The territorial control strategy of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (2014-2015)

La estrategia de control territorial del Estado Islámico de Irak y el Levante (2014-2015)

Abstract: The article discusses the urban strategy of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (2014-2015) in the region of its primary action between the years 2014 to 2015. The article analyzes how the organization uses its dominion over territories to build the territorial bases of the self-proclaimed caliphate, provide logistical points that allow the control of new localities, and institutionalize their presence in the region of Iraq and Syria.

Keywords: Islamic State. War. Syria. Iraq.

Resumen: El artículo aborda la estrategia urbana del Estado Islámico de Irak y el Levante (2014-2015) en la región desde su actuación principal entre 2014 y 2015. Se pretende analizar cómo la organización ejerció su dominio sobre los territorios para construir las bases territoriales del proclamado califato, al proporcionar puntos logísticos que la permitieron controlar nuevos locales e institucionalizar su presencia en la región de Irak y de Siria.

Palabras clave: Estado Islámico. War. Siria. Irak.

Cláudio Júnior Damin
Universidade Federal do Pampa
São Borja, RS, Brasil
superdamin@terra.com.br

Coleç. Meira Mattos, Rio de Janeiro, v. 13, n. 48, p. 253-266, September/December 2019

253

1 Introduction

The role of the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant[1] (ISIL) has become a growing threat to governments not only in the West but also in Middle East regimes. The broad coalition that, led by the United States, has used airpower to attack extremist positions, particularly in Syria and Iraq, is representative of this situation. From the second half of 2015, twelve nations have been fighting ISIL's presence in the region, including countries directly affected by the expansion of caliphate warriors such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Turkey.

This perception that ISIL is an existential threat to the Westphalian international system based on the nation-state paradigm is largely due to the organization's expansion strategy since, in June 2014, Abu Bakral-Baghdadi, claiming to be Muhammad's offspring, proclaimed the formation of an Islamic caliphate and placed himself as the supreme head of this enterprise. This proclamation, emblematic for the jihadist scene in the Middle East, came, however, only after some territorial gains, including the capture of Mosul, Iraq's second most populous city.

Within this context, this article studies the urban strategy of the ISIL group in the region of its primary activity between 2014 and 2015. The objective is to analyze how the organization used its domain of Syrian and Iraqi cities to build the territorial bases of the self-proclaimed caliphate, to provide the logistical points that allowed the control of new localities, in addition to institutionalizing its presence in the region of Iraq and Syria.

By achieving very significant territorial control of cities and their surroundings, the article's hypothesis suggests that the support for ISIL's strength and resilience, despite coalition air strikes, was the dominance exercised in Iraq's and Syria's urban centers.

It should be noted that ISIL territorial control must be understood as a process that has ceased in time, since, by the end of 2017, Russia, the Iraqi government and the US military announced that the insurgent group no longer controlled any city in Russia, Syria and Iraq.

For the purposes of this study, therefore, a timeframe is proposed beginning with the conquest of Raqqa in Syria, and is limited to the fall of Ramadi in Iraq, comprising 2014 and 2015. This is a period in which there was a rapid and aggressive expansion of the territory controlled by the group, rivaling the 2016-2017 biennium when the loss of land greatly weakened the organization.

Therefore, this article analyzes a phenomenon limited to a certain period of time, between 2014 and 2015 that we could consider as the "pinnacle" of ISIL activities, since it marks the group's conquest and maintenance of territories in Syria and in Iraq. It is a period that portrays how the weakness of national states like Syria and Iraq allowed the strengthening of an organization that sought to replace these states with another governmental configuration, the caliphate.

---

1   The Arabic name of ISIL is ad-Dawla al-Islamiya fi'l-Iraq w'ash-Sham. "Sham" has been commonly translated as "Levant" or "Syria." It turns out, however, that "Sham" has a broader meaning, a territory that can be considered to be "Greater Syria" and made up of Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, and present-day Syria (HAMDAN, 2016).

2 The al-Zarqawi map

ISIL's urban strategy is rooted in the period of the Sunni insurgency in Iraq following the Anglo-American invasion and the overthrow of the Saddam Hussein regime in 2003. One of the main leaders of this insurgency was Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian from the Sunni branch of Islam who, with Osama bin Laden's acquiescence, established a plan to expel the Western military forces of Iraq (LISTER, 2014).

