opposing fields in order to defend their own goals. Saudi Arabia and Qatar — due to Riyadh having a major dispute against Tehran for predominance in the Middle East — have given economic aid to the insurgent groups against Assad's regime so that Iran's liaisons and areas of influence could be harmed. The conflict, then, would have become a way for other nations to get their interests carried out.

Saudi Arabia, alongside the United States, France, the United Kingdom and other Western countries, have supported, since the beginning of the conflict, the forces that were fighting against Assad by sending them financial and material aid (Bandeira 2013). The Arab monarchies supposedly lent their assistance to secularist insurgent groups such as the Free Syrian Army (FSA), but the armaments were sent mainly to jihadist warlords and groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN), a Syrian branch of al-Qaeda (Bandeira 2013). In addition, problems regarding Turkey-Syria borders, which have proven to be very porous and uncontrolled by the Turkish, started to aggravate since thousands of jihadists have been able to reach Syria (Soguel 2015). As the former uprisings on behalf of democratic values degenerated into an opposition fracture and a humanitarian disaster, as thousands of civilians died in Syria and as jihadists forces began to rise, the Western consen-

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4   A proxy war is a conflict that results when opposing powers use third parties as substitutes for fighting each other directly.

sus started to fall apart (Kissinger 2014).

2.3. THE RISE OF ISIS

According to Patrick Cockburn (2015), the rise of ISIS was mainly a result of the events that happened in Iraq in the last decade and in Syria in the past few years. Its formation was caused by Iraq's ill-managed sectarian conflict, since they are the former al-Qaeda in Iraq. However, the rise of Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria is also crucial to understand ISIS, since ISIS/AQI were the founders of JAN and the ones that put this group in action in Syrian territory. They eventually split up because of a growing process of independence of Jabaht al-Nusra. However, a great amount of the armaments that were sent to Assad's jihadist opposition has been able to pass to the hands of the Islamic State due to the cooperation between AQI and JAN. Also, the propagation of Wahhabism, a fundamentalist version of Islam that imposes sharia law, preaching the subjugation of women and the persecution of Shia and non-Muslims, was somewhat promoted by Saudi Arabia this last decade in many countries, influencing many jihadists from ISIS to join in the fight (Cockburn 2015).

As stated by Cockburn (2015), the U.S., Europe, and their regional allies in Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait and United Arab States created the conditions for the rise of ISIS. They kept the war going on Syria, though it was unlikely from 2012 on that Assad would fall, as Russia, Iran and Hezbollah were backing his government.

In 2014, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, ISIS' leader, claimed the organization to be a worldwide caliphate, seeking to restore Abu al-Abbas' caliphate[5] in the Middle East. He also called upon all Muslims to pledge subservience to him, the khalifa. According to al-Baghdadi, all modern institutions, including states, are irrelevant and must be subordinated to the caliphate (Wood 2014). This has led other fundamentalist groups throughout the world to support ISIS: the al-Qaeda branch in the Arab Peninsula (AQAP) and the Nigerian militants of Boko Haram have already pledged alliance to the caliphate, aside from other groups in Egypt and Libya (Fox 2015). On the other hand, al-Qaeda's leader publicly stated that the

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5   A caliphate is a form of Muslim government led by a Caliph, a person considered successor to prophet Mohammed and leader of the entire Musim community. Abu al-Abbas was the first leader of the Abbasi caliphate, one of the most important caliphates in Islamic history, which was implanted in the 8th century.

group disavowed ISIS (Tran 2014).

Al-Baghdadi has reorganized the Islamic State from within since he took over. He has implanted a complex body of bureaucracy that encompasses military commands and intelligence, making his demands and goals more feasible. He has also created a financial system, wherewith al-Baghdadi can tax the conquered populations and export oil from fields under ISIS' control, enabling the funding of the running costs of the state-building process (Hashim 2015).

Since its rise, ISIS has completely changed the shape of the Middle Eastern balance of power. The extremist and fanatic group, located between the two countries' boundaries, has won over territories and achieved unexpected victories against Iraqi, Syrian and Kurdish forces. Its fast rise made many historically opponent countries, such as the U.S. and Iran unite against ISIS. However, the group is still far from being subjugated.

ISIS, much bigger and far better organized than Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda in terms of military and intelligence, has shocked the world showing videos of the organization executing Western journalists, what has also been a call to arms for many ISIS sympathizers across the world (Cockburn 2015). In addition to the discredit to Iraqi Dawa Party government, ISIS militants have been able to convince people of their cause, providing food, water, security and sewage (Dreazen 2014).

Territories run by ISIS have been expanding on and on. The Islamic State already controls an area of the same size of Jordan, and a population larger than five million people (Cockburn 2015). In early 2013, ISIS took control over Raqqa, a Syrian city, slaughtering the Alawite minority and establishing the capital to their caliphate. One year later, the city of Fallujah, located within a distance of 65 kilometers from Baghdad, was taken in central Iraq. Not only has the Islamic State conquered a great amount of land in the Middle East, but it has also put an end to the former boundaries in the region that existed since the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916. ISIS has also shown quick expansions and impressive mobility between their bases in two different countries.

In June 2014, ISIS fighters began an attack on Mosul, the second largest city in Iraq, in the Anbar province. Four days later, the city fell. Astonishingly, the 1,300 men that ISIS sent were able to take over the city against the nominal 60,000 from the Iraqi federal forces. In truth, the Iraqi army was so incapable, out of morale and discipline and corrupted — a big part of the soldiers were not even in Mosul despite being paid for that —, and the Iraqi government so discredited, that taking over Mosul was not as difficult as the ISIS officials originally thought

(Cockburn 2015).

Suddenly, the West began to understand that ISIS was representing a real threat to the Middle East. Despite still not being strong enough to conquer Baghdad, the peril was imminent. For ISIS, seizing Baghdad, one of the great Arab capitals of the world, would give credibility to its claim to be founding a new caliphate. The conquest of Mosul was the most symbolic victory for the jihadists until then (Cockburn 2015).

Also in June 2014, ISIS started advancing to both Sunni cities of Tikrit and Baiji in Iraq — the latter being the biggest oil refinery in the Iraqi territory and a major strategic spot in the country. The two cities surrendered without a fight. ISIS took control of the refinery and set the local prisoners free. The Iraqi government made a counteroffensive and was able to retake the city in November 2014 (Naharnet 2014).

In August 2014, ISIS marched and sieged to the Kurdish city of Erbil. The group was already fighting in two fronts — Iraq and Syria —, but was also able to reach the Iraqi Kurdistan. After sending drones and surveillance flights to gather intelligence on ISIS targets, the U.S. Air Force started bombing the Islamic State both in Iraq and in Syria as a response. On 10th September 2014, President Barack Obama made a public speech, vowing to "degrade and destroy" ISIS, and highlighting the importance of forming an international coalition to contain the group, even though no long-term plan has been presented by the West so far beyond the airstrikes. Shortly after, the coalition, formally known as Combined Joint Task Force — Operation Inherent Resolve was formed. Whilst Iraq formally asked the United States to launch airstrikes on ISIS inside their territory (Shankar 2014), the Syrian government had known about the U.S.-led campaign before it started but did not have details about how it would happen (The Huffington Post 2015).

In September 2014, ISIS besieged the Syrian-Kurdish city of Kobane, next to the 820 kilometers border with Turkey. The U.S. coalition bombed the city and sent modern armaments, such as antitank weapons, to the Peshmerga, the Kurdish army, since the Iraqi army is prohibited to enter Kurdistan[6], an autonomous region of Iraq (Karouny and Hogg 2014). After months of battle and hundreds of deaths, the Kurdish forces, with the help of Western airstrikes and weapons, were able to retake Kobane in January 2015, inflicting one important defeat to the Islamic State. In May 2015, in spite of the Western efforts, the Islamic State took over the city of Ramadi, the main supply route from Aleppo to Baghdad, and

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6   The Kurds were also able to opportunistically use the crisis to expand and become more independent, securing territories they have always claimed, both in Iraq and in Syria.

capital to Iraq's biggest province, Anbar (Russia Times 2015).

Facing the rise of a common enemy to many countries, the United States is finding it necessary to assume a more cooperative approach alongside enemy regimes such as Iran and Syria's Assad (Abrahms 2014). With the Islamic State virtually surrounding Baghdad and the Kurds constantly clashing with the Iraqi central government, it remains difficult for Iraq to hold its territorial integrity. If preventing ISIS to conquer other cities is already a challenge, taking back the ones already in their control may be even more difficult.

2.4. THE PRESENCE AND REACH OF ISIS

2.4.1. TERRITORY

The success of ISIS' warfare is considerably related to the Syrian and Iraqi physical terrains. At the current time, ISIS fights a ground war on three types of landscape: deserts, cities and suburban areas (McFate 2015). Image 3 represents the actual ISIS' territorial arrangement.

Image 3: ISIS Sanctuary (as of May 2015)
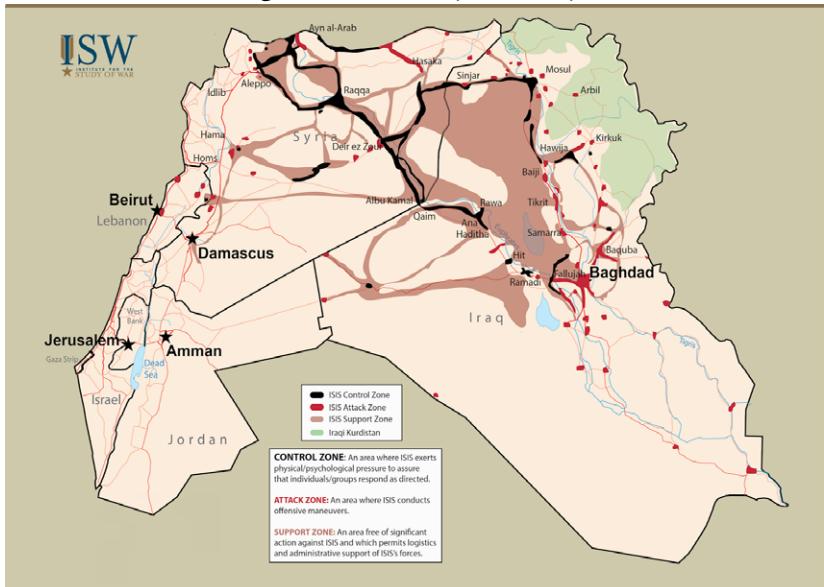
Source: ISW 2015a.

The deserts dominated by ISIS in northern and western Iraq form a vast maneuvering area with access to many Iraqi cities along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. ISIS uses the terrain features to move off Iraq's main roads at various distances from Baghdad to plan and coordinate attacks. Furthermore, the exploitation of deserts also enables ISIS to establish links among adjacent fronts, without coming into unwanted contact with the Iraqi Security Forces (McFate 2015).

ISIS began to take possession of cities in January 2014, when it seized Fallujah, signaling its increasing capabilities. Five months later, ISIS took control of cities such as Mosul and Tikrit, among other towns in Iraq and Syria (Ntrepid 2015). These offensives helped ISIS to accomplish its intentions in areas far from Baghdad, where it faced Iraqi Security Forces on one front only. Due to the complete access ISIS had to the desert, and the possibility to reinforce its ongoing urban operations from there, Mosul was especially vulnerable to isolation from Baghdad long before its fall to ISIS in June 2014 (McFate 2015).

