

The Islamic State and the Caliphate.

EUROPE IN DANGER



CENTRE
FOR INTERNATIONAL
RELATIONS

Comment

03/2016

www.csm.org.pl



Mahan Charmshir

Born in 1991 in Tehran, Iran, he currently studies International Relations at the University of Warsaw. Earlier, he studied architecture at UiTM University in Malaysia and got MBA in Brand Management in Tehran. He worked as PR manager in Aftabnet Advertising company for 2 years. He is interested in Middle East and peace studies.

Last week's Zaventem airport and Maelbeek metro station blasts in Brussels once more demonstrated how insecure Europe is today. 35 people died, over 300 were injured. Luckily, one of the bombs did not explode, otherwise the balance would have been much worse. The Islamic State (called ISIS or IS) took responsibility for these suicide attacks performed by two brothers el-Bakraoui, around 30 years old, both Muslims. ISIS is much more than a terrorist group. It has its leaders, structure, financial resources, deep ideological background and an idea of the Caliphate, attractive for a large number of frustrated Muslims from all around the world who join ISIS's ranks every day.

THE ISLAMIC STATE AND THE CALIPHATE.

EUROPE IN DANGER

| Mahan Charmshir

2

On 13 November, 2015, in Paris 137 civilian lives were ended in a terrorist attack organised by ISIS. According to human rights organisations that report on the Syrian war, each day 121 people are killed in armed conflicts or air strikes, or else die of starvation. What had started as a democratic wave of the "Arab Spring" against the rule of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, ended up in a clash between the old regime and a new and ever stronger entity: ISIS.

The organisation was created as a terrorist group to oppose the domination of the West after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. In just a decade it conquered half of Syria and a quarter of Iraq, establishing the so called "Islamic State" supported by numerous Muslims, especially young men, including those who were living in the West.

ISIS's strength does not come from 3 billion USD generated annually by selling oil, nor from regional or international support. Its increase in power is mostly due to the frustration of millions of young Muslims who don't agree with the Western vision of the global world which brings them to the margin of the so called "civilised societies". In their eyes, this civilization doesn't have values or ideals, and it should be replaced by the Muslim Caliphate - an idea to inte-

grate Muslim world under one leadership, present in the history of Islam since the death of the Prophet¹.

Born in a stable but not a horse

When Jihadi John, a British ISIS butcher, was killed in Syria during American drone strike, he was replaced by Siddhartha Dhar, a Hindu-British citizen. Before he left London for Raqqa in 2015, he became a pro-ISIS public figure appearing in the British media. In an interview for the CBS's "60 Minutes", while questioned about feeling British, he answers: *I identify myself as a Muslim. If I was born in a stable, I am not going to be a horse. If I was born in Nazi Germany, I'm not going to be a Nazi. I mean this is just an island I was just born in.* In a video material presenting him as a new ISIS killer, he threatens Western countries, especially Great Britain. *How strange it is that a leader of a small island threatens us with a handful of planes* – he says, grinning.

¹ The worldwide Caliphate was proclaimed by ISIS in June 2014. Read more: B. Roggio, *ISIS announces formation of Caliphate, rebrands as "Islamic State"*, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/06/isis_announces_formation_of_ca.php.

THE ISLAMIC STATE AND THE CALIPHATE.

EUROPE IN DANGER

| Mahan Charmshir

3

The film also shows the execution of 5 people who are accused to be spies.

Why is ISIS's ideology attractive for young British citizens like Siddhartha Dhar? What makes young Muslim-British, Muslim-French or Muslim-Belgian citizens leave their life in London, Paris or Brussels and join ISIS for jihad? What is the fuel to the engine of ISIS's recruitment all around the world? What is behind the idea of life under the flag of the Islamic Caliphate and Sharia law? To answer these questions, we have to go back almost 100 years. On August 10, 1920, the Ottoman Empire, one of the most important and influential powers in the international order, was dissolved by treaty of Sèvres. Together with the Empire, the Islamic Caliphate was brought to its end.

Roots of clash of civilisations

From the beginning of the 16th century, the Ottoman Empire was one of the most important global players. It was an entirely Muslim state under the Sultan's rule. It occupied a large area of Middle East and Arabic territories, but also half of the Balkans and Greece. The dissolution of this superpower after the First World War led to a number of socio-political consequences

which have had a serious impact on international relations until today.

The Turkish Republic, created in 1923 thanks to the successful military operation of the Turkish army and its leader Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, distanced itself from the history of the Ottoman Empire, introduced the Western concept of the secular state, as well as westernised its elites. At the same time, new Arab countries were created around Turkey and put under the mandate of the Allied powers. After the Second World War, they gained independence. Moreover, in 1948, the Jewish sovereign country was founded in their neighbourhood, in the heart of former Ottoman Empire, in Arabs' land, inhabited by Arabic speaking people.