From unconventional military tactics associated with so-called irregular conflicts, al-Zarqawi became head of the then-called Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) group, an affiliate of the terrorist organization structured under the leadership of the Saudi extremist. One of the goals of al-Zarqawi's group, as well as bin Laden's organization, was the establishment of a caliphate that would include Iraqi territory and unite the primarily Sunni Islamic community (ZIMMERMAN, 2013).

Caliphate is understood to be an Islamic state configuration, dominated by a supreme ruler in political and religious terms (FUKUYAMA, 2013). Caliphate, thus, can be understood as an Islamic state led by the so-called caliph, which necessarily must have descent with Muhammad and be considered a kind of successor to the Prophet (LIEBL, 2009). According to Napoleoni (2015), the Ottoman Caliphate that lasted from 1453 to 1924 was one of the most important, expanding to Europe from the exercise of the power of the Turkish sultans. In this article, therefore, when we speak of the caliphate, we are referring to a state configuration that would erode the present borders of Middle Eastern countries.

To fulfill such a broad goal of re-establishing the caliphate, AQI has invested in tension between the Sunni and Shiite branches of the Iraqi population. Even though they are minority (30%), Sunnis have always been tied to power, whether in the monarchical regime or in Saddam Hussein's dictatorship (POLK, 2006). The Shiites (60%), in turn, remained oblivious to the positions of command power in the secular bureaucracy as well as in the military corporations. From the Anglo-American intervention in 2003, there is a reconfiguration of these forces, and Shiites now controll the most important positions of the first post-Saddam government (MABON; ROYLE, 2017).

This change in the internal geometry of power in the country went further, and, in 2004, the well-known "Bremmer laws"[2] decreed the demobilization of the Iraqi army, including the so-called Republican Guard, and put the regime's former support party, the secular-tinted Baath Party, underground. Such norms, established by an alien agent to the Iraqi context, produced a serious crisis, as the Sunni elements linked to Saddam — bureaucrats, politicians and military — came to be considered as enemies of the eventual new Iraq that would emerge with the support of Washington. From day to night, the country saw the erosion of its military and police forces, with clear damage to public safety.

Most important, however, was the resentment created over the clear alienation of Sunnis in the Iraqi configuration freed from the authoritarian regime of the Hussein family.

---

2   In reference to the first US administrator in Iraq after the intervention, the diplomat Paul Bremmer.

Shiites, as well as, partly, Kurds[3], have taken up leadership positions in the country and established dominance in security forces that would be recreated and trained by US officials. In this context, Sunnis have become pejoratively labeled as the former ruling class associated with Saddam's regime and, due to their quantitative limitations and a boycott, have not won the post of prime minister in the country's first parliamentary elections following the invasion, performed in 2005 (KATZMAN; HUMUD, 2016).

It was precisely from this juncture at the time that al-Zarqawi structured a strategy of destabilization of the Shiite regime associated with the US military. The insurgency was mostly promoted by Sunni groups and militias, many of them linked to AQI. Sectarian and anti-occupation violence peaked in 2006 and much of 2007, when technically there was a civil war on Iraqi territory (KAGAN, 2007; PETRAEUS, 2007).

In some parts of the country, in a first moment, a successful alliance of Sunni insurgent groups and tribal leaders against US military forces took place. This meant, in practical terms, that AQI began to establish certain zones of influence and, ultimately, held control of villages, districts and even cities. The most emblematic case was the rule over much of the towns and villages of Anbar province, whose capital, the city of Ramadi, would be controlled by ISIL insurgents in May 2015 and which would resume in December of the same year by the Iraqi government. This mostly Sunni province accounted for 30% of US military casualties between 2003 and 2011, a period of the war against Iraq (IRAQ..., 2015).

Geographically, the insurgency focused on the so-called "Sunni triangle", a vast region of Iraq that comprises Mosul in the North, Rutbah in the West and Baghdad in the East. This is an important territorial area that houses a large part of Iraqi Sunnis, which allowed insurgent groups to establish zones of popular influence and support, as well as important logistical points in an attempt to overthrow the Shiite-dominated government grounded in the American military presence (AL-JABOURI; JENSEN, 2012).