In late months of 2013, ISIS established a number of fighting positions throughout Iraqi territory, at multiple distances from Baghdad. ISIS maximized its advantages in the geographic disparity of its elements in northern, eastern, and western Iraq and started to design phased campaigns which would allow it to function as mutually supportive fighting forces. ISIS' mobility advantage in Iraq lasted between 2013 and 2014; however, as of May 2015, ISIS' freedom of movement has likely been disrupted due to coalition airstrikes and Iraqi ground counter-offensives. Therefore, one may claim that ISIS' operations on different fronts are now more isolated, and ISIS has had less mobility advantage as it used to have previously. Even so, unrestricted desert mobility is a longstanding advantage of ISIS and it will likely maximize again if airstrikes stop before ISIS has been defeated (McFate 2015).

Regarding the projection zone in Syria, its western geography is otherwise less maneuverable by ISIS' desert forces — which creates a disparity between how ISIS conceptualizes and organizes the fights in both Iraqi and Syrian fronts. The Syrian desert contains mountains that separate the western region of the country from the open desert areas bordering Iraq. In eastern Syria (see Image 4), ISIS has acted like in the rest of the Jazeera desert that runs across Iraq and Syria, especially after the Syrian regime lost control of most of Deir ez-Zour province in December 2012 and Raqqa in early 2013. The Jazeera is a region where ISIS has a dense control; it is likely using the desert east of Homs and Hama (close to northern Lebanon — see Image 4) as a maneuvering corridor in 2015 — it connects Syria's central corridor east of the M5 highway to ISIS' stronghold in Raqqa. Furthermore, ISIS' access to interior deserts — such as eastern Qalamoun, around

Damascus — is constrained; however, ISIS likely uses them as a stage in support of its urban and suburban positions (McFate 2015).

In this context, it is important to highlight that no anti-ISIS forces are well positioned to get rid off ISIS from the Jazeera desert. While Syrian forces are likely to prioritize their campaigns in western Syria — which make ISIS freer in the Syrian east —, on the other hand, Iraqi forces are likely to prioritize the campaign for Iraqi interior — an exception being the attempts to reclaim Mosul. Syrian and Iraqi Kurds fight for controlling their already patrolled area, looking for autonomy and not opposing to ISIS' projection in other regions — excepting Mosul (McFate 2015).

ISIS uses not only deserts for their operations — it is also specialized in activities in urban areas. Probably AQI retained urban support networks inside Mosul after battle in 2008; this way, it was easier for ISIS to claim the city in June 2014. In Iraq, ISIS also established support networks within disenfranchised Sunni communities. Such infiltration allows ISIS to position itself close to urban targets in order to conduct more lethal terror campaigns. In Syria, ISIS is not the most powerful military force among anti-Assad forces in all places; however, it retains positions inside neighborhoods in Damascus (McFate 2015). ISIS is also present in Hajr al-Aswad and in the Yarmouk refugee camp, both close the capital. In the first days of April, ISIS captured about 90% of the Yarmouk Palestinian refugee camp, in southern Damascus. It had previously a presence in al-Hajar al-Aswad just south of the camp, but it was not considered in that moment as a dominant force in the capital area. It is possible to affirm that the advance into Yarmouk camp represents the strongest ISIS encroachment into southern Syria so far (White & Tabler 2015). Infiltrating into these locations may be useful both to prepare offensives and to escape U.S.-led coalition airstrikes in the Jazeera Desert and counter-attacks by the Syrian Kurds in northern Syria (McFate 2015).

In relation to Baghdad, ISIS wove a surrounding network of suburban roads which connected towns around the Iraqi capital — such ring of roads around Baghdad, as represented in Image 4, is referenced as "the Baghdad Belts". Used for the defense of Baghdad into an offensive concept, they were originally an artifact of AQI's campaign design. Currently, the system of belts represents to ISIS a way to organize a battle plan around a principal city using dispersed units, informal tactics, and freedom of maneuver to compromise the main defenses of a conventional enemy. It is also possible that ISIS may adapt its belts framework to major Syrian cities surrounded by large suburban areas, such as Aleppo and Damascus (McFate 2015).

Image 4: The Baghdad Belts

Source: McFate 2015.

Since August 2014, ISIS has been contained and its borders have been relatively retracted. That means ISIS is no longer able to act freely between approximately 25-30% of the locations where it previously operated – such areas extend from 13,000 to 17,000 km², especially in Iraq. However, it is important bearing in mind that such estimates are mutable, because of daily changes on the battlefield. The ISIS's region of influence in Syria has remained relatively constant and unchanged, on the other hand (U.S. Department of Defense 2015).

The advance ISIS has reached in the territories of Iraq and Syria also concerns its neighboring states. Such countries have already been suffering from instability due to the large influx of Iraqi and Syrian refugees, who flee from ISIS's repression and violence everyday. Moreover, threats have also been identified beyond the Middle East, in Libya – where attacks were carried out under the ISIS flag – and in Nigeria – where Boko Haram has pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (European Parliament 2015).

2.4.2. ORGANIZATION

In order to manage the caliphate, Baghdadi has appointed a cadre of advi-

sors, ministers and military commanders. This way, ISIS is run by a sophisticated hierarchy of commanders, each one with specific issue areas of responsibility. Moreover, to better administer ISIS' territorial possessions, he has two deputies immediately under himself, one for Syria and another for Iraq — each province has its own governor responsible for the administration of the region, down in the hierarchy. Still, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is advised by a cabinet staffed with ministers — those of which have clearly demarcated roles, salaries and delegated powers (Clarion Project 2015).

There are specific ministries related to treasury, transport, security and prisoners, and a minister in charge of looking after the needs of foreign jihadi fighters. All logistics and technicalities of war are managed by a specialized 'war office'. A great part of the cabinet and lots of higher level commanders served as high-ranking officers in Saddam Hussein's military and many others have high level technical expertise. There are indications that ISIS holds about 1,000 medium to top level field commanders — salaries of such commanders range between US$300-US$2000/month (Clarion Project 2015).

To effectively govern the controlled areas, ISIS builds institutions and infrastructure in addition to their military campaigns in its territories, since, in order to establish a state, ISIS has to gain the acquiescence of the governed, at least to a certain extent (Clarion Project 2015). The levels of sophistication of ISIS' governance programs vary depending on the level of control over each region. ISIS tends to make substantial investments in developing lasting institutions where it maintains greater dominance (Caris & Reynolds 2014). Since the northeastern Syrian city of Raqqa was conquered, ISIS has established it as a capital de facto and it runs healthcare, education and keeps public order over there — it tries to set these kind of services everywhere, but it is most entrenched in Raqqa (Clarion Project 2015).

Furthermore, ISIS has also been creating Sharia institutes, which are the most common institutions within its territory. The purpose of such institutes is to teach people about Islamic dogmas — there are also institutions directed to women only. Regarding children's education, school curriculum is focused on the Islamic sciences (study of the Quran, for example) rather than secular subjects such as physics or mathematics. It is important to highlight, however, that ISIS sees itself not as a terrorist organization indoctrinating children, but as a real sovereign state educating its citizens (Caris & Reynolds 2014).

Another major component of ISIS' caliphate vision is the institution of Islamic law as the sole source of authority within the state. ISIS operates courts, based on sharia law. With that, the considered good Islamic manners according to the extremist interpretation of Quran are required — gender segregation is

enforced and women must wear the burqa in public, for example (Clarion Project 2015). Through a harsh judicial system, ISIS also practices serious forms of punishment (known as hudud), which are reserved for the most egregious offenses under Islamic law (Caris & Reynolds 2014). The Hisbah, how the "morality police" is called, patrols the streets of ISIS in order to ensure that sharia law is being followed — punishments for transgressions of sharia law include flogging, amputation and death (Clarion Project 2015).

It is possible to affirm that these acts are also part of an intimidation strategy aimed at pacifying the areas ISIS controls. By showing extreme violence to enemies, ISIS utilizes the propaganda value of fear with the conquered people. Furthermore, this tactic also includes the gruesome videos of it carrying out mass and individual murders — all replicated online, utilizing social media in order to ensure maximum visibility (Clarion Project 2015).

In order to maintain all this organization system, ISIS also maintains multiple offices of recruitment for military service. These offices of recruitment welcome any Muslim in the world who wants to enter the ISIS' army. The potential candidates have to go through different phases of "sharia and military preparation" before being sent to the battlefront. In addition to these offices, ISIS also maintains training camps dedicated for children (Caris & Reynolds 2014).

2.4.3. FINANCING

It is possible to affirm that ISIS is currently the most well-funded terrorist group in the world, being richer than several small countries (Washington Institute 2015). Unlike Al-Qaeda or other groups, ISIS has been financially self-sufficient for about eight years as a terrorist and insurgent group, before claiming its status as a caliphate (Levitt 2014).

It is estimated that ISIS' oil income accounts for around $3 million per day, giving it a total value of assets between $1.3 and $2 billion (Dilanian 2015, Chulov 2014). Such income is immensely necessary to ISIS, considering that it helps supply and maintain equipment, provide salaries for fighters, manage civilian infrastructure and administration, expand its propaganda campaign, and bribe tribal leaders (Levitt 2014). Moreover, ISIS' oil production was estimated as being around 80,000 barrels per day, going $40 per barrel on the black market (Barrett 2014). In order to supply domestic demand, ISIS transports crude oil into neighboring countries, refines it into low quality gasoline at makeshift refineries and takes it back to urban centers for resale within its territory. Furthermore, ISIS also sells oil to foreign customers in Turkey, Kurdistan, and Jordan (Levitt 2014). ISIS

has tapped into pre-existing black market routes (dated back to 1990s) and smuggling networks (dated to Saddam-era) for selling extracted crude oil to smugglers, and then transport the oil outside of conflict zones. ISIS has used for that a variety of means: tanker trucks, vans, jerry cans carried by mules, makeshift pipes, and even rafts when crossing rivers (Levitt 2014).

Moreover, for nearly a decade, AQI has benefited from donations by deep pocket donors; today, although they still exist, donations are only one relatively small source of financing for ISIS (Financial Action Task Force 2015). Even so, there is evidence that ISIS has accumulated as much as $40 million or more over the last two years from donors in the oil-rich nations of Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Kuwait. While Qatar and Kuwait remain problematic jurisdictions, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have made significant strides in combating terror finance within their countries (Levitt 2014).

In addition to illicit oil sale and donations, ISIS has also been financially self-sufficient through its criminal activity enterprises. Currently, ISIS is involved in a wide array of criminal activities, such as livestock stealing, foreign passports sales, taxing minorities, extortion, kidnappings of civilians for ransom payments, among others. ISIS has also robbed banks, the Central Bank of Mosul included (Levitt 2014). Furthermore, a great amount of "taxes" is levied on companies and individuals. The second-largest revenue stream to ISIS — after illicit oil sales — is selling historical artifacts in the black market. More than a third of Iraq's 12,000 archaeological sites are under ISIS control, and many of these items — dating back to 9,000 BCE — are smuggled into Europe via Turkey, Iran, and Syria (Levitt 2014).

It is still possible to affirm that about 20% of ISIS revenue comes from kidnapping ransom payments — France has probably paid $18 million for four of its captured journalists in April 2014, for example (Levitt 2014). ISIS has been kidnapping hundreds of individuals, including local Iraqis, Syrians and members of ethnic minorities, as well as Westerners, and East Asians — while ISIS does extract ransom payments from some of them, it brutally murders others in order to send a political message to the world (FATF 2015). Estimates indicate that kidnapped Yazidi women and girls forced into marriage or sex slavery range from 2,500 to 4,000 (Watson 2014). Women are frequently sold at a low price, however, often as low as $10, mainly to attract more ISIS recruits who would buy them[7] (Keating 2014).

