

Sebastian WOJCIECHOWSKI

Poznań

## Reasons behind the success of the “Islamic State”

**Abstract:** Terrorism today entails a wide range of diverse threats. Currently, the most dangerous such threats are posed by ‘the “Islamic State” (IS). The aim of this paper is to identify the key factors for the dramatic rise of the “Islamic State” to power and significance. Its success has been the sum total of a number of diverse and mutually linked factors. Those fall into the two categories of endogenous reasons associated with the activities undertaken by the “Islamic State” and the exogenic factors, which apply to various developments and processes which have also contributed to IS advancement. Despite the “Islamic State” s loss of influence and resources, it is bound to continue to destabilize the international scene and pose a security threat for years to come. One should therefore give priority to learning about the reasons behind its success as such knowledge may help not only defeat IS but also prevent other Islamic and terrorist organizations from rising to power in the future.

**Key words:** The “Islamic State”, IS, terrorism, causes of terrorism, al Qaeda

---

Terrorism today entails a wide range of diverse threats. Currently, the most dangerous such threats are posed by the “Islamic State” (IS).<sup>1</sup> The extent and nature of this peril has been noted by numerous experts, among them FBI Director James Comey who observed that the IS tactic makes it a bigger threat to US security than any potential al Qaeda attacks (Comey, 2016). A high level of threat on the European continent has been noted by Europol Director Rob Wainwright. His opinion was shared by the German Federal Intelligence Service BND in a report suggesting the threat posed by Islamic terrorism in the “West” is greater than it was in 2001, the year of the 9/11 attacks in the United States (Niemiecki, 2016).

In examining the activities of the “Islamic State”, one should emphasize that IS is not a state within the meaning of international law and international practice.<sup>2</sup> Although IS maintains a territory under its control, a population of residents and a government, it lacks the ability to engage in international relations and fails to meet the criterion of the so called external sovereignty. Statehood is conditional on satisfying all of these criteria. Although, admittedly, IS has succeeded in creating certain elements of statehood, it cannot be considered a state under international law.

The aim of this paper is to identify the key factors for the dramatic rise of the “Islamic State” to power and significance.<sup>3</sup> Its success has been the sum total of a number

---

<sup>1</sup> Also known by other names and acronyms such as ISIS, ISIL and DAESH, see e.g. (Dawn, 2014; Hall, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> This is confirmed by the approach of the UN Security Council whose resolutions refer to the “Islamic State” as an “entity” but not a “state”, see e.g. Resolution 2178 (2014) or Resolution 2253 (2015). Neither is the term “state” used by other international law organizations and the news media, e.g. CNN (which calls it a militant group) or the BBC (jihadist group).

<sup>3</sup> The success of the “Islamic State” should be considered in view of the fact that the entity has been successively losing ground and initiative ever since 2015. Its failures result from a combination of

of diverse and mutually linked factors (Park, 2014). These fall into the two categories of endogenic reasons associated with the activities undertaken by the “Islamic State” and the exogenic factors, which apply to various developments and processes which have helped IS advance to one extent or another.

### Endogenic success factors

1. IS leaders realize that a combination of spectacular and extremely violent actions accounts for much of the success of their strategy aimed at the so-called terrorist marketing. They use it as a show of strength and effectiveness and to demonstrate their ruthlessness and determination. Such activities send a signal to both their adversaries and sympathizers (including potential volunteers and sponsors). They are also noted by other radical groups and Islamic communities which IS expects to realize that it is IS rather than any other competing organization (such as al Qaeda) that holds the position of the world leader “in the fight against infidels” and ensures the most faithful adherence to jihad principles. The violent and ruthless nature of IS is evidenced, for instance, by the burning to death of a Jordanian pilot in 2015 and the execution of 21 Coptic Christians.

2. The “Islamic State” makes very effective use of the media appeal of terrorism (Wojciechowski, 2013). It is well aware that the choice of specific targets and methods will help it achieve not only reprisal or intimidation but also media “success”. The results include long-term and far-reaching publicity for its activities and demands. To that end, IS takes advantage of social media for propaganda and communication purposes.<sup>4</sup> It has established its own “social network” modeled on Facebook. The terrorists make increasing use of encoding technologies to communicate on the Internet.<sup>5</sup> Their skills were assessed as sophisticated in 2015 by FBI Director who said that the jihadists have perfected the technique and found a variety of ways to apply the Internet, including book selling, film promotion and fund raising.