Al-Zarqawi died in a US air strike in early June 2006 in the city of Baqubah, thus not witnessing the fulfillment or otherwise of his goal of establishing the caliphate. Next to the body of the insurgent leader was a sheet with a drawing in the shape of geometric figures and annotations associated with arrows indicating positions (LEWIS, 2014a; ROGGIO, 2014). It was a map that revealed the Jordanian's grand strategy to overthrow the Iraqi regime. Fundamental to understanding the Iraqi civil war, the map came to be known as the "Baghdad Belt" and set out, in al-Zarqawi's view, the plan to establish the caliphate from the Iraqi capital.

More precisely, there were five "belts", or sectors, surrounding Baghdad: 1) the Southern one, comprising the provinces of Babil and Diyala; 2) the Western one, which included the province of Anbar and the area of Thar Thar; 3) the Northern belt, which included the province of Salah-ad-Din; 4) the "Diyala belt" with the cities of Baqubah and Khadis; and 5) the Eastern belt, encompassing rural areas East of Baghdad (LEWIS, 2014; ROGGIO, 2014a). These sectors

---

3   It should be noted that the Kurds are essentially characterized by their particularity as an ethnic-linguistic group and not as a religious segment, for example, of Islam. According to a 2014 survey by the *Pew Research Center*, 98% of Iraqi Kurds declared themselves Sunnis and only 2% identified themselves as Shiites. In Iraq, this group concentrates its presence in the so-called autonomous and self-governing Kurdistan Region, one of the most developed in Iraq, but still subordinate in many ways to the Iraqi federal government (MARCUS, 2007). Kurds are also scattered as a minority in several countries in the region, such as Syria, Iran and Turkey.

reveal a strategy of occupation of territory and formation of zones of influence capable of eroding, from the outside, all the administrative and military apparatus concentrated in the capital of the country. All of these areas that comprise the Baghdad belts became the deadliest and most violent during the insurgency (DAMIN, 2016).

From the control of provinces, cities, towns and urban districts, the strategy was precisely to provide logistical bases for the commission of terrorist attacks in Baghdad and thus gradually undermine the legitimacy of the regime anchored in the presence of US military forces. The strategy was therefore clearly based on the need for territorial control prior to the conquest of the country's capital.

Insurgent domination of Anbar, for example, was able to provide control of a large road network that was extremely functional for the movement of foreign insurgents, since this province is bordered by Syria and Jordan. As Kagan (2007) points out, AQI members have established lines of communication between the main cities of Anbar, the insurgency infiltrating Baghdad districts and also Mosul.

Dyiala, in turn, was also controlled by Sunni militias formed by former Baath Party members, to the point that al-Zarqawi designated the province as the capital of the Islamic caliphate persecuted by his organization (KAGAN, 2007). As with Anbar, Dyiala's geographical position, once controlled by insurgents, made it possible for militants to easily enter the Baghdad metropolitan area and commit terrorist acts against the occupation forces and Shiite communities.

The al-Zarqawi map is therefore extremely important because it points to territory control as a prerequisite for attaining the caliphate. Even though, for a few months, the violence against military and civilians registered in Baghdad was extremely high, AQI was never able to control the capital, and its rule over the belts proved unable to last in time.

In 2007, with the war virtually "lost", the United States promoted an inflection in its conflict strategy. Washington, albeit belatedly, realized that the strategy of the insurgent groups, whether Sunni or even Shiite, focused precisely on acquiring sovereign *status*, imposing fear on civilians, homicides against opposing ethnic groups, and the promotion of alliances with local tribal leaders. These measures would guide the conquest of Baghdad and the overthrow of the Iraqi government with the proclamation of the caliphate under Islamic law.

It was in this need to contain the advance of AQI mainly that the United States began to implement counterinsurgency tactics. Among the measures, in early 2007, President George W. Bush ordered the deployment of 20,000 new military personnel to Iraq. Most of this contingent was distributed between Baghdad and its nearest provinces, not by chance the "belts" demarcated by al-Zarqawi. This increase in the number of military personnel became known as the *Surge*, which achieved its results in reducing violence in the country because it was primarily used for the protection of Iraqi civilians.

This increased presence of US troops in the communities provided assurance that AQI would no longer take control of territories and impose its brutal tactics, which made it possible to build alliances with local Sunni *sheiks* against the rule of insurgent groups in neighboring provinces to the country's capital — this was the origin of the so-called Sunni Awakening. It is not the purpose of this article to detail this new US strategy, but to point out that it worked, and

the insurgent groups were almost completely neutralized in the third half of 2007, as evidenced by the very significant drop in civilian deaths, terrorist attacks and military casualties from both the United States and the Iraqi Security Forces.