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7   According to United Nations investigators, about 2,500 women and children have been enslaved by ISIS — they are specially captured from Christian and Yazidi groups (Keating 2014).

2.5. THE RESISTANCE AGAINST ISIS

The rise of ISIS in Syria and Iraq led to regional responses in both countries, with a range of different actors all willing to contain the radical group's spreading. Such movements have been set in motion, in fact, prior to the U.S.-led coalition's assembling and represent a variety of interest on the ground.

In Syria, the fight against ISIS is headed mainly by Bashar al-Assad's army together with Hezbollah fighters, with the support of Iran and other Shia militias as well. On the other hand, rebel groups, mainly the FSA, are also engaged against the Islamic State, as well as the northern Syrian Kurds, represented by the People's Protection Units (YPG), the armed wing of the Syrian Kurdish party, the Democratic Union Party (PYD). Besides their common enemy, the Free Syrian Army and the YPG have been fighting al-Assad's army and its allies since, at least, 2011, and their enmity persists. Clashes have also occurred between FSA and YPG.

In its turn, in Iraq, the forces combating ISIS are mainly consisted by the Iraqi army, headed by Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's government in Baghdad, the Shia militias assembled and supported by Iran as well as the many Shia volunteers called upon by the Iraqi Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, and the Kurdish Peshmerga in the northern territories. Nonetheless, tensions between the Kurds and the central government in Baghdad also persists, despite the common threat of ISIS.

Therefore, as it can be seen, the forces spread throughout the Syrian and Iraqi theaters that are currently combating ISIS are not necessarily are aligned with the interests of the U.S. and the other members of Operation Inherent Resolve's coalition. If, on one hand, the coalition members, in general, support the Iraqi government and its army, on the other hand, they have vehemently opposed the Syrian government of Bashar al-Assad since 2011. Also, there is general support by the coalition members in relation to the Kurdish Peshmerga in Iraq and the FSA in Syria, but high suspicions remains towards the Shia militias supported by Iran in Iraq and the Hezbollah fighters in Syria. This way, the coalition has to maneuver carefully between the two operational theaters since, albeit the common battle against ISIS, it will have to be weighted to which extent collaboration with hostile actors would be useful or tolerated.

2.5.1. FORCES IN THE SYRIAN TERRITORY

2.5.1.1. BASHAR AL-ASSAD'S FORCES AND HEZBOLLAH

Bashar al-Assad's regime main forces on the ground consist of the Syrian

Arab Army (SAA) and the Syrian Arab Air Force (SAAF). The SAA is considered as one of the strongest and largest forces of the region, even though its main equipment is aged and/or outdated, originated from the Soviet era — 1970s or prior (IHS Jane's 2015c). Furthermore, due to the current insurgency that the regime faces, since 2011, the SAA is overstretched through multiple fronts.

Besides the confrontation of the regime against the FSA in the capital Damascus, the SAA have many other fronts of combat. They consist of: i) the **city of Aleppo**, in the province of Halab (Aleppo), in the north, where SAA confronts the FSA in one side and ISIS on the other; ii) **al-Hasakah province** in the northeast, where FSA controls only the province capital, al-Hasakah city, being surrounded by ISIS as well as the YPG; iii) **the province of Dayr az Zawr**, where the regime holds also the capital city while it is surrounded by ISIS; iv) the central **Homs province**, where the government faces ISIS forces on its central territory and FSA rebels against the capital city of Homs; and v) the southwestern **Dar'a province**, where al-Assad clashes with the FSA (IHS Jane's 2015c).

Image 5: Syrian political map - provinces
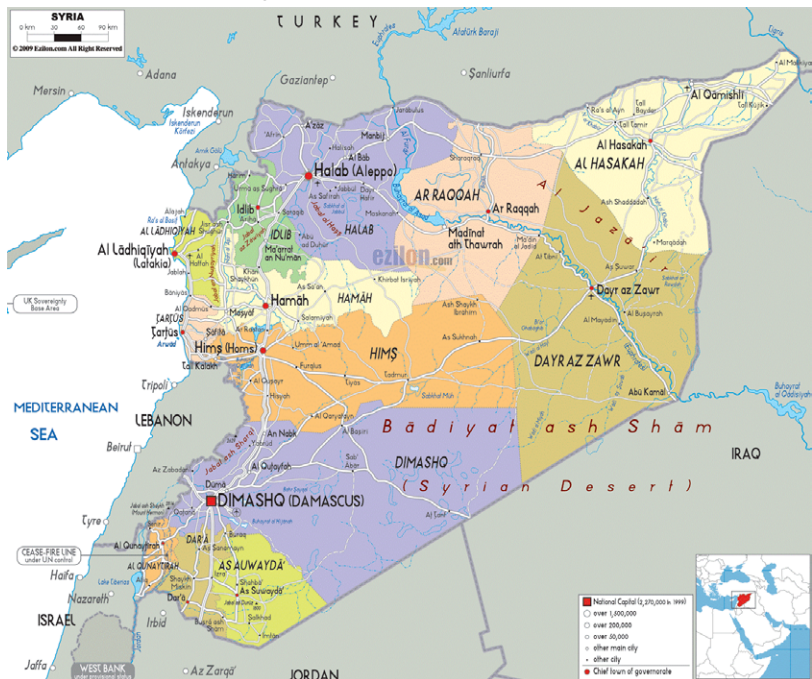
Source: Ezilon n.d.

According to IHS Jane's (2015c, 3),

> The SAA receives operational assistance and support from Iraq, Iran, and the Lebanese Hezbollah. It is estimated there are 2,000-5,000 Iraqi Shia militias and 1,000-1,500 Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force (IRGC) fighting in tandem with the SAA as well as providing training. Likewise, Hezbollah has provided advice and logistical support to the Syrian government and is also said to have protected supply lines as well as monitored rebel positions near the border between Syria-Lebanon.

The SAA forces have declined from a total of 325,000 in 2011 to a lower level of 178,000 in 2014, even though the remaining troops are loyal and combat-tested with more than two years of recent fighting at least. In regard to SAA's tanks, they have taken heavy losses, with an estimated of, at least, 1,000-1,800 T-55, T-62, and T-72 lost, which happened mainly due to SAA's prior strategy of sending tanks into urban areas without infantry support (IHS Jane's 2015c).

Currently, the Syrian army has shifted from a doctrine that relied on heavy weapons, artillery and air force to clear rebel areas, towards relying on smaller units, as well as Hezbollah fighters and IRGC soldiers, to clear urban areas — a lighter infantry approach (Kozak 2015). If they are not able to advance, the Syrian government forces moves toward a siege and bombing campaign in order to force civilian displacement of the area. Furthermore, Bashar al-Assad has coined a new strategy of having "an army in all corners" of Syria. This means that the regime has tried to have at least an outpost in each part of the Syrian territory, a movement guided by al-Assad's objective to be present through a united and contiguous state in order to preserve his position through a negotiated political solution (Kozak 2015).

Such posture may be seen in his attempts to portray the regime as a fighter against a transnational threat of terrorists, framing itself as the only viable alternative to a failed jihadist Syrian state. Nonetheless, such strategy of having remote, and sometimes isolated, outposts through Syria is risky: They do not necessarily translate into the ability to project force into its surroundings, and they might, as well, be overrun by an enemy's large scale, concerted offensive (Kozak 2015).

The Syrian Arab Air Force (SAAF) consists of a substantial number of combat aircrafts, such as Su-24, Su-22, MiG-25, MiG-23, MiG-21 and MiG-29. The SAAF has also been engaged in the internal conflict since the beginning, targeting the FSA and other opposition groups. It has suffered further losses of aircrafts and helicopters, with some of the air force installations being controlled by rebel forces at some periods — and even by the Islamic State (IHS Jane's 2015d). The SAAF main military air bases are located in the provinces of Idlib (Abu al-Duhur),

Homs (Al-Qusayr, Shayrat), Hama (Hamah), Aleppo (Jirah, Kwers, Menag), and Damascus (Mezzeh) (IHS Jane's 2015d).

In relation to the regimes' air defense systems, it possesses nearly 200 active surface-to-air missile (SAM) batteries and early warning (EW) radars[8] — an important factor that made Western countries unwilling to take any military action against Syria. The SAM systems consist of Soviet-era S-75 (SA-2), S-125 (SA-3), S-200VE (SA-5) and the EW complexes rely on the P-12/18 radar systems (IHS Jane's, 2015d). Even though the rebels have taken several sites since 2012, the majority of Syria's air defense system remain intact, since most assets are deployed in areas still controlled by the government (the Mediterranean coastal plain, the region between Aleppo and Homs, around Damascus, and the southwestern border near the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights).

**Image 6:** ISIS' control of terrain in Syria, May 2015
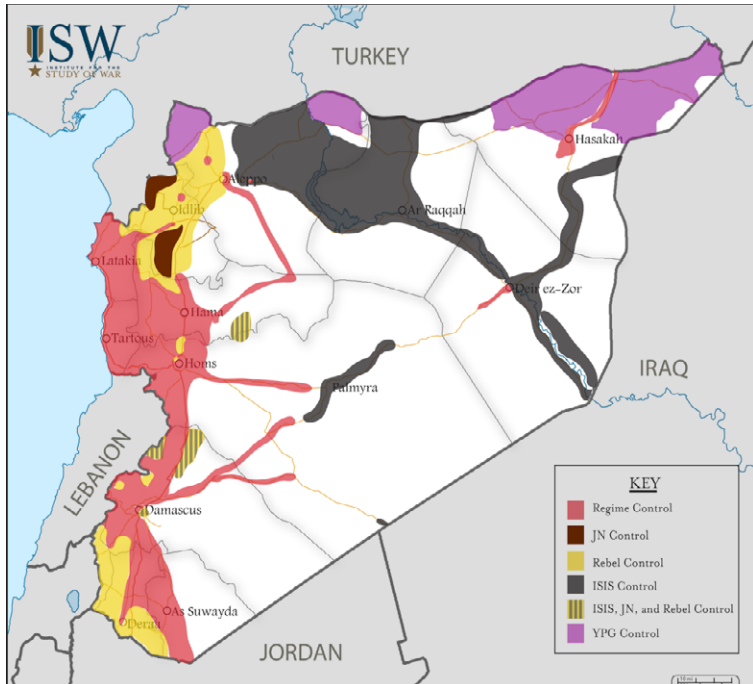
Source: Ezilon n.d.

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8   Early Warning (EW) radars deliver "an early notification of the launch or approach of unknown weapons or weapons carriers" (Defense 2014, 81). Therefore, they alert for incoming intruders as early as possible, giving enough time for the defense systems to operate.

The regime of Bashar al-Assad has also coordinated Hezbollah fighters against the armed opposition and the jihadist groups. The Lebanese group fully took part of the conflict in Syria from early 2013 onwards when they leaded a ground assault on the city of al-Qusayr, in the Homs province, near the border with Lebanon, against the FSA. From then on, Hezbollah supposedly maintains from 4,000 to 5,000 fighters on rotation in Damascus, Qalamoun, Homs, Idlib, Hama, Latakia, Aleppo and Southern Syria (Der'a). Al-Assad's forces also received strong support of Iran, even though since the fall of Mosul in Iraq, on June, 2014, Tehran has redirected its attention from Syria to Iraq (Kozak 2015).