IS fighters are well aware of “media power”, as evidenced by their establishment of their own “Voice of the Caliphate” radio station in Afghanistan. The station is to increase their popularity among the local population. Meanwhile, they banned the use of satellite antennas in their controlled territory fearing the televised content. While their official

---

multiple factors such as intensified air strikes by the US-led international coalition forces, the military operations by Russia and the support it extends to the forces of President Bashar al-Assad, the activities of the Iraqi government army, Kurdish militants and other actors involved in fighting IS. Other reasons include a decline in IS’ access to funding (for instance, according to US experts, oil revenues dropped by roughly 30% from October 2015 to January 2016), IS’ inability to maintain a sustained level of recruitment and various measures taken against IS by the international community, see e.g. (Gaier, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Brookings Institute estimates that some 46,000 Twitter accounts were used to promote IS in the early 2015. The German intelligence service BND believe that IS distributes 30 to 40 videos, photographs and written statements a day (mainly on social networks).

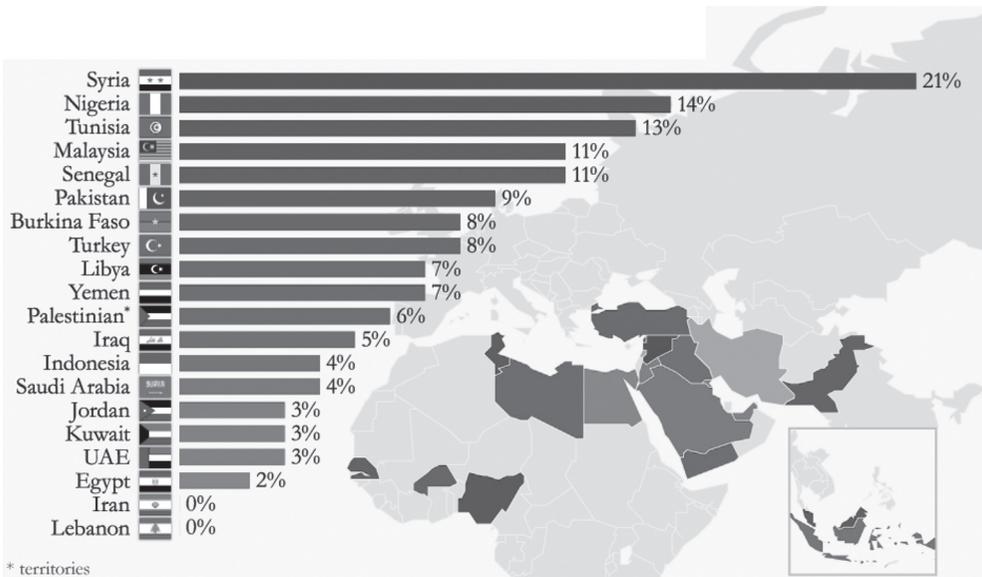
<sup>5</sup> The “Islamic State” increasingly refrains from using such messenger services as Telegram and Facebook Messenger fearing its messages may be intercepted and decoded by security services. Their alternative is an IS-owned encoded messenger.

excuse was to prevent "moral decay", their actual purpose was to keep the local population from accessing information that is unfavorable towards IS, whether disseminated by Arab media, such as Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya, or broadcast by the so called western media.

3. The "Islamic State" promotes a "revival", a slogan popular with some Muslims, which it seeks to achieve in several areas. When applied to religion, "revival" refers to the "return to the roots" and the literal interpretation of the Koran. IS makes clever use of the Sunni – Shia conflict and the ideas of "a war against infidels." On the political front, the "revival" takes the form of creating a caliphate and expanding its political, military, economic and other types of power. In the "social" dimension, it results in renouncing the domination and dictate of "the western world" as well as secular Arab "dictatorship."

Although rather unpopular in Muslim states, IS slogans and activities continue to earn it sympathizers and followers, as demonstrated below.