What deserves our attention is the fact that, when AQI lost control of the land, being expelled from villages, districts and cities, the group was eventually neutralized by the counterinsurgency strategy led by General David Petraeus. Without any territorial control and with US troops assuming the objective of protecting civilians, insurgent groups were greatly hampered in their efforts to overthrow the regime established in Baghdad characterized by Shiite occupation of key positions within the government.

These groups, therefore, were evacuated from logistics, from resources to finance their activities by levying fees and taxes from local populations, and their main leaders were hunted and killed. After 2007, Iraq allowed itself to live moments of apparent conciliation and a seemingly stable government. Al-Zarqawi's urban strategy, however, would resurface years later after the withdrawal of US combat troops from Iraq in late 2011.

3 ISIL and city control

What today the international system knows to be the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant is the product of a transformation in the Iraqi jihadist scene following the disarticulation of AQI in late 2007.

Jihadism is born after the death of the Prophet Muhammad and was "the fruit of refining the essays of the Quran and the Prophet," as punctuated by Napoleoni (2015, p. 97, our translation). Jihad has two dimensions, the "major", which would be the spirituality of each Muslim, and the "minor", "the material struggle against an enemy". Also according to Napoleoni (2015, p. 97, our translation), the "minor jihad" is linked to the notion of sovereignty and as instruments "to protect the faithful community". Within a caliphate, it is up to the supreme leader, the caliph, to recruit faithful people to participate in jihad (NANCE, 2016).

Among civil and military analysts, there is a widespread understanding that ISIL is a kind of successor organization to AQI, sprung from the rubble of al-Zarqawi's group. This was also the official view advocated by the Democratic administration of Barack Obama (EARNEST, 2014). One senior government official even wrote that ISIL "[...] is the true inheritor of Osama bin Laden's legacy" (TSANG, 2014, p. 1).

The resurgence of AQI took place most strongly in 2012, not by chance after the withdrawal of almost the entire US contingent stationed in Iraq. The organization has since made some name changes from AQI to the Islamic State of Iraq, then to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (early 2013) until it finally declared itself an Islamic State (late June 2014).

In addition to the military vacuum brought about by the US withdrawal from Iraq in late 2011, ISIL has once again benefited from the internal political dispute between Shiites and Sunnis. Prime Minister Nouri Kamel al-Maliki's government, elected in 2006 and reelected in 2010, has deliberately excluded Sunnis from the country's government. One of the vice presidents, Tariq al-Hashemi, for example, was removed from office and sentenced, *in absentia*, to death on

the grounds that he was supporting domestic terrorist groups (SULLIVAN, 2013). This vice was Sunni and eventually had to flee to Turkey.

Maliki's government was also extremely authoritarian in its response to Sunni popular demonstrations that erupted in 2013 in the Northern and Western provinces of the country. The Shiite prime minister employed the Iraqi Security Forces to crack down on Sunni protests, producing countless dead and wounded. With this kind of attitude, his government accelerated a process of loss of legitimacy, which opened the way for a further strengthening of Sunni insurgent groups, among which ISIL was the main one.

In regional terms, some events of the so-called Arab Spring in 2013 also influenced the return, now in other ways, of AQI. In addition to not producing stable polyarchic regimes — although it can be said that Tunisia would be a kind of exception, even if precarious —, the spring has destabilized authoritarian governments in important countries, such as Egypt, Libya and Syria, which have been experiencing intense conflict for the sovereignty of the territory.

Of these cases, the Syrian one is especially important to the subject of our article, as factions of the Jabhat al-Nusra organization[4], considered an affiliate of the Pakistani ruling al-Qaeda core, deserted in order to form, along with Iraqi insurgents, what is now known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ZIMMERMAN, 2013). The degeneration of state capacities of the Syrian Alawite house of Bashar al-Assad, the result of which was still an ongoing civil war, led to the creation of a strongly rooted organization in Sunni areas in Syria and Iraq, two border countries. The ultimate goal of the group would be to establish a caliphate from the disintegration of the borders of the Middle East and thus the consequent destruction of the currently established regimes.