It is estimated that between 3,000 to 4,000 foreign Shia fighters from Iraq, Lebanon and Afghanistan have gone to Syria to fight on behalf of the regime through the support of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards. The Iranian Revolutionary Guards supposedly operates in Damascus and Der'a, as well as in Aleppo — and the same is said about Afghan Shia militias, which came from the Hazara community (Kozak 2015). Moreover, some air defenses systems (Buk-2M and Pantsir-S1), ballistic missiles (Scud-D, Scud-C and Fateh-110) and artillery rockets (Fajr) were reportedly being transferred to the Lebanese Hezbollah by the Syrian regime, which led to several attacks of Israeli aircrafts on Syrian military bases since early 2012 (IHS Jane's 2015d).

Image 7: Syrian regime airstrikes by province
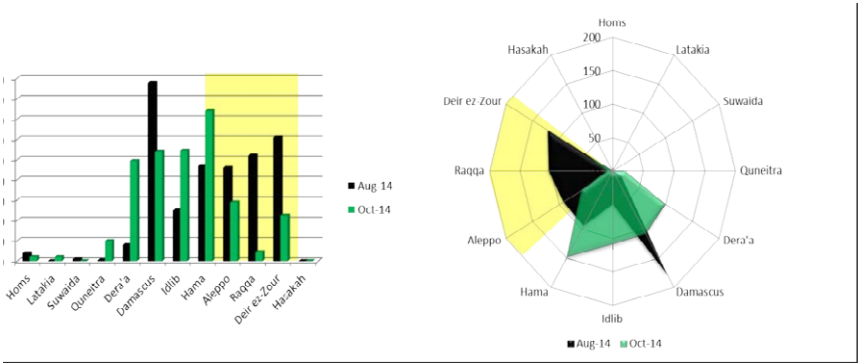
Source: Kozak 2015.

After the Operation Inherent Resolve airstrikes began in Syria, al-Assad's regime has taken the opportunity to pass a huge part of the burden of fighting ISIS to the coalition. Therefore, as it can be seen in Image 7, the regime could increase its own airstrikes against its opposition in other places, reallocating its bombings towards other provinces, such as Dar'a, Idlib and Hama (Kozak 2015).

2.5.1.2. THE FREE SYRIAN ARMY AND THE KURDISH YPG

The first and main rebel military group against Bashar al-Assad's government was the Free Syrian Army, established by former colonel of the Air Force, Riyad al-Asad, composed of defectors from the armed forces and from new recruits of the civilian population. Since the end of 2011, the FSA began operating under the Syrian National Council political opposition umbrella group and, in the end of 2012, it joined other militant groups to form the Syrian Higher Military Council, amidst the growing assertiveness of jihadist groups. It then became the official Syrian opposition movement's armed wing. Control of the FSA was assumed by Brigadier General Selim Idriss in the end of 2012, being subsequently succeeded as chief of staff by Brigadier General Abdul-Ilah al-Bashir al-Noeimi in February 2014 (IHS Jane's 2014).

Such umbrella of groups were the so-called moderate rebels. Nonetheless, it became known for its lack of a unified command and a unity of purpose. This resulted in grim outcomes for the group such as innumerous defeats to Islamic extremist groups and also the SAA (IHS Jane's 2015c). Such decline in relation to the jihadists became evident since late 2012, when their assertiveness and capabilities begun to ascend. From then on, many fighters from FSA have defected and its international support has also been reduced. In 2013, the frequency and intensity of FSA attacks declined sharply to only sporadic assaults, primarily in Damascus, Der'a and Aleppo. Currently it has been left with small strongholds in the north and in the south, as well as small pockets around Homs and Damascus, but its attacks are routed mainly in Aleppo and, sometimes, Der'a (IHS Jane's 2014).

The first clashes between FSA and the jihadist groups in late 2012 also involved the Kurdish militia People's Protection Units (YPG), the armed wing of the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD). The YPG forces clashed directly with the FSA on one front, mainly at Aleppo and al-Hasakah, and with ISIS on the other. Reconciliation came to the forefront between the FSA and YPG on September 2014, when both groups conducted joint operations against the Islamic State during its military assault towards Kobane. It is uncertain for how long they will continue to cooperate. YPG has also cooperated with the SAA during the siege of Kobane, nonetheless this does not mean that the group will accept al-Assad's regime as a legitimate government (IHS Jane's 2015c).

In relation to the weaponry held by the FSA, small-arms and other direct fire infantry weapons are believed to be the main type used by the group. According to IHS Jane's (2014, 13), "FSA fighters are typically equipped with AK-series assault rifles […] which have been looted extensively from Syrian military stockpiles.

Individual units typically also have access to rocket-propelled grenade launchers (RPGs)[9]". The military group has also reportedly captured T-62 main battle tanks as well as some surface-to-air missiles, including man-portable air defense systems (MANPADs)[10] (IHS Jane's 2014).

Finally, regarding the international funding to the FSA, IHS Jane's (2014, 16) states that

> the combination of the FSA's own declining capabilities over the course of 2013-2014, and the parallel shift in international focus from toppling President Bashar al-Assad to countering the spread of the Islamic State, has prompted a significant decline in international support for the FSA.

This shortage of funding has led the FSA to suspend fighters' wages, which has resulted in many defections. Furthermore, many of the Operation Inherent Resolve coalition's airstrikes in Syrian territory have been made without prior contact to the FSA, pointing to its marginalization in the operational theater of war. Therefore, despite all FSA efforts, the Islamic State is the current largest singular threat to the SAA.

2.5.2. FORCES IN THE IRAQI TERRITORY

2.5.2.1. THE IRAQI STATE FORCES

The current Iraqi Army (IA) was founded in 2003, after the ousting of Saddam-era previous military organizations by the U.S.-led Coalition Provisional Authority. It has been trained and mentored by the U.S., but since its withdrawal from Iraq in 2011, the IA operates with independence. According to IHS Jane's (2015a), the army consists primarily of light infantry and it has only one mechanized brigade, which received a delivery of 140 M1A1 Abrams main battle tanks in 2010.

With the rise of ISIS in Iraq, the IA saw many of its military divisions' commands disintegrate in the provinces of Anbar, Nineveh and Salehedinne, with a huge of number of soldiers' defections. Since then, the government in Baghdad

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9   Rocket-propelled grenades are anti-tank weapon that can be fired from the shoulder, which fires rockets equipped with an explosive warhead, usually targeting main battle tanks. It is important to notice that this kind of explosive device does not damage tanks with harder armor, differently from other more advanced MANPATS (Man-Portable Anti-Tank System).

10   MANPADs (Man-Portable Air-Defense System) are also weapons that can be fired from the shoulder, but they are equipped with surface-to-air missiles, thus being targeted at low-flying aircraft, such as helicopters.

has failed in mounting an effective counter offensive to retake its lost territory, even though operations had already started from June 2014 onwards (IHS Jane's 2015a).

In relation to the Iraqi Air Force, it was also founded after the Saddam-era structure was disbanded in 2003. Nonetheless, the Air Force has lagged behind in terms of development in relation to the Army due to the higher rates of investment required (IHS Jane's 2015b). Its missions, therefore, consist mostly of support for ground forces, infrastructure surveillance and logistics. With the exception of 12 Su-25s that Russia has provided in July/September 2014, after the request of the Iraqi government, and the Army's Mi-35s, the Air Force's air-to-ground attack capabilities are limited in range, endurance, and firepower. F-16s are expected to be delivered to the Iraqi Air Force and the United Arab Emirates has also ordered a number of Brazilian Embraer EMB-314 Super Tucano, a light strike aircraft they possess, to be given to Baghdad (IHS Jane's 2015b). Air Force's military bases are located in the provinces of Salehedinne (Al-Sahra/Tikrit, Balad), Ta'mim (Kirkuk), Baghdad (Baghdad) and Dhi-Qar (Tallil) (IHS Jane's 2015b).

With the collapse of army units in northern Iraq, nearly 40,000 Shia volunteers have responded to Iraqi Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani's callings on all those capable to join the fight against ISIS. The government had no other option other than to rely upon such militias. Furthermore, the Kurdish Peshmerga forces in northern Iraq have also been deployed in areas such as Kirkuk, in the Ta'mim province, giving effective control of the city to the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Erbil. Other disputed areas between Baghdad and Erbil in the Nineveh and Diyalah are also under increased Peshmerga occupation (IHS Jane's 2015a).

The Iraqi government has further requested an international military intervention in the form of airstrikes as a response to the security crisis in order to help push back ISIS. Operation Inherent Resolve has then been formed and it started to act in Iraq, as well as in Syria later on. It is important to note that in the Iraqi territory the coalition forces are not targeting oil refineries. In Syria, on the other hand, at least 12 refineries held by ISIS have already been damaged by airstrikes — assuring that they will not be used; neither by the Islamic State nor by Assad (IHS Jane's 2015a).

Image 8: Iraqi political map — provinces

Source: Global Security n.d.

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Baghdad became dependent on other forces that are not its own due to the collapse of IA and the weakness of the Iraqi government's effort to reach the Sunni population. In fact, according to IHS Jane's (2015a), the first big defeat of ISIS in Iraq came in late August 2014 after a combined force of Iraqi security forces, Kurdish Peshmerga and Shia militias, such as the Badr Corps and Kataib

Hezbollah, freed the Shia city of Amerli in the Salehedinne province. While these ground troops entered the two-month-sieged town, the coalition airstrikes helped targeting Islamic State supply routes and combat vehicles. The same combination of Shia militias and U.S. airstrikes have also helped to retake the city of Tikrit in March 2015.

Image 9: ISIS' control of terrain in Iraq, May 2015

Source: Centanni 2015.

Combat has spread through many fronts in Iraq. Currently, the main ones consist of: (i) Anbar province, mainly around Fallujah and Ramadi, both taken by ISIS, involving Shia militias, the IA and the coalition's airstrikes; (ii) Salehedinne province, around the city and refinery of Baiji, Iraq's biggest, also near the border with Ta'mim province, involving ISIS, the Kurdish Peshmerga and Shia militias; and (iii) the contention of ISIS assaults near Baghdad and/or at Diyala province, both by Shia militias, the IA and the coalition.

2.5.2.2. SHIA MILITIAS AND THE KURDISH PESHMERGA

The Shia militias fighting alongside the Baghdad government are one of the main forces currently fighting ISIS in Iraq. In fact, according to Dehghanpisheh (2014, 2), such militias "have become the most powerful military force in Iraq since the collapse of the national army in June [2014]". Beyond the 40,000 Shia volunteers that answered Iraqi Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani's callings to join the fight against ISIS, there are three main groups, all backed by Iran, acting in Iraq: the Badr Organization, Kataib Hezbollah and Asaib Ahl al-Haq.

All militias have political wings and they are funded, armed and trained with the help of Iran's Quds force, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards' branch responsible for dealing with foreign groups outside Iran. They all follow the Lebanese Hezbollah model. The three are coordinated by the Quds Force commander, Qassem Soleimaini, who has already helped in many victories against ISIS. He has reportedly visited Iraq several times, bringing together weapons, electronic interception devices and drones (Dehghanpisheh 2014).