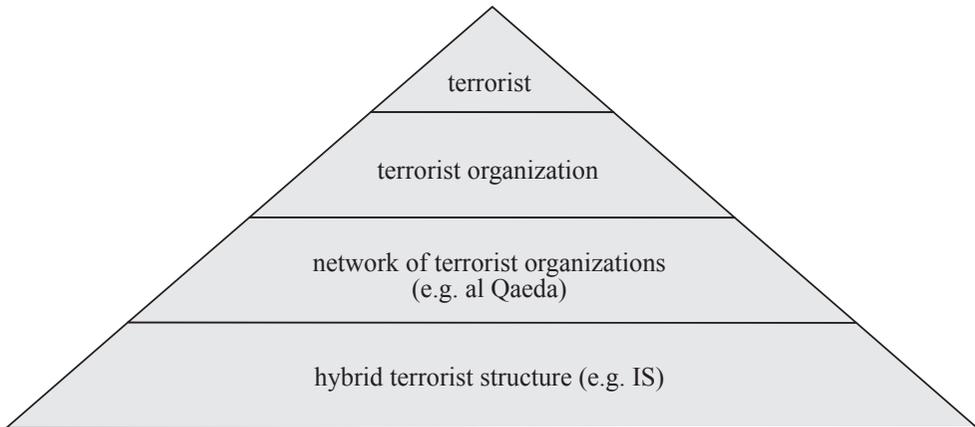
**Chart 1. Support for the "Islamic State" in selected Muslim countries and territories**



Source: Pew Research Washington Institute, cited after: www.statysta.com, 26.01.2016.

Whereas support for IS in the majority of Muslim states ranges from several to a dozen plus percentage points, it must not be dismissed as this figure represents a proportion of a nearly one-billion strong Sunni community.

4. The "Islamic State" is a new and modern form of terrorist activity. It transcends the classical definition of a terrorist organization as it controls a cross-border territory and an extensive structure that helps it achieve its goals. The "Islamic State" is a hybrid terrorist organization which brings together the characteristics of a terrorist group, a criminal organization, a state, a terrorist network and an armed militia. It is also the most complex part of the so called pyramid of terror.

**Diagram 1. The Pyramid of Terror**

Source: Own analysis.

The “Islamic State” has become the farthest reaching and the most dangerous form of terrorism. The future may see the emergence of even more complex terrorist organizations. One may not rule out that continued failures and loss of territory will drive IS to radically alter its organization and *modi operandi* (McCants, 2015).

5. By capturing parts of Iraq and Syria and establishing its own institutions, the “Islamic State” deprived al Qaeda of its “status” as the world’s key jihadist organization. It thus largely filled the “ideological” and “logistic” void left after al Qaeda lost its significance. IS took over some of its influence, sponsors, members and sympathizers. It proved to be more dynamic, more violent and more creative. It went a step further “along the path of terrorist activity” creating “state structures” and proclaiming the establishment of a caliphate. This decision conveyed a profound political, ideological and religious message that rested on the significance of the “caliphate” in the Muslim tradition.<sup>6</sup> It led to a confrontation between the “Islamic State” and al Qaeda not only over money, militants and sponsors but also over prestige and popularity. This rivalry has taken a number of forms, leading to friction in Syria between IS and the al Qaeda-tied organization al-Nusra Front, disputes over responsibility for attacks (such as the one in San Bernardino) and cases of the organizations discrediting each other in the public eye.<sup>7</sup>

While the above-mentioned conflict of interest is not helping either party, it is a crucial factor which the opponents of the “Islamic State” should exploit to the best of their ability. Nevertheless, one cannot rule out a reverse scenario of the two terrorist organizations making up and engaging in more or less coordinated collaboration by e.g. synchronizing their attacks or exchanging resources, intelligence, etc. This may lead to the establishment of a “personal union” of sorts if not a whole new joint organization.

<sup>6</sup> Note also legal and religious misgivings concerning e.g. the proclamation of a caliphate. For more on its origin, idea and functioning, see e.g. (Wejkszner, 2016).

<sup>7</sup> Examples include al Qaeda’s statements refusing to recognize the IS-proclaimed caliphate and calling IS the source of trouble. On the other hand, a number of articles published in the December 2015 issue of “Dabiq” (an “Islamic State” publication) have criticized and disparaged al Qaeda. For more on similarities and differences between the “Islamic State” and al Qaeda, see e.g. (Byman, 2016).