In the second half of 2013, with the splitting of Syrian state sovereignty, a strong presence of the so-called Islamic State of Iraq was already diagnosed in northern Syria, in various cities and rural villages. Al-Tamimi (2013), for example, documents, from photos, the presence of the typical extremist flag in various Syrian cities. In many localities, at the same time, manifestations against the presence of elements of the Islamic State of Iraq are narrated, with a certain resistance on the part of the population regarding its methods of action.

For months, Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) have fought Assad's regular military forces together. This relationship, however, deteriorated over time, according to the facts narrated by Al-Tamimi (2014). In April 2013, the ISI leader al-Baghdadi proposed a merger between his Iraq-based group and al-Nusra limited to Syria. Note that this proposition denoted an attempt to internationalize the operation of the Iraqi Sunni group. It was precisely in this context that al-Baghdadi changed his group's name to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, bringing together al-Nusra leaders and militants.

At al-Nusra, however, this move was not well received. The jihadist group was founded in early 2012 and its top leadership, Abu Mohammed al-Jowlani, did not agree to the union with the Iraqi jihadists, making room for the split between the two organizations (AL-TAMIMI, 2014). In an act of great symbolism, the leader of Al-Nusra renewed his *bay'ah* (oath of allegiance) with the core of Al-Qaeda, led by emir Ayman al-Zawahiri, becoming the only

---

4   This group was also known as the Nusra Front or Al-Nusra Front.

organization considered affiliated with Al-Qaeda in Syria. By July 2013, this division between the two groups was already clear.

This process shows that ISIL initially needed to share power with other jihadist groups and only then to control the vast territory that it dominated between 2014 and 2015 in Eastern Syria. The case of the city of Raqqa, considered the capital of the caliphate, is paradigmatic in this regard.

The city was captured by Abu Sa'ad al-Hadrami in March 2013, and by July of that year there was a symbiosis between Al-Nusra and the ISI regarding the administration of the city. With the letter from the Al-Qaeda emir, in the second half of 2013, in which a distinction is established between al-Nusra and the ISI, al-Hadrami and his supporters withdrew from Raqqa and migrated to Tabqa, returning to the city in September, then under the unique denomination of Jabah Al-Nusra (AL-TAMIMI, 2014).

It is considered that only in January 2014 did the ISIL take over Raqqa's sovereignty, after months of intense disputes with other groups for control of the city. Other municipalities and villages in northern Syria and near Aleppo also capitulated to ISIL in the early months of 2014. As Al-Tamimi (2014) writes, establishing ultimate sovereignty over territories would be a basic and distinctive feature of the organization.

> [...] despite ISIS's political outreach, the group faces a fundamental problem in dealing with other rebel factions and thus in consolidating political control. This is partly because ISIS already sees itself not merely as a "group" or "faction" like the other rebels but as a "state" that has the prerogative to rule over all others. Therefore, ISIS is inherently unwilling to share power, and often adopts a particularly brutal approach to dealing with other rebel factions. (AL-TAMIMI, 2014, p. 8)

The issue raised here is basic, namely the need for a state to have a certain territory under its control. Land control must be accompanied by the question of internal legitimacy so that a regime can be established. This opportunity for ISIL first arose in Syria. As Napoleoni (2015, p. 84, our translation) emphasized, this "migration to Syria was its last cartridge in the struggle for survival," since "at the end of 2010, the Islamic State of Iraq was on the brink of extinction".

January 2014, in addition to marking ISIL's dominance over Raqqa, also showed territorial gains in Iraq. Fallujah, a major city in the Iraqi Sunni triangle, was also controlled by caliphate fighters. It can be considered as one of the first effective territorial conquests of ISIL in Iraq, which occurred months before the proclamation of the caliphate. Fallujah is a city located in the province of Anbar and 70 kilometers from Baghdad, thus forming part of the capital's belt.

Fallujah's history, following US intervention in 2003, is from a region where Sunni insurgent groups receive support from both the population and tribal leaders. Conflicts between insurgent forces and the US military were intense during the war, as AQI gained significant logistical support in the city to attack Baghdad, in addition to imposing its own rules on local communities. In the so-called second battle of Fallujah, which took place

between November and December 2004, by way of example, 95 military personnel were killed in an attempt to expel the region's extremists (BYERS, 2007). Fallujah was later liberated by the Western occupying forces, but it was one of the first cities to be recaptured by Sunni insurgents, now clustered in ISIL.