The Badr Organizations is composed of 10,000 to 15,000 fighters (Dehghanpisheh 2014), headed by Hadi al-Amri, and it was originally called Badr Brigades by the time of its foundation in 1982, when it acted as a military wing of an Iranian-backed Iraqi Shia political party. Amri has fought together with Iran's Revolutionary Guard against Saddam's army in the 1980s during the Iran-Iraq war. After the 2003 deposition of Saddam, he has won a seat in parliament and has acted as Maliki's Minister of Transportation in his second term. Kataib Hezbollah, whose leader is Abu Mahdi al-Mohandes, is composed of nearly 3,000 fighters (Dehghanpisheh 2014). It is known for the attacks it has committed against American forces during the U.S. occupation in Iraq — thus being considered as a terrorist group by Washington. Mohandes has been working with Iran's Revolutionary Guards since 1983 and it has lived in exile in Iran until 2003, when he came back and was elected to parliament. He was reportedly serving as a channel of message exchange between Baghdad and Tehran and was one of the responsible for organizing the thousands Shia volunteers called by Ali al-Sistani. Finally, the Asaib Ahl al-Haq group, headed by Qais Khazali, consists of up to 10,000 fighters (Dehghanpisheh 2014) and it was a former part of the Shia paramilitary force called Mahdi Army between 2004 and 2006. Such group has also been known for the various attacks committed against U.S. and Iraqi security forces (Dehghanpisheh 2014).

The Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga, in turn, are also acting in the northern territory of Iraq in the fight against ISIS. They are the military wing of the political par-

ties in control of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), whose recognized boundaries are the provinces of Dohuk, Erbil, Suleimaniyah, and the northern parts of Diyala and Salehedinne. Nonetheless, each of the two parties in the KRG has its own loyal part of Peshmerga, which, in fact, resulted in a weakened joint position in face of ISIS. The Kurdish political party in power at Erbil is the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), faced by the opposition of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) party (Ali 2014).

Such weakness resulted in initial defeats on the part of Peshmerga, differently from the YPG Kurdish forces in Syria, who had always had better results. In fact, the Syrian YPG had to come to the rescue of the Iraqi Peshmerga and help in its war efforts. This resulted in modifications in the Kurdish political landscape, since the Syrian YPG is a branch of the Turkish Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK), who conflicted directly with the KDP in Iraq. Therefore, the battle against ISIS joined the two opposing wings of Kurdish parties — even though it is uncertain until when such common ground will remain (Dalay 2015).

After the first initial waves of ISIS attacks, which found a weaker Peshmerga than what was imagined, the Operation Inherent Resolve's airstrikes and the YPG forces helped to turn the tide of the conflict and to hold ISIS' advance. From then on, the Iraqi Kurds have also received support by Iran and even the central Baghdad government has relatively allowed the sending of weapons to the Peshmerga, a development it has previously objected. This combination of concerted efforts resulted in an advance of the own Peshmerga to territorial positions it did not control before — a movement seen with distrust by Baghdad (Berman 2015).

According to Berman (2015), the Peshmerga have primarily light arms, such as AK-47s and Soviet machine guns, often mounted on unarmored jeeps, and very few anti-tank capabilities, such as American TOW missiles[11] and RPG-7s. Their artillery mainly consists of Soviet-era howitzers and small mortars[12]. From August 2014 onwards, the moment of the first ISIS assault on the Iraqi Kurdistan, western countries hurried in providing more weapons and ammunition for the Peshmerga, such as rifles, pistols and grenades. Night-vision equipment, mine detection systems, helmets, body armor, communications gear and light vehicles have also been sent as non-lethal foreign aid. Military advisors from the U.S., UK, France and Italy too have been sent to train the Kurdish fighters. Nonethe-

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11   TOW (Tube-launched, Optically tracked, Wire-guided) missiles are anti-tank guided missiles (Defense 2014).

12   Mortars are artillery weapons designed to fire explosive projectiles bombs (the mortar) at low velocities, short-range and in a high-arching trajectory. The howitzers, on the other hand, are cannons that combines characteristics of both mortars and guns, delivering projectiles usually with medium velocities and having a tube length of 20 to 30 calibers (Defense 2014, 120).

less, even with all such efforts, Iran is still the Peshmerga's primary artillery provider, with daily shipments to the Kurds, consisting mainly of BM-14 and BM-21 truck-mounted rocket launchers (Berman 2015).

Western military aid, however, is still being limited due to the mistrust existent between Baghdad and Erbil, since the central government is wary that these weapons could one day be used against the federal forces; and the West, especially the U.S., is committed to a unified federal Iraq. Moreover, another reason for aid constraint is the fact that a high influx of weapons to the Kurds may fuel a future civil war between the political parties, or even that such equipment may fall into ISIS hands (Berman 2015).

# 3. OPERATION INHERENT RESOLVE

3.1. OVERVIEW

The first airstrike conducted by the U.S. against ISIS took place on August 2014, near Baghdad. It was approved by President Barack Obama as a first step of a planned expanded fight against the terrorist group. The targeted attacks continued for a month; then, on September 10, the President announced a broader strategy to "degrade and ultimately destroy the terrorist group known as ISIL" (The White House 2014). The plan, to be carried out with the support of its western and non-western allies, contains nine lines of action: supporting effective governance in Iraq; denying ISIL safe haven; building partner capacity; enhancing intelligence collection on ISIS; disrupting ISIS's finances; exposing ISIS's true nature; disrupting the flow of foreign terrorist fighters; protecting the homeland; and humanitarian support. In the weeks following the Presidential announce, more than 60 international partners have joined the coalition to support a broad diplomatic, economic, and military response to ISIS (Lead Inspector General for Overseas Contingency Operations 2015).

In order to accomplish the aforementioned objectives, the President issued two main military lines of action. First, the U.S.-led allied forces will conduct a systematic campaign of airstrikes against ISIS and other selected targets. These airstrikes are directed to strategic locations, such as buildings, fighting positions, supplying lines, oil facilities, or any other target that could contribute to weaken ISIS. Second, the U.S. and its allies will increase their support to selected forces fighting the group on the ground. This way, the U.S. has been sending troops to assess and train Iraqi and Kurdish security forces. It does not mean that the U.S.

will engage in another ground war in Iraq, since the American ground forces will not be employed in combat missions (The White House 2014).

In October 15, 2014, the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) announced that the U.S. led military operations against ISIS had been named Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR). The OIR nomenclature applied retroactively to all military airstrikes that had been conducted against the group in Iraq and Syria (United States Central Command 2014). A couple days later, the Secretary of Defense designated OIR an Overseas Contingency Operation (OCO). In November 2014, President Barack Obama submitted to Congress a $5.6 billion OCO budget amendment for Fiscal Year 2015 to fund OIR and additional U.S. programs to support regional stabilization (Lead Inspector General for Overseas Contingency Operations 2015, 2). For the Fiscal Year of 2016, $8.8 billion in OCO funding have been requested specifically for OIR or the counter-ISIS strategy (Lead Inspector General for Overseas Contingency Operations 2015, 3).

The main purpose of OIR is supporting defensive and offensive military operations by Iraqi military and Kurdish forces and weakening ISIS' ability to support its operations in Iraq from its bases inside Syria (Katzman, et al. 2015). As stated above, the airstrikes are the coalition's main weapon to jeopardize ISIS capabilities. The coalition forces have used combat aircraft, armed unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), and sea-launched cruise missiles to conduct more than two thousand strikes in Iraq since August 2014, and in Syria since September 2014. (Katzman, et al. 2015). The partner nations conducting airstrikes in Syria, besides the U.S., are Bahrain, Canada, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar. Western and other non-Middle Eastern allies of the United States, such as Australia, Belgium, Denmark, France, Netherlands and the United Kingdom, are conducting airstrikes only in Iraq (U.S. Departmente of Defense 2015). Until June 3rd, 2,835 airstrikes have been conducted in Iraq and 1,463 in Syria. In Image 10, it is possible to see where the main areas of coalition action are located.

Image 10: OIR in Iraq and Syria
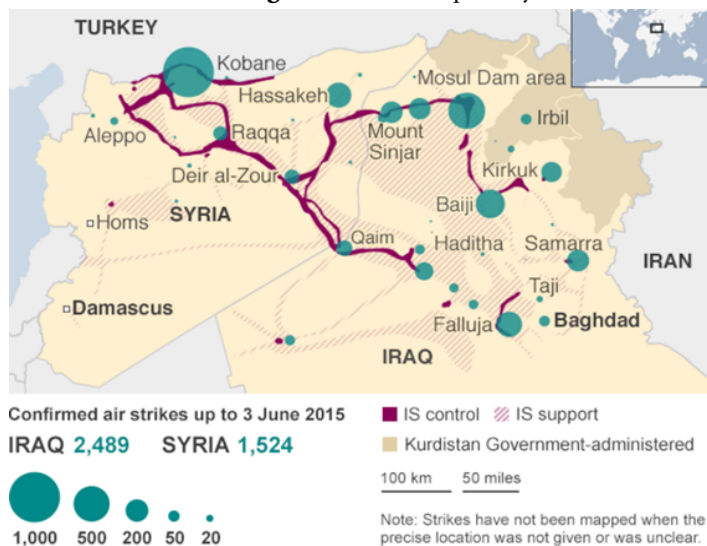
Source: BBC 2015.

In Iraq, the national government approves the operations. However, in Syria the situation is very different. President Obama has already declared that the United States will not coordinate its actions in Syria with the Assad regime, nor does it seem to be the intention of the Syrian government. Here lies the most central point for criticism concerning the U.S. approach on the Middle East: the strategy suffers from a basic contradiction in not confronting the regime of Bashar Al-Assad. President Obama has stated that U.S. engagement in Syria will remain focused "narrowly" on assisting Syrians in combatting the Islamic State, while continuing "to look for opportunities" to support a political resolution to Syria's conflict (Katzman, et al. 2015). At the same time, it lacks effective partners who can advance against ISIS-held territory on the ground. "These critics assert that achieving stated Administration objectives requires U.S. or other ground combat troops and expansion of the mission to include pressuring Assad to accept a political solution" (Katzman, et al. 2015).

3.2. MILITARY CAPABILITIES OF THE COALITION

A Combined Joint Task Force is an ad hoc coalition of armed forces of two or more nations. In this case, the international coalition brings more than

COMBINED JOINT TASK FORCE

60 countries to join efforts in order to combat the terrorist threat posed by ISIS. Seven allied countries that represent some of the main powers fighting ISIS (U.S., UK, France, Australia Canada, Jordan and Saudi Arabia) have been selected to the represent the coalition, and their military capabilities to fight ISIS are listed below.

3.2.1. UNITED STATES

The United States Central Command (CENTCOM) is responsible for leading the military campaign to deny ISIS safe haven, including airstrikes, and building the capacity of Iraq's security forces and moderate Syrian opposition fighters (Lead Inspector General for Overseas Contingency Operations 2015). President Obama has authorized the deployment of approximately 3,100 U.S. military personnel to Iraq for advising Iraqi forces, gathering intelligence on the Islamic State, and securing U.S. personnel and facilities (Katzman, et al. 2015).

US Air Force assets being used to strike ISIS targets are located at bases outside of Iraq, including Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar, Ali al Salem Air Base in Kuwait, and Al Dhafra Air Base in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), as shown in Image 11. Strike missions are being conducted by F-15s, F-16s, and B-1Bs, as well as F-22s (IHS Jane's 2015). Also, CENTCOM has allocated some capabilities specifically to OIR as presented by the Military Balance (IISS 2015): 1,400 personnel; 01 infantry division headquarter; 01 marine company; 01 company of attack helicopters with AH-64D Apache; MQ-1B Predator (attack drone). In mid-October 2014, the USAF deployed 12 A-10A Warthog ground-attack aircraft to the CENTCOM, along with 300 support personnel (IHS Jane's 2015).

It is important to note that much information is classified. There is a possibility that the Command is utilizing bases in Cyprus, Turkey, Bahrain, the UAE and Saudi Arabia to launch the attacks. Furthermore, CENTCOM can reallocate any military means available if approved.