6. The swiftness and, in particular, the effectiveness with which IS has been carrying out its operations came as a huge surprise to the international community. Despite major crises, as in the late 2008 and the early 2009 when IS came close to destruction, the terrorist group (which has changed its name on several occasions) displayed an amazing “ability” to adjust to change. This was possible thanks to three other “abilities” attributed to IS. In the past, no other terrorist or fundamentalist organization could raise such enormous funds (“fund-raising ability”). No such entity had been able to create such an extended and efficient organization (“organizational abilities”) or recruit as many volunteers and sympathizers (“recruiting ability”).

7. “Fund-raising ability”. Never before in history has a terrorist organization gained access to such enormous funds and, consequently, such enormous potential. In 2015, IS’ worth was estimated at US\$ 2–4 billion (Brisard, 2016). Provided below for the sake of comparison are the amounts of funds acquired by other terrorist organizations:

Table 1  
**Estimated funding of selected terrorist organizations in 2015**

Organization	Funds held in \$ million
Al Qaeda	15–50
Hamas	70
FARC	300
Hezbollah	200–500
Taliban	560
“Islamic State”	2000–4000

**Source:** International Business Times, MoneyJihad, CNN, “The Guardian”.

IS derives its funds from a wide range of diverse sources including the sales of oil and gas, revenues from phosphate mining, industrial operations and cereal growing, proceeds from taxes and other levies (e.g. a tax on non-Muslims, road extortion tax, luxury tax), ransoms, donations, trading in works of art, human and human organ trafficking, property rental, theft and robbery, and so on.

Table 2  
**Selected sources of “Islamic State” financing and estimated revenues**

Source	Share in IS total financing	Annual revenues of IS
Crude oil	38%	\$ 730–1460 million
Natural gas	17%	\$489 million
Extortions and rackets	12%	\$330 million
Industrial operations, including phosphate mining	10%	\$300 million
Cement plants	10%	\$291 million
Cereal growing	7%	\$200 million
Kidnapping ransoms	4%	\$120 million
Sponsors/donations	2%	\$50 million

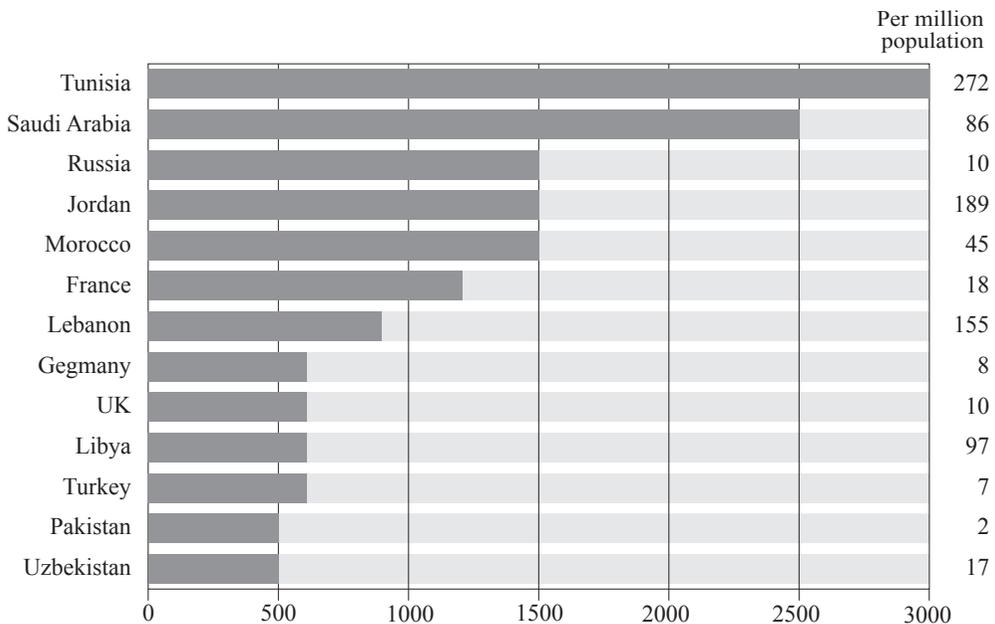
**Source:** Report Thomson Reuters *Accelus*, cited after: P. Cizak, *Państwo Islamskie ma w budżecie 2,2 mld dolarów*, www.money.pl, 14.11.2015.