There were Arab leaders who tried in vain to prevent the progressive dismantling of the Muslim strength and significance in the world. Some of them, like Gamal Abdel Nasser, President of Egypt, attempted to position themselves as bellwethers of the new-born Arab, and in particular, Muslim world by promoting pan-Arabism, but painfully failed. This failure was emphasised by everyday advances of Israeli troops and peremptory support of Western countries. On the other hand, the Middle East

THE ISLAMIC STATE AND THE CALIPHATE.

EUROPE IN DANGER

| Mahan Charmshir

4

countries soon became the battlefield of the superpowers of the Cold War: the US and Soviet Union. Both sides were trying to increase their dominance in the region. These actions caused dozen of coups and revolutions in the young Arab states. At this moment, a revolution in Iran – a country which was historically against the old Ottoman Empire and new Arab states – has changed fundamentally the dynamics in the region.

Role of Iran

Ancient Persia was a superpower at that time. Iran, the heir of this proud tradition, was always a serious threat to the Eastern border of the Ottoman Empire. Besides frequent armed conflicts, the two neighbours were engaged in an ideological war. In the beginning of the 16th century, Shah Ismail I, the founder of the Safavi dynasty, seized power in Iran after 800 years of Arab and Turkish rule. He decided to draw a line between Iran and the rest of the Muslim countries while converting Iran from Sunni to Shia Islam, and importing religious authorities from the Levant. This transformation had its roots in an old dispute over succession to the Islamic prophet, Mohammad. Ismail I promoted the Shia way of thinking all over the Persian Empire,

which at its height was one of the most powerful empires of all time, comprising all of Iran, Azerbaijan, Armenia, most of Georgia, the North Caucasus, Iraq, Kuwait, and Afghanistan, as well as parts of modern day Syria, Turkey, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. The successive Iranian dynasties, especially the last one, Pahlavi, concentrated on secularisation and modernisation of Iran. However, they still maintained opposing policies towards its neighbours. This period brings us to the last days of the Ottoman Empire's existence and the beginning of a new international order.

After creation of Israel, the differences between Iran and the new-born Arab states entered a new stage. Unlike the rest of Islamic countries' leaders, Iranian prime minister went to an official visit to Israel in 1950. Moreover, Iran and Israel opened their embassies in 1970, in Tel Aviv and Tehran respectively. Israel, situated between hostile neighbours, with the US as its most important ally, considered Iran a regional power who could help to strengthen its national security. On the other hand, Iran, trapped between countries following pan-Arab ideology and the Soviet Union, decided that the strategy of supporting its enemy's enemy was a rational move. However, 9 years after the establishing of diplo-

THE ISLAMIC STATE AND THE CALIPHATE.

EUROPE IN DANGER

| Mahan Charmshir

5

matic relations between Iran and Israel, history took its own path.

Islamic revolution

In 1979, the Islamic Revolution took place in Iran, declaring anti-Western and pro-Shiite Islamic slogans. As their first move, even before the occupation of the US embassy in Tehran, Iranian revolutionaries cut off the ties with the Israeli government. Yasser Arafat, at the time chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organisation, was the first foreign guest to officially visit Iran. The new regime symbolically handed over to him the key to the first Palestinian embassy. Arafat talked about solidarity among Islamic countries to fight against Israel. However, the new alliance did not last long. In 1980, Iraq invaded Iran with the support of Arab countries and the West. After the Islamic revolution in Iran, the Arab world felt threatened by the rising Shiite power. On top of that, Iranian revolutionaries advocated the exportation of Shiite revolution to their Sunni neighbours. This led the Islamic world to the highest point of tension since the death of the Islamic Prophet.

Right after the Islamic Revolution, and 8 years of war with Iraq (1980-88), Iran created and supported militant groups active in

the region. Most of them were located in countries with the highest population of Shiite Muslims, like Lebanon, Iraq and Bahrain. Although Syria had a secular regime, the Assad dynasty supported the Iranian government since the beginning of the war out of political reasons. Contrarily, the Arab neighbouring countries dispelled Iranian ambition of Shiite expansion by arranging a coalition called the Gulf Cooperation Council. The gap between Shiite and Sunni increased day by day.

In 2003, with the invasion of Iraq by the US and its allies to topple Saddam Hussein, Iran found an opportunity to use the power vacuum in Iraq for expanding its influence in that country. Iraqi Shiites, which make up 65 percent of the Iraqi population, willingly accepted Iran's support but the discriminatory policy against Sunnis led by the Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki led Iraq to chaos.