Image 11: US bases in the Middle East
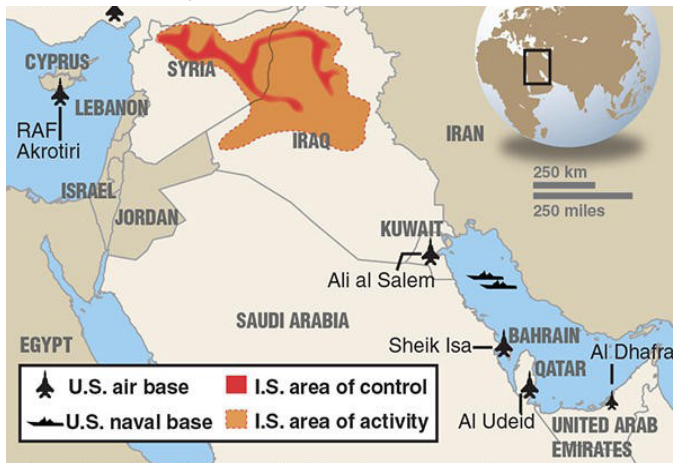
Source: SBS 2014.

3.2.2. UNITED KINGDOM

The United Kingdom first operated in Iraq by humanitarian supply drops to Yazidi refugees in August and the delivery of arms to Kurdish Peshmerga forces in Northern Iraq by RAF Hercules transport aircraft, as well in reconnaissance missions using the RC-135 Rivet Joint (electronic intelligence)[13] and Tornado. UK airstrikes against ISIS in Iraq, by RAF Tornados flying from Cyprus, began after the murder of British and U.S. hostages, a formal request for assistance by the Iraqi government and British parliamentary assent (IISS 2015). In Syria, the United Kingdom takes part in reconnaissance missions, using its Reaper UAVs and Rivet Joint aircraft. The air campaign conducted by London is named Operation Shader. The UK uses bases in Cyprus, Iraq, Kuwait and Qatar for the operation. Below, the United Kingdom assets for Operation Shader, as presented by the Military Balance (IISS 2015): in Cyprus, 01 Fighter Ground Attack Squadron with 08 Tornado GR4; 01 Voyager KC3[14]; 01 C-130J Hercules; 04 CH-47D Chinook HC4; 02 Airborne Early Warning & Control E-3D Sentry; 02 ASTOR. In Iraq: 12 Training Team. In Kuwait: 40 Training Team; MQ-9A Reaper. In Qatar: 01 RC-135V Rivet Joint.

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13 The aircraft is used to gather signal intelligence and to support operations with real-time on-scene information.

14 Aerial refuelling tanker aircraft.

COMBINED JOINT TASK FORCE

3.2.3. FRANCE

France was the first European state to engage in military action in Iraq supporting the fight against ISIS, flying intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance and strike missions with nine Rafale combat aircraft, plus in-flight refueling tankers from the permanent French base in the United Arab Emirates (IISS 2015). The French air campaign against ISIS is named Operation Chammal. Early this year, France has deployed its aircraft carrier, Charles de Gaulle, to fight against ISIS in Iraq alongside the U.S.. Flying from the French carrier are 12 Dassault Rafale M multi role fighters, nine Dassault Super Étendards and one E-2 Hawkeye (Hest 2015). In total, French air assets in the strikes against ISIS now include the aircraft sailing along on the Charles de Gaulle and six Armée de l'Air Dassault Rafales, six Mirage 2000Ds, one C-135FR air-to-air and one Atlantique 2 maritime patrol aircraft (Hest 2015).

3.2.4. AUSTRALIA

Operation Okra is the Australian Defence Force's (ADF) contribution to the international effort to combat ISIS threat in Iraq. About 900 ADF personnel have been deployed to the Middle East in support of Operation Okra. These personnel make up the Air Task Group (400 personnel), the Special Operations Task Group (200 personnel) and Task Group Taji (300 personnel) (Australian Government 2015). Also, Australia has deployed the following military means to the United Arab Emirates, where Operation Okra is based: 01 Fighter Ground Attack Detachment with 06 F/A-18A Super Hornet; 01 E-7A Wedgetail used for intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance missions; 01 KC-30A (IISS 2015).

3.2.5. CANADA

Canada joined the coalition by the end of 2014. Its air campaign is named Operation Impact, and it conducts airstrikes in Syria and Iraq. Assets and personnel include six CF-18 Hornets, CC-150T Polaris refueling aircraft and two CP-140 Aurora surveillance aircraft were dispatched on Operation Impact in October 2014; the operation is based in Kuwait (IISS 2015). The first Canadian airstrike took place on November 2, 2014, targeting construction equipment near Fallujah, a militant stronghold about 71 kilometers west of Baghdad (CBC News 2014). Also, Canada has sent 70 training team personnel to assist the preparation of Iraqi security forces.

3.2.6. JORDAN

Jordan joined the U.S.-led military coalition against ISIS in September 2014, first attacking sites located only inside the Syrian borders. In December 24, ISIS captured a Jordanian fighter pilot, Lieutenant Muath Al-Kasasbeh. Rumors of his murder by the group spread up until February 4, when ISIS released a video where the pilot was burned alive. On that same day, the Jordanian government announced, in retaliation, the expansion of the airstrikes to Iraq as part as the new operation to fight ISIS, "Operation Martyr Muath" (I24 News 2015). The operation is conducted by the Royal Jordanian Air Force (RJAF), manly through its fighter ground attack aircraft. The RJAF ground attack force is equipped with two squadrons with F-16AM/BM Fighting Falcon and one squadron with F-5E/F Tiger II (IISS 2015).

3.2.7. SAUDI ARABIA

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is part of the international coalition since September 2014. It has sent warplanes to strike ISIS targets in Syria and agreed to host efforts to train moderate Syrian rebels to fight ISIS (Fantz 2015). Saudi Arabia has the best-equipped armed forces in the Gulf region, and its Air Force can employ varied aircraft in its campaign against ISIS. The Royal Saudi Air Force (RSAF) possess a large force of ground attack fighters: two squadron with F-15S Eagle, three squadron with Tornado IDS and Tornado GR1A, and two squadron with multi-role Eurofigther Typhoon. It also can engage in intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance missions with its Airborne Early Warning & Control aircraft E-3A Sentry and Saab 2000 Erieye, besides many other tanker and transportation aircrafts (IISS 2015). However, Saudi Arabia is now dividing its efforts as it leads simultaneously another coalition involved in the Yemeni situation.

3.3. MILITARY CAPACITIES OF ISIS

ISIS personnel numbers up to 35,000 core and associated fighters. It relies highly on the flow of foreign fighters, since foreign jihadists from over 80 countries compose one third of its personnel. The troops are highly motivated and the group has a cadre of effective military commanders. "Some of these are former Sunni and al-Qaeda insurgents. In Iraq, others were drawn from Saddam's officer corps; and in Syria, from a mix of local and foreign commanders, including Chechens, Saudis and North Africans" (IISS 2015, 304-305). ISIS has developed

a guerrilla strategy for its attacks on Iraqi security forces and Sunni resistant, employing bombings, assassinations, but also:

> […] assembling more conventional forces, including effective 'flying columns' of fighters in pick-up trucks, armed with heavy machine guns and other direct-fire weapons. It uses mortars and artillery to bombard enemy positions for a day or more, undermining the morale of its opponents; small mobile units then deploy to swarm and seize bases and towns by capitalizing on surprise and panic. Suicide bombers are used to breach obstacles and destroy checkpoints before close assault. These tactics have made ISIS able to disperse and regroup quickly, rendering it less vulnerable to Iraq's limited air capabilities and conventional counterattacks (IISS 2015, 305).

The most common source of weapons used against U.S. and other Coalition forces in Iraq is the former Saddam Hussein's weapon stockpiles. ISIS now possesses scores of Iraqi military equipment originally provided by the United States, from Humvees and cargo vehicles to small arms, including SA-7 and Stinger surface-to-air missiles (Fox News 2014). ISIS is reported to have captured T-54/55, T-72, and M1 Abrams main battle tanks, M1113, M1114 and M1117 armored cars, Kornet anti-tank weapons (IISS 2015) and at least one Scud missile. In June 2014, ISIS took control of the Mosul Airport, and possibly sized UH-60 Blackhawk helicopters and cargo planes, but is very unlikely that the group may employ them (Lake, Jamie and Visser 2014). There is no consensus on ISIS' military capacities, and they are in constant change. Nevertheless, it is necessary to highlight that, even with the capabilities aforementioned, ISIS will not necessarily have the training, spare parts or ammunition to operate this equipment on a routine basis (IISS 2015).

3.4. INTELLIGENCE OPERATIONS

According to Johnson (2008), most professionals in the United States Intelligence Community define intelligence in two broad senses. The first one is that of information or data from around the world that is collected — via clandestine or overt methods —, processed, thoroughly analyzed and then disseminated to a final consumer[15]. This is the "strategic" approach of intelligence, the one that focuses on information that caters to a policymaker who will then be able to formulate decisions based on his or her assessment of the received product. On the

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15   The perpetual process of planning, collection, processing, analysis and dissemination is commonly referred to as the Intelligence Cycle. It is under these general guidelines that most intelligence services function and perform their tasks enabling national security.

other hand, there is the "tactical" approach to intelligence, which is essentially the same as the aforementioned, but with the additional factor that it strictly partakes to "events and conditions on specific battlefields or theaters of war, what military commanders refer to as 'situational awareness'" (Johnson 2008, 1). In other words, this type of intelligence activity, also known as Defense Intelligence, has the warfighter as the primary target of its support.

Nevertheless, it is necessary to mention that intelligence by itself cannot win a war (Marques 2015). Clausewitz's Theory of War recognizes that information in the form of intelligence can indeed provide a valuable edge to the combatant and, therefore, reduce friction. However, his theory emphasizes the primacy of command as the main gear towards achieving military goals, not the collection and analysis of intelligence. Thus, intelligence makes itself useful in the battlefield by reducing uncertainties about the enemy at hand (Marques 2015). It is a secondary tool that aids the decision-making process. It assesses capacities and intentions, which can enable commanders to trace the best possible plans. That is to say, states are not required to have excelling defense intelligence services to win a war. However, they can surely attain a decisive advantage over their adversaries by having this asset on their side.

In this interim, Coalition Forces and their allies are fortunate enough to possess some of the most formidable defense intelligence services in the world, namely under the leadership of the United States of America. Their access to top-notch technology and ISR[16] systems enables these forces to be in the forefront of intelligence collection capabilities on the battlefield. Also on their side is a team of highly trained analysts, who underwent rigorous professionalization with the advent of the Global War on Terrorism, and are theoretically prepared to provide early warnings and avoid failures at all costs (Lead Inspector General for Overseas Contingency Operations 2015, 31). With these assets, Coalition Forces are expected to utilize intelligence as a strategic enabler to attain their operational objectives against the threat of ISIS on the ground with more precision, accuracy and timeliness[17].

That being said, it is not as simple and straightforward for professionals to

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16   ISR (intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance) is the continuous and coordinated effort to monitor activities on the ground and, therefore, support operations. ISR systems include all sorts of technical novelties, from multi-purpose satellites to unmanned aerial vehicles, but can also include collection from simpler, more traditional means, such as aircrafts or human sources.