It should be noted that, in the early months of 2014, despite the advance of ISIL in Syria and Iraq, the caliphate had not yet been proclaimed. Today, al-Baghdadi's strategy seems clear: to gain territorial control only to later proclaim the caliphate. And the announcement of the establishment of the caliphate was made possible by the organization's offensive in June 2014, particularly in Iraq.

Mosul, the second most populous and mostly Sunni Iraqi city, was captured by extremists on June 10. Its capitulation was followed by other ISIL military victories, with control, among others, of cities such as Ryaad, Hawija, Karma, Rabia, Rawah, Ruthbah and Walled in the same month, as well as Sinjar and Bashiqa in August and Hit and Al Wafa in October 2014. It was, however, the conquest of Mosul that warned the West of what was happening in Iraq, that is, the return of the insurgency after it was supposedly dismantled in the late 2000s (LEWIS, 2014b).

The fall of Mosul revealed the fragility of Iraq's state capabilities, particularly its security forces. The city perished before ISIL without any more substantive resistance, even though Iraqi regiments were present in the region. According to Cockburn (2015), ISIL attempted to capture the city with about 1,300 members, while the Iraqi forces — army, federal and local police — totaled 60,000. This extreme numerical advantage, however, was only theoretical because:

> Such was the corruption in the Iraqi security forces that only about one in three of them was actually present in Mosul, the rest paying up to half their salaries to their officers to stay on permanent leave. (COCKBURN, 2015, p. 29)

It is no coincidence that the ISIL assault begins on June 06 and, four days later, an important military victory is proclaimed by the organization. A day before the extremists definitively set the flag of the Islamic State, three Mosul-based generals fled by helicopter to the Kurdistan region, signaling that the city could no longer be recovered by regular Iraqi forces (COCKBURN, 2015).

The achievements of Mosul and Raqqa became the great achievements of the group, decisively influencing so that, by the end of June 2014, the caliphate was finally proclaimed. This is because, according to MCFate (2015), the increasing territorial gains in the first half of 2014, which are consequences of an ongoing process of infiltration into Syria and Iraq, have produced what the author aptly termed the "physical caliphate". It should be noted that it is no coincidence that the organization proclaimed its "state" only after becoming the sovereign of certain inhabited areas in the region.

Control over cities, in this sense, is now being used as a power resource by ISIL, providing it with the basic conditions to legitimize itself among the populations of Iraq and Syria. Focusing on the outskirts of big cities also encouraged Sunni-Shiite sectarianism, the organization's bet to impose its legitimacy and power. There was also a strategy of undermining control of the Iraqi state

in urban centers by capitulating districts and neighborhoods. In the end, government buildings, as the case of Mosul attests, were transformed into bureaucratic spaces of the organization.

The properly military domination of the cities was followed by a bureaucratic effort that sought to institutionalize the power of the organization. ISIL endowed itself with a method of institutionalization in urban areas, for example, by appointing local administrators, establishing governorates, adopting the *Sharia law* and consequently establishing courts, tax collections and the permanent recruitment of new caliphate soldiers. In addition, therefore, to having a monopoly on the use of force, ISIL also imposes itself as the sovereign administrative structure. According to al-Tamimi's (2015a, 2015b) abundant records, in Mosul, the organization created departments to regulate the daily lives of individuals, suppressing any mention of the "Republic of Iraq" and replacing it with the "Islamic State".

ISIL's control of cities also solved, at least in part, the problem of financing its actions. In Mosul, for example, millions of dollars were plundered from the city bank. And taxes and fees were regularly collected in dozens of extremist-dominated cities. In addition, in many cases, the group began to control refineries and oil wells, which fostered the practice of selling oil and fuel in the so-called "black market". In November 2015, for example, hundreds of ISIL tankers were destroyed by the Russian air force in Syria.

City capture also provided insurgents with weapons and ammunition. Citing the case of Mosul again, after its fall, military parades were witnessed in which caliphate soldiers paraded in US-made battle tanks and armored vehicles that were used by the Iraqi Army. In Syria, the advancement of the group in the cities has also enabled ISIS to appropriate weapons from the Assad regime.

Controlling cities also enhanced the propaganda of the ISIL. The organization used its military victories to publicize the existence of a tangible caliphate, initiated in Syria and Iraq, in order to seduce new *jihadists*, including from European countries, to join the ISIL ranks. In July 2014, Dabiq, the group's official digital magazine, circulated.