8. “Organizational abilities”. IS pursues a new form of terrorist activity which transcends prior rules. IS cleverly brings together military force, politics, ideology, logistics, finance, social materials, propaganda, etc. The “Islamic State” maintains an extensive organization made up of diverse institutions<sup>8</sup> (Laurent, 2014) responsible for e.g. administration, the media, intelligence, justice, education, health care, charity, tax collection, natural resources, military matters and the distribution of benefits to IS fighters.

In 2014, IS established a ministry of martyrdom in charge of recruiting and training future suicide attackers. The Ministry also cares for their families providing social assistance and pensions. Another way to “honor” suicide terrorists is to offer public posts to their close ones and pay tribute to the suicides during various celebrations. Trained suicide fighters can be used to carry out attacks in Syria and Iraq as well as other parts of the world such as the European Union.

9. “Recruiting abilities” – a capacity to recruit sympathizers, sponsors as well as fighters stemming from a wide range of locations across the world. Another aspect of such abilities is to secure support from various clans, groups and terrorist organizations (such as Boko Haram and numerous Taliban groups). The ranks of IS include fighters from ca. 70 countries, Muslim as well as non-Muslim. Their total number is commonly estimated at 20–30,000 with 3–5,000 coming from Europe.

**Chart 2. Number of fighters engaged in Syria and Iraq by selected country of origin (per million population)**



**Note:** Upper estimates used. Countries with fewer than 500 fighters not included.

**Source:** ICSR, CIA World Factbook, cited after: [www.statysta.com](http://www.statysta.com), 21.01.2016.

<sup>8</sup> The instructions prepared by IS leaders show that in addition to creating a number of ministries, the organization has plans to build military barracks, devise a children’s and veterans’ curriculum and set up weaponry manufacturing and repair plants.

IS sympathizers and members represent practically all social groups ranging from students to entrepreneurs, to lawyers, teachers and doctors. Many of them learn about IS ideology over the Internet. The popularity of this communication channel is exemplified by the fact that the Islamic Al-Itisam profile has attracted more than 50,000 subscribers (Laurent, 2014).

10. An equally critical role is played by the strategy of creating (Mironova, 2016) the so-called new fronts, i.e. taking action, including terrorist attacks, in the states and regions in which IS has been relatively inactive or altogether absent. Copied from al Qaeda, the standard has been expanded and perfected by IS. It is currently employed in e.g. Afghanistan, Pakistan, Algeria, Libya, Egypt, Nigeria, Yemen.

**Map 1. Selected areas of “Islamic State” activities pursued under the new-front strategy**



**Source:** T. Batchelor, *Horrifying map reveals how ISIS terror will infect world if not defeated in Syria and Iraq*, 9.12.2015, [www.express.co.uk](http://www.express.co.uk), 20.06.2016.

**Exogenic reasons behind “Islamic State” success**

1. A number of diverse events and processes have (further) destabilized the Middle East helping IS to achieve significant military, political and propaganda success. The most prominent such events are the US intervention in Iraq and the subsequent destabilization of that state, conflicts in Syria, Yemen and Libya, rivalry among the “superpowers” vying for influence in the region, the Iranian crisis, the developments of the “Arab Spring” and their consequences, as well as the conclusion of the ISAF operation in Afghanistan and the activation of the Islamic community around the world (Wejkszner, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> Assessments of the term “Arab Spring” vary. A number of its variants are also in use, such as “Arab Awakening”, “Arab Revolution” and “Arab Uprising”, see e.g. (Osiewicz, 2014; Relations, 2015).

2. The “Islamic State” enjoys some degree of support not only from parts of Muslim communities but also from Islamic organizations. According to surveys by the UK Centre on Religion & Geopolitics, Syria and Iraq are currently home to at least 15 fundamentalist paramilitary organizations having the combined followings of approximately 65,000 members. Some of them collaborate with IS more or less closely.

The extent of support for IS provided by other Islamic organizations has been revealed in a UN-published report showing that 34 Islamic groups around the world swore allegiance to the “Islamic State” by the end of 2015 (ONZ, 2016).