17   The pressure for better intelligence on ISIS' activities is quite real, mainly after the heavy criticism that U.S. intelligence has recently underwent regarding this issue. Critics mention that CIA and the intelligence offices of military services have failed on predicting the rise of the terrorist group and have continued to do so by not knowing enough about its status to be properly able to foresee its next steps (Ignatius 2015).

plan ahead intelligence operations and serve the commander's needs. They must have several variables in mind and carefully weight them down before proceeding with military action (Kringen 2014). On the strategic sphere, the tragedy of September 11 is an ever-present shadow that reminds how intelligence failures can be devastating for a nation. This also spills over to the tactical and operational side on task forces abroad, where mistakes can be equally harmful to combatants and local populations. Long-thought calculations that put all factors involved into consideration are therefore more than an obligation to operational commanders (Kringen 2014).

3.4.1. INTELLIGENCE COLLECTION

Intelligence can be collected by numerous means, each with its own advantages and disadvantages. Means of intelligence collection are mainly divided into two broad categories: *human intelligence* (HUMINT) and *technical intelligence* (TECHINT). Human intelligence or espionage is the most traditional form of spying, provided by human assets. Contrary to what popular culture suggests, it largely involves sending professionals called case officers (CO)[18] to foreign ground for the attempt of recruiting spies from these locations[19]. Ideally, a deployed CO will have as his or her job recruiting and administrating a web of spies (Wippl and D'Andrea 2010).

Undercover COs must find the best candidates for being spies. These can be disgruntled defectors, secret informants, captured prisoners, refugees, escapees, exiles, wartime occupied populations, political opponents and many more. After careful psychological evaluation, assessing weaknesses and strengths, the candidate can be approached and receive an offer to be hired as an agent after properly convinced — either by good disposition from the candidate or more forceful methods to ensure compliance, such as blackmailing. From the moment the candidate becomes and agent, he or she will regularly meet with the CO to exchange information in a secure way (United States 2011, Wippl and D'Andrea 2010).

It comes with no surprise that there are several risks involved in HUMINT. COs will sometimes obtain false and deceptive information from their sources,

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18   To avoid confusion, case officers are not the spies themselves. A person that is recruited by a case officer is a spy him or herself. Only on a small percentage of occasions will a CO do the job of a spy, like stealing documents or watching their surroundings.

19   COs often do not use nationals to conduct HUMINT and recruit foreigners instead because of how easier it is for them to obtain sensible information or infiltrate organizations due to affiliations in language, culture, tradition, appearance and so on. This is especially true when it comes to infiltrating terrorist organizations like ISIS.

who are prone to lying or simply passing along the wrongful version of what they believe is true. An agent's penetration on a target organization often takes a very long time to develop and mature as well, being susceptible to weak assessments in the meantime. Sources and methods of HUMINT are therefore fragile, and must be dealt with extreme caution and care. On the upside, HUMINT provides direct access to a targeted organization, enabling deception and influencing when rightly done. It is the most direct way of getting to know what the adversary is thinking, speaking or planning. Lastly, it is one of the easiest ways of penetrating organizations with low communications ("low signature") with the outside world, such as terrorist groups (Wippl and D'Andrea 2010).

On the other end of the collection specter, there is *technical intelligence*, which, not surprisingly, relies on technology to be performed. Technical means of gathering intelligence mainly encompass three categories. Firstly, there is *signals intelligence* (SIGINT). This activity consists on the interception and exploitation of data transmissions, being it speech or text, such as electronic communications, or other forms of transmission, like radar signals. Technicians can perform SIGINT by rudimentary means of wiretapping to highly complex methods of electronic interception utilizing sophisticated hardware and software[20]. As practically all sorts of intelligence products, signals are not always prone to straightforward interpretation. They can be written or spoken on an unknown language, encrypted by seemingly unbreakable codes, or simply lost among a sea of useless information (commonly referred as "noise") (United States 2011).

Next, there is *imagery intelligence* (IMINT). This refers to information that is collected in the form of pictures or footages by surveillance and reconnaissance systems. Devices that capture these images can range from satellites, to aircrafts, to UAVs. Their finished product are usually images from a determinate target seen from above, at the highest resolution available (United States 2011). In the case of the Task Force, considering that, as aforementioned, the coalition possesses the top ISR systems in the world, the quality of these photos and videos are among the best that can be captured or recorded. Even so, there are many complications with IMINT to be taken into consideration.

The best way to exemplify this is by displaying the controversies that surround drone strikes conducted by two members of the Task Force: the U.S. and the UK. On the past decade, civil society entities have heavily criticized both countries for the numerous accidental civilian deaths that resulted from the tar-

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20   SIGINT is particularly valuable on a world where even terrorists organizations such as ISIS increasingly have to rely on electronic data transmission to establish communications, which makes them susceptible to interception, albeit not sufficiently naïve as to not attempt to mask their messages.

geted killing operations of terrorist groups on Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia. They point out how imagery from drones, albeit all the high-end technology imbued to them, have no way of providing controllers pinpoint accuracy on selected enemy targets (Ronconi, Batista and Merola 2014). This is directly correlated to the limitations of IMINT, as images captured from a single angle, such as the case of those captured from UAVs, cannot give out a completely clear panorama of what is being targeted, leaving room for multiple interpretations and therefore mistakes to happen[21].

The third form of technical collection is *measurements and signatures intelligence* (MASINT). It focuses on analyzing quantitative and qualitative traits of the physical attributes of targets in order to provide measurements and signatures. It is an incredibly technical discipline that requires rigorous expertise and is further subdivided into more specific categories such as nuclear, acoustic, biological, electromagnetic, etc. In simple terms, MASINT collects and analyzes what is "left behind" by targets, identifying the complex nature of "trails" and subsequently quantifying samples (United States 2011). While MASINT can be useful on the strategic level when it comes to global counterproliferation efforts and such, it is quite valuable on the battlefield too when it comes to detecting recent movements of an adversary battalion or its lines of supply, for example (Richelson 2001).

Aside from the two broad collection categories, also a third collection discipline has exponentially developed and acquired more space within intelligence services in the past years. It is the field of *open source intelligence* (OSINT), a personal favorite to the advocates of the ever-expanding possibilities of the Digital Era. OSINT relates to the analysis of all sorts of data and information that is not collected clandestinely, but from sources that are publicly available in the print, digital or spoken form – mass media, public data, grey literature[22], online resources, etc (United States 2011). It has been historically devaluated by those who only saw secret and clandestine information as truly useful, but it has seen a dramatic shift in its favor in the last decades with the advent of the Internet and the increased access to information that this made possible (Pallaris 2008).

Much like intelligence professionals will often fail to see the relevance of a balanced approach to OSINT — which is recognizing the complementarity of overt and covert information in the production of intelligence — on the spec-

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21   Still, IMINT is the main form of intelligence utilized by Task Force members to seek out terrorist head leaderships in the Middle East. Even when we consider that information on targeted killing operations is strictly confidential, it is logically implied that OIR will choose to neutralize these key individuals by means of calculated airstrikes – which could entail all the aforementioned setbacks.

22   Hard-to-find published material with small or limited distribution.

trum of strategy, commanders will rarely give the importance that it deserves for operational support (Hulnick 2012). It is important to highlight that globalization has brought a reality where there is an increasing merge between the open source environment and the classified domain, as more and more people around the globe are instantly connected and exchanging information (Pallaris 2008). Terrorist organizations are present on the digital domain as well and they will sometimes let out valuable information, if only there is someone ready to capture the message. Albeit the susceptibility that OSINT has to inaccuracy of information, overlooking this collection discipline might not be the wisest choice for a commander (Hulnick 2012).

3.4.2. INTELLIGENCE ANALYSIS

Once collection has been sorted, decision-makers must also have in mind that the process of analysis — which involves transforming collected information into a finalized intelligence product[23] — has its own factors to be taken into consideration. Intelligence analysis is a growing discipline that only recently saw significant efforts towards professionalization, mainly geared by the recognition of institutionalized failures that led to the permission of the September 11 attacks. That being said, it does not yet have rigid, strict guidelines for its conduction (Bruce and George 2014). Nonetheless, several studies have already displayed what the main factors that ultimately result on mistakes within intelligence services. Most of them partake to the intelligence support of strategy, but some of the lessons apply to tactical and operational support too (Kringen 2014).

First, there is the tendency on solely relying on one collection discipline for intelligence production. As thoroughly exposed in the previous section, each one of them has its uniqueness and particular strength, but they also have their inherent limitations, either by technological or human constraints. For that reason, analysis ideally derives from "all-source" collection, which attempts to take the most advantage as possible from all collection disciplines and ensure the accuracy of a finished product by shedding light into the "bigger picture" (Bruce and George 2014). Next, there is the difficult task of constantly attempting to tackle the cognitive bias that an analyst may have. This refers to regular conditions of the

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23   This is where analysts will gather raw data and attempt to "connect the dots" to form good intelligence products. Intelligence professionals engaged with OIR are currently working their way towards having some of these dots connected in order to address pressing concerns that policymakers and military commanders may have on the strategic and tactical levels alike. They will try to answer urgent questions such as "who is buying oil from ISIS right now?", "where is al-Baghdadi hiding?" or "how and when will ISIS strike next in Syria or Iraq?"

human mind that will sometimes hamper the clear, unbiased production of intelligence, such as group-thinking, mirror-imaging or clientism[24] (Bruce and George 2014). In the case of the Task Force, this should be watered down by the presence of intelligence officials from multiple backgrounds and nationalities, should they work together to resolve the issues at hand.

We then stumble upon the issue of the political neutrality of analysis. Ideally, intelligence, as a bureaucracy whose function is providing the necessary support for policymakers and commanders, should never prescribe policy, being completely unpartisan to any issue at hand. However, intelligence does not always manage to stay free of political influence, especially when there is a lot at stake, which leads to distortions in analysis that will work to fit into a certain political view (Bruce and George 2014). Such was the case of the invasion of Iraq based on the mistaken assumption of the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Saddam Hussein's possession, and, if not properly handled, could easily lead to hasty decisions surrounding the threat of ISIS.

The last issue worth mentioning is the one that concerns the reluctance to share intelligence. When analyzing the failures that preceded 9/11, congressional commissions found that the U.S. Intelligence Community as a whole had practically all the information necessary to stop the attacks from happening. However, information was so compartmentalized and agencies – notably the CIA and the FBI – were so unwilling to cooperate with each other that their intelligence analysis capabilities were nullified (Kean and Hamilton 2004). This pointed out to the pressing importance of establishing a "need to share" culture, as opposed to the traditional "need to know" (Bruce and George 2014). When we talk about international coalitions, this could certainly be paralleled to a country's reluctance to share precious information with its allies and regional partners.

3.4.3. COVERT ACTION

Although not commonly, there are times in which intelligence services will not exclusively assume the passive role of providing support to final consumers, but rather take the proactive stance of conducting secret operations by itself after being commanded to do so. In covert action (CA), intelligence will attempt to

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24   Evidently, cognitive biases will not always be the sole responsible factors for mistakes in analysis. In many cases, intelligence failures will derive from the simple lack of critical thinking that an analyst may have because of a variety of aspects, but most frequently due to insufficient training in the discipline of analysis. This happens more often with professionals in intelligence services that do not have years of tradition in analysis (which is not the case of the United States, the United Kingdom and France, for example), but it is not limited to them.

influence what happens within another state or organization without revealing the origins of said influence. Notwithstanding, there are many types of CA – most of which are employed with similar means to HUMINT, relying frequently on human assets. Covert economic, political and paramilitary action, as, for example, disrupting trade, influence elections and providing weapons to non-state actors[25], usually apply to state targets. There are far more controversial type of CA aims against terrorist groups like ISIS and at times other countries as well. Denominated "wet operations", they involve assassinations, assisting coup d'états, fostering sedition and subversion, conducting covert propaganda and so on (Godson 2000).