ISIL's dominance pattern in urban centers has greatly hampered its combat by the coalition, which, from August 2014, began launching air strikes against the group. The limitations of action were clear, since directly bombarding urban centers controlled by the organization would mean producing adverse effects such as the death of civilians. The very distinction between combatants and noncombatants, typical of regular conflicts, does not occur in ISIL-controlled cities, since, for example, extremists mingle with noncombatants.

One of the ISIL characteristics is that it has become a predominantly urban organization, disputing sovereignty over certain territories with both the Syrian and Iraqi government. And in the various cities it controlled between 2014 and 2015, the group became a Hobbesian sovereign, imposing its institutions on local people. From this reality derive, in good measure, the difficulties arising for the liberation of these urban territories under the control of the caliphate militants.

The use of airpower showed its clear limits, since negative externalities such as civilian deaths were present during bombings in densely populated areas, such as Mosul. This meant that

the liberation of the cities depended on ground fighting, with ground troops advancing from house to house. It is no coincidence that the Iraqi security forces took almost nine months to declare Mosul free from ISIL. With no troops on the ground and relying solely on air strike capabilities, cities would hardly be able to leave the insurgent group, even if airpower was instrumental in disrupting the group's logistical routes within Syria and Iraq. The bombings alone did not defeat the organization, but weakened its control over territories, cities, districts and rural areas, a control that was completely lost by the end of 2017.

4 Final considerations

As discussed in the previous sections, ISIL used an urban achievement strategy to institutionalize its presence in Syria and especially Iraq to achieve the group's main objective: the formation of a transnational caliphate from the erosion of current borders of Middle Eastern states.

The "physical caliphate", however, has entered a crisis and is now only a wish of the remaining insurgents as a result of ongoing military defeats in 2017. The caliph is in an uncertain place and its "warriors" no longer show any expansionist and offensive impetus in Iraq and Syria. Its most lucrative cities, Mosul and Raqqa, were taken over by official forces in July and October, respectively. In late November, the group lost control of its last city, Rawa, in Iraq.

Finally, on December 7, 2017, Russia declared that Syria was free from ISIL rule and, two days after, Baghdad also announced that Iraqi territory was completely freed from the organization's territorial rule over its cities. ISIL has succumbed to the loss of its territories conquered by force and against the established governments of Iraq and Syria. This does not, of course, mean the demise of the insurgent group, but it is a victory against the establishment of a caliphate based on the perversion of religious interpretation and violence. Since the loss of its territories, ISIL has changed its practices, reverting to sectarian terrorist attacks with improvised explosive devices in Iraqi urban centers.

References

AL-JABOURI, N. A.; JENSEN, S. The Iraqi and AQI roles in the Sunni Awakening. **Prism**, Washington, DC, v. 2, n. 1, p. 3-18, 2012.

AL-TAMINI, A. J. Al Qaeda Expands into Northern Syria. **Middle East Forum**, Philadelphia, 18 July, 2013. Available at: https://bit.ly/2ZK03Dg. Access on: Oct. 15, 2015.

AL-TAMIMI, A. J. The dawn of the Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham. **Current Trends in Islamist Ideology**, Washington, DC, v. 16, p. 5-15, 2014.

AL-TAMIMI, A. J. Aspects of Islamic State (IS) Administration in Ninawa Province: Part I. **Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi**, [*S. l.*], 17 Jan. 2015a. Available at: https://bit.ly/1fhI3sB. Access on: Oct. 10, 2015.

AL-TAMIMI, A. J. Aspects of Islamic State (IS) Administration in Ninawa Province: Part II. **Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi**, [*S. l.*], 20 Jan. 2015b. Available at: https://bit.ly/2NpqUUb. Access on: Oct. 10, 2015.

BYERS, M. **A Lei da Guerra**: direito internacional e conflito armado. Rio de Janeiro: Record, 2007.

COCKBURN, P. **Isis**: el retorno de la yihad. Buenos Aires: Ariel, 2015.

DAMIN, C. J. Violência e baixas militares norte-americanas na Guerra do Iraque (2003-2011). **Revista de Estudos Internacionais**, João Pessoa, v. 7, n. 2, p. 148-170, 2016. Available at: https://bit.ly/2RwIlQY. Access on: June 25, 2019.