The Sunni population was disillusioned with the performance of the Iraq's central government unable or unwilling to keep the balance in the country. This occurred in parallel with the "Arab Spring". In January 2011 Syrian people started protests against President Bashar al-Assad who was in power since 2000 and ruled the country in a dictatorial way. This movement has turned

THE ISLAMIC STATE AND THE CALIPHATE.

EUROPE IN DANGER

| Mahan Charmshir

6

soon into a civil war between the government, supported by Iran and Russia, and opposition parties, supported mostly by the Gulf Cooperation Council countries. Consequently, these elements formed the potential ground for the rise of ISIS in Syria.

Caliphate: the way out of frustration

No one knows how Arab leaders like Saddam Hussein in Iraq, Muammar Gaddafi in Libya, Hosni Mubarak in Egypt or even Ben Ali in Tunisia would react to the current developments in the Middle East if they were still in power. The battle between two sects of Islam is led today by Saudi Arabia from one side and Iran from another with Turkey – the EU member *in spe* – in between. They will use any opportunity to take advantage of the evolving situation in the region. In such a clash, ISIS seems to be a way out.

Every day young people like Siddhartha Dhar join the Islamic Caliphate, a group claiming it is against both parties, and against the West, too. The majority of ISIS recruitment is from Tunisia, Jordan, and even Saudi Arabia – countries already ruled by Islamic regimes. But the point is that they are too busy spending their oil money

or solving their domestic problems to find time to play an efficient role in the international community. They are mostly just the followers of the Western countries' plan in regional and international policies.

A young Muslim who regularly hears about the brutality of the Israeli Army (a reminder that Islamic countries have been unable to cooperate to resolve the problem of Palestine for 70 years), and who has witnessed invasions of 3 Islamic states by the Western countries during the past 15 years only, will fall captive to ISIS's message of waging war with everyone and compromising with no one. The majority of these men are second or third generation Muslim immigrants. They were often isolated in their own neighbourhoods and communities, deprived from any interaction with the rest of society. Unemployment and the sense of being ignored in their homelands make them despondent or even averse. They prefer to fight alongside ISIS for revenge and for the establishment of the Islamic paradise promised to them by the ISIS's leaders.

The frustration of the Muslim communities with both their native countries and the Western countries that have hosted them, as well as a lack of solidarity in terms of re-

THE ISLAMIC STATE AND THE CALIPHATE.

EUROPE IN DANGER

| Mahan Charmshir

7

gional and international issues, mostly about the question of Palestine, caused a massive power vacuum in the Islamic world. This gave a shining moment for extremist jihadi groups.

Islamic Caliphate propaganda promotes a state of freedom, in which all Sunni Muslims are equal, where Islamic justice is the first and foremost principle. These messages are popular among Muslims who are facing discrimination in their own countries (whether Islamic or Western). On top of that, ISIS has proven that it can exercise its power in reality. Though such demonstration of strength is just promoting fear and hate, it appears that ISIS fans would be satisfied by just that, and believe that only the Caliphate has the ability to accomplish its target goal.

The Islamic Caliphate does not have a legal recognition or entity. This excludes it from diplomatic negotiations and official platforms for conducting international relations. Moreover, as a warrior against all, it has no allies among the world's states. Its final goal is the establishment of the Islamic Caliphate and Sharia law, and on the path to do that it is an enemy of all and a friend to no one. Siddhartha Dhar and his colleagues, like the brothers el-Bakraoui who blew themselves

in Brussels, see themselves as creators of the greatest Islamic Empire after the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. A uniform, Islamic great power which will do everything to shadow the power of the Western Civilisation.

The Author thanks the CIR's staff - Małgorzata Bonikowska, Michał Szczygielski and Agnieszka Ostrowska in particular - for the consultations and suggestions to the text.

Mahan Charmshir

Centre for International Relations (CIR) is an independent, non-government analytical centre established in 1996 which deals with Polish foreign policy and the most important issues of international politics. CIR is active in research, education and publishing, organises conferences and meetings, and participates in international projects in collaboration with similar institutions in many countries. CIR creates a forum for debate and exchange of ideas in matters of international politics, relations between states and challenges in the global world. CIR's activities are addressed above all to local-government officials and to entrepreneurs, as well as to officials of the central administration, politicians, diplomats, political scientists and the media. In 2014, CIR was again recognised as one of the best think-tanks in East-Central Europe in the study "The Leading Public Policy Research Organisations in the World" conducted by the University of Pennsylvania.

CENTRE FOR INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS ul. Mińska 25, 03-808 Warszawa t: +48 22 646 52 67

 www.twitter.com/CIR_CSM

 www.facebook.com/CIR.CSM



CENTRE
FOR INTERNATIONAL
RELATIONS