Wet operations can be very useful in counterterrorism missions, as proven in the past by French and Israeli intelligence successes in Africa and the Middle East. Intelligence services can find ways to penetrate and harass terrorist cells from within by "tampering with their communications, sabotaging their operations and sowing discord among members" (Godson 2000, 182). Nevertheless, considering the risks involved in covert action, both physical and political, and the upkeep of maintaining plausible deniability, policymakers and commanders do not easily deploy officers for these operations. CA involves a carefully calculated decision by policymakers and commanders (not by intelligence professionals themselves) as to the collateral damages it might bring to foreign populations or operatives on one hand and the benefits it can result to domestic populations and national or international security on the other.

4. THE POLITICAL SITUATION OF THE MIDDLE EAST

Finally, in order to fully understand the complexities behind the battle against ISIS, it is necessary to point out the current political context of the Middle East region. According to Gause III (2014), the best analytical framework to understand Middle Eastern politics and conflicts today is as a new cold war between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Such regional dispute would materialize in the internal disputes of other states through the use of military "proxies" — groups supported

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25   That the West has been clandestinely providing material and tactical support to non-state actors in Iraq and the Levant – even under heavy criticism from developing nations – is no well-guarded secret. These paramilitary operations, that were first limited to destabilizing the Assad regime in Syria by aiding the FSA, then started gearing themselves more towards countering the presence of ISIS by helping Kurdish forces (IHS Jane's 2014). It is important to highlight that these operations are not limited to the Task Force members, as Iran's Quds forces actively support Shia militias in the region (Dehghanpisheh 2014).

by either Tehran or Riyadh, diplomatically and militarily.

This is especially the case of Syria. The country is one of the main allies of Iran and is fundamental to the strategy that Tehran had been developing in the Middle East region in the 2000s. Mohns and Bank (2012, 25) call such strategy as the Resistance Axis, and state that:

> From the mid- to late 2000s, Middle East regional politics had been characterized by a polarization between pro-Western status quo powers — mainly Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan — and an anti-Western resistance camp made up of the Islamic Republic of Iran and Syria as well as the Lebanese Hezbollah and the Palestinian Hamas.

Therefore, Syria and the Lebanese Hezbollah have been part of the Iranian strategy, mainly after the U.S. has put its own troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, ringing the alarm in Tehran that it would be increasingly surrounded. Thus, the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah partnership widened Tehran's security perimeter to the Levant. In this perspective, Syria, especially, "constitutes a 'forward operating' post, a strategic buffer, and a means of projecting power and influence into the Levant" (Chubin 2012, 30). Hezbollah is also a keystone of Tehran's strategy and a strategic asset against Israel due to the group's possibility of retaliation against Tel Aviv, therefore being a part of Iran's forward defense.

Saudi Arabia, in turn, leading the pro-Western status quo Arab camp, saw the opportunity to weaken Iran and its allies since the beginning of the manifestations in Syria. Riyadh and its allies started to fuel the Syrian rebels with weapons, training and financing in order to strike down the geographical center of the Resistance Axis — Damascus — and to substitute al-Assad's regime for another one more favorable to the petro monarchies' interests (Visentini and Roberto 2015).

Nonetheless, Saudi Arabia, since the 1980s, was used to support radical and jihadists groups through the spread of its puritanical brand of Islam, Wahhabism, the kingdom's official religious sect. This is exactly what gave birth to the mujahedeen in Afghanistan, later regrouped and renamed as Al-Qaeda in the 1990s. This way, through the continuous fueling of money and weapons to Islamic groups in Syria that were rapidly turning into a radical opposition to Assad's regime, Saudi Arabia has contributed to the rise of terrorist cells in detriment of the moderated opposition, the FSA (Cockburn 2014).

It is in this context that Al-Qaeda in Iraq could settle Al-Nusra in Syria and benefit from the continuous inflow of material support from the Gulf, later rebranding itself as ISIS and conquering enormous chunks of territory in Syria and Iraq. This way, the Islamic State carries with it part of the regional rivalry's bitter legacy between the two opposite camps in the Middle East — a strategic com-

petition that is still not resolved and which will also impact Operation Inherent Resolve's decisions and actions.

5. BLOC POSITIONS

5.1. UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

The United States sees the rise of ISIS as a threat not only to the Middle East region, but also to homeland security. Therefore, the U.S. is the main force in the coalition fighting ISIS, with growing investments in the Operation Inherent Resolve. It has been engaged in airstrikes in both Iraq and Syria. Meanwhile, the U.S. are focused on supporting the Iraqi Ground Forces fighting ISIS as a way to capacitate the Iraqi government while also avoiding the deployment of boots on the ground (U.S. Department of Defense 2015).

Lieutenant General James L. Terry, Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve Commander (CJTF-OIR), runs the meeting as the chair, while coordinating and commanding the combined efforts to fight ISIS from all the members of the coalition.

General Lloyd Austin, U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) Commander, is the lead U.S. officer with respect to U.S. military operations against ISIS and other terrorist groups in Iraq and Syria.

Major General Paul Funk, Coalition Joint Forces Land Component Command Commander, is in charge of providing coalition ground troops as well as training Iraqi ground troops.

Ashton Carter, Minister of Defense of the U.S., has the role of representing the political interests of the U.S.A in the coalition's operation, also taking into consideration the country's political and diplomatic necessities. He is in charge of contacting the President, if necessary.

Rear Admiral Brett Heimbigner, Commanding Officer of the Joint Intelligence Center, Central Command (JICCENT), is responsible for providing support to the Commander of U.S.CENTCOM by leading military intelligence collection, analysis, and targeting operations.

5.2. UNITED KINGDOM

For the United Kingdom, the rise of ISIS is not only hazardous to the integrity of its close allies in the Middle East. Its transnational reach has been proven

by tragic incidents all over the world, and the UK is not willing to stand idle while the extremist group exerts its domination further into the West. Nevertheless, the British government recognizes the complexity of the situation in Iraq and the Levant region, knowing that the current alliances being formed in the Middle East now are key to the Task Force's success (Cockburn 2015).

The Right Honorable **Michael Fallon**, Secretary of State for Defense of the United Kingdom — has overall responsibility for the business of the department providing strategic direction on policy, operations, acquisition and personnel matters, including: operational strategy; defense planning, program and resource allocation; defense exports policy; among other responsibilities.

General Sir Nicholas Houghton, Chief of the United Kingdom Defense Staff and Commander of the Operation Shader — is the professional head of the Armed Forces and principal military adviser to the Secretary of State for Defense and the government. He leads UK defense, setting military strategies and is responsible for the conduct of current operations, as strategic commander.

Vice Admiral Alan Richards, Agency Executive of Defense Intelligence (DI), an integral part of the UK's Ministry of Defense, has the role of pushing forward all-source intelligence collection and analysis efforts in order to provide support to British military operations.

5.3. FRANCE

Of all member-states of NATO, France is perhaps one of the most envisioned countries for terrorist attacks by ISIS-affiliated terrorists. As a result, the French government not only feels compelled to intervene in the Middle East in order to curb the expansion of the radical group against its interests in the region, but it also does so by its perceived obligation to protect its own national security and population. It follows that France has attained an increasingly adamant position against the Islamic State, aiming to wipe out the terrorist group completely (Cockburn 2015).

Jean-Yves Le Drian, Minister of Defense of France — is responsible for execution of military policy and for the control of military operations, also taking into consideration the country's political and diplomatic necessities. He is in charge of contacting the President, if necessary.

Rear Admiral Antoine Beaussant, admiral commander of the naval maritime zone in the Indian Ocean (ALINDIEN), he is the operational commander of Opération Chammal – the French military mission in the fight against ISIS. He is in charge of setting the military strategies and is responsible for the conduct

of current operations.

General Christophe Gomart, Head of the Directorate of Military Intelligence (DRM) — a directorate of France's Ministry of Defense —, is the chief responsible for France's military intelligence collection, analysis, and dissemination efforts for the French Armed Forces and their operations.

5.4. SAUDI ARABIA

The kingdom of Saudi Arabia sees in ISIS a threat against its own existence since they proclaim to be the true version of Islam, besides vowing to overthrown the Arab regimes allied to the West. Furthermore, due to the kingdom Wahhabi credentials, ISIS transnational message may resonate on Saudi citizens. Nonetheless, besides this fear, Riyadh is dreaded by the possibility of Shia power, headed by Iran, getting more consolidate in Syria and Iraq. Therefore, the House of Saud needs to halt ISIS spread without giving ground to the Shia power (Friedman 2015).

Prince Mohammad bin Salman al-Saud, Minister of Defense of Saudi Arabia, has the role of representing Saudi political interests, also taking in consideration the political necessities and all the diplomacy related between Saudi Arabia's interests and the coalition's operations. He is also responsible for contacting Saudi Arabia's king, in case of necessity.

Lt. General Mohammed bin Ahmed Alshaa'lan, Chief of Air Staff of the Royal Saudi Air Force, is responsible for managing the military operations of the Royal Saudi Air Force inside the coalition's missions.

5.5. JORDAN

The kingdom of Jordan has a similar position in relation to ISIS as Saudi Arabia. Being a country with close relations to the West and also Israel, it fears having its legitimacy questioned by ISIS. Furthermore, it is located near the reach of ISIS forces, sensing the threat that may cross its borders. Nonetheless, Amman is also concerned about the reach of Iranian power, keeping in mind that efforts to contain ISIS must be concerned with not giving ground to Iran and its allies (Friedman 2015).

Abdullah Ensour, Prime Minister and Minister of Defense of Jordan, has the role of representing Jordanian political interests, also taking in consideration the political necessities and all the diplomacy related between Saudi interests and the coalition's operations. He is also responsible for contacting the Jordanian king,

in the case of necessity.

Major General Mansour al-Jobour, Chief of Air Staff of the Royal Jordanian Air Force, is responsible for managing the military operations of the Royal Jordanian Air Force inside the coalition's missions.

5.6. AUSTRALIA

Through Operation OKRA, the Australian Defense Force has participated in international efforts to counter ISIS's terrorist threats. The entry of Australia in the fight against ISIS was due to the US government's formal request for the Australian contribution to the international coalition. To Australia, ISIS threatens not only people in the Middle East, but in the whole world. In addition, Australia also shows concern for at least 60 Australians who have joined ISIS or other terrorist groups and more than 100 other nationals who have been supporting the organization (Prime Minister of Australia 2014).

Rear Admiral Trevor Jones, Commander of the Operation OKRA — is a senior officer in the Royal Australian Navy (RAN), formerly serving as Deputy Chief of Navy from 2011 to 2013 and Head Military Strategic Commitments since April 2013.

5.7. CANADA

Since ISIS actions created the necessity of an international community's response, Canada launched its own military mission and further expanded it through the approval of its House of Commons. Alleging self-defense reasons, Canada sees ISIS as a terrorist threat to its country. Furthermore, it also seeks to deepen its relations with its allies, mainly the United States (The National Post 2015).

Thomas J. Lawson, Chief of the Defense Staff of the Canadian Armed Forces and Commander of Operation Impact, is in charge of conducting the command, control and administration of the forces, as well as having responsibility for military strategy, plans, and requirements.

6. GENERAL OPERATIONAL OBJECTIVES

1. To conduct an airstrike campaign aiming regain Iraqi and Syrian cities from the control of ISIS while support legitimate ground forces also confronting

the group;

2. To come out with a strategy to interrupt the revenues of ISIS and its main forms of financing;

3. To create an operation targeting the head leaderships of ISIS.

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