EARNEST, J. Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest. **The White House**, Washington, DC, 11 Sept. 2014. Available at: https://bit.ly/2J5SX5z. Access on: April 15, 2015.

FUKUYAMA, F. **As origens da ordem política**: dos tempos pré-humanos até a Revolução Francesa. Rio de Janeiro: Rocco, 2013.

HAMDAN, A. N. Breaker of Barriers? Notes on the geopolitics of the Islamic State in Iraq and Sham. **Geopolitics**, Philadelphia, v. 21, n. 3, p. 605-627, 2016. Available at: https://bit.ly/2Xu4R2l. Access on: June 25, 2019.

IRAQ Coalition Casualty Count (2003-2015). **iCasualties.org**, [*S. l.*], 2015. Available at: http://icasualties.org/Iraq/index.aspx. Access on: March 12, 2015.

KAGAN, F. W. **Choosing Victory**: a plan for success in Iraq. Phase I Report. Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, 5 Jan. 2007. A Report of the Iraq Planning Group at the American Enterprise Institute. Available at: https://bit.ly/2XFuddP. Access on: June 25, 2019.

KATZMAN, K.; HUMUD, C. E. **Iraq**: politics and governance. Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 9 Mar. 2016. Available at: https://bit.ly/2Xs4g1b. Access on: Oct. 5, 2017.

LEWIS, J. D. **ISIS Battle Plan for Baghdad**. Washington, DC: ISW, 2014a. (Backgrounder June 27, 2014). Available at: https://bit.ly/2Xdrk0I. Access on: June 25, 2019.

LEWIS, J. D. The Terrorist Army Marching on Baghdad. **Wall Street Journal**, New York, 12 Jun. 2014b. Available at: https://on.wsj.com/2ZRIQbn. Access on: Oct. 10, 2015.

LIEBL,V. The Caliphate. **Middle Eastern Studies**, Abingdon, v. 45, n. 3, p. 373-391, May 2009.

LISTER, C. **Profiling the Islamic State**. Doha: Brookings Doha Center, Nov. 2014. (Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper, 13). Available at: https://brook.gs/2nkVmiM. Access on: Jan. 10, 2015.

MABON, S.; ROYLE, S. **The Origins of ISIS**: the collapse of nations and revolution in the Middle East. London: I. B. Tauris, 2017.

MARCUS, A. Turkey's PKK: rise, fall, rise again? **World Policy Journal**, Durham, NC, v. 24, n. 1, p. 75-84, spring 2007.

MCFATE, J. L. **The ISIS Defense in Iraq and Syria**: countering and adaptive enemy. Washington, DC: ISW, May 2015. (Middle East Security Report, 27). Available at: https://bit.ly/1Ht7Rey. Access on: Oct. 10, 2015.

NANCE, M. **Defeating ISIS**: who they are, how they fight, what they believe. New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2016.

NAPOLEONI, L. **A fênix islamita**: o Estado Islâmico e a reconfiguração do Oriente Médio. Rio de Janeiro: Bertrand Brasil, 2015.

PETRAEUS, D. H. **Congressional Testimony**: report to Congress on the situation in Iraq. Washington, DC: Defense Technical Information Center, 2007. ADA473579. Available at: https://bit.ly/2NccO8q. Access on: Jan. 20, 2015.

POLK, W. **Understanding Iraq**. New York: Harper Perennial, 2006.

ROGGIO, B. Analysis: ISIS, allies reviving 'Baghdad belts' battle plan. **Long War Journal**, [*S. l.*], 14 June 2014. Available at: https://bit.ly/2J4aWcD. Access on: June 25, 2019.

SULLIVAN, M. **Maliki's Authoritarian Regime**. Washington, DC: ISW, Apr. 2013. (Middle East Security Report, 10). Available at: https://bit.ly/2kIvmui. Access on: May 15, 2018.

Coleç. Meira Mattos, Rio de Janeiro, v. 13, n. 48, p. 253-266, September/December 2019

265

TSANG, D. To justify ISIS airstrikes, Obama using legislation he wants repealed. **PunditFact**, Washington, DC, 18 Sept. 2014. Available at: https://bit.ly/2KFgxcj. Access on: April 16, 2015.

ZIMMERMAN, K. **The Al Qaeda Network**: a new framework for defining the enemy. Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, Sept. 2013. Available at: https://bit.ly/2ZItmpZ. Access on: Jan. 6, 2015.