3. Some of the most important albeit frequently overlooked factors generating or stimulating terrorism are social and economic in nature. This largely applies to IS. The extreme poverty or gaping wealth inequalities found in a specific area tend to result in extremist behavior which at times includes terrorism. This tendency is reflected in the data published in the “Global Terrorism Index 2015” (Global, 2015) which shows that, in recent years, countries with the highest number of terrorist attack casualties are also plagued by serious social and economic problems. Such countries include Iraq, Nigeria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria and Somalia. Obviously, this does not mean that poverty and huge social inequalities inevitably breed terrorism. However, they may stimulate extremism. This condition is described as providing a socio-economic “hotbed of terrorism” (Wojciechowski, 2013).

4. Another key determinant are delayed responses by the international community (and especially the large powers and the United Nations) aimed at comprehensively impeding “Islamic State” funding. It was not until December 17, 2015 that a significant initiative to that end was undertaken by the UN Security Council. Its aim was to develop and adopt a resolution that would keep IS from accessing the international financial system and deprive it of proceeds from the smuggling of oil, gas and antiques. The draft resolution was prepared jointly by the United States and Russia and adopted unanimously. It provides for entities that support al Qaeda or IS to be targeted with a system of UN sanctions such as the freezing of assets, the withholding of visas and arms embargos. The implementation will be overseen by a special UN expert team which will monitor banks and other financial institutions of the member states.

The “Islamic State” makes clever use of economic and social factors to forge relationships and gain influence. The result is an extensive network of “points” and persons responsible to extend financial, health-care-related and logistic assistance to the loyal segments of local communities. This provides fighters not only with sympathy but also with new recruits.

5. IS’ success has been largely facilitated by common differences of interests among individual states and especially the superpowers. This point can well be illustrated by reference to the troubled relationship between Russia and the United-States-led coalition.<sup>10</sup> The IS has also benefited from animosities between such states as Iran, Turkey, Israel and Saudi Arabia. Such animosities have prompted Turkey to engage in military operations, drove Saudi Arabia to establish the so called Islamic Military Counter Ter-

---

<sup>10</sup> The coalition comprises ca. 60 states with varying degrees of commitment, some 20 of which engage in military operations. The American Department of Defense has repeatedly expressed its skepticism about the dedication of some of the coalition partners which undermines the effectiveness of operations.

rorism Coalition and forced Iran, Israel and Turkey to launch diplomatic efforts. Other examples include Iran and Saudi Arabia vying for influence in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and the entire Middle East. Their rivalry is not only political but also economic (competition for oil profits) as well as religious (tensions between Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shiite Iran).

Needless to say, the above factors do not exhaust the list of reasons for the success of the "Islamic State." They do, however, shed light on their complexity, mutual links and diversity. The success of IS is not limited to military and political matters as it also extends to logistics, recruitment, finance and propaganda. While such success has in part resulted from the aforementioned developments and processes unfolding in the international arena, it is also an aftermath of the frequently effective efforts by "Islamic State" leaders who skillfully used the situation in Syria, Iraq as well as the entire Middle East and North Africa to their advantage.

Despite the "Islamic State's" loss of influence and resources, it is bound to continue to destabilize the international scene and pose a security threat for years to come. One should therefore give priority to learning about the reasons behind its success as such knowledge may help not only defeat the "Islamic State" but also prevent other Islamic and terrorist organizations from rising to power in the future.

### Bibliography

- Brisard J., Martinez D. (2016), *Islamic State: The Economy-Based Terrorist Funding*, Thomson Reuters Accelus, [www.risk.thomsonreuters.com](http://www.risk.thomsonreuters.com), 26.01.2016.
- Byman D. (2016), *Comparing Al Qaeda and IS: Different goals, different targets*, [www.brookings.edu](http://www.brookings.edu), 10.01.2016.
- Comby J. (2016), *Zagrożenie ze strony IS większe niż stwarzane przez Al-Kaidę*, <http://wiadomosci.wp.pl> (13.03.2016).
- Dawn M. (2014), *ISIS: And Its Hostages ISIL/Islamic State/Daesh*, Createspace.
- Hall B. (2015), *Inside ISIS. The Brutal Rise of a Terrorist Army*, New York.
- Global Terrorism Index 2015, Measuring and Understanding the Impact of Terrorism*, Institute for Economics & Peace, [www.economicsandpeace.org](http://www.economicsandpeace.org), 18.01.2016.
- Gaier M. (2016), *From Local Actor to Global Threat, The So-Called Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria*, „Konrad-Adenauer Stiftung International Reports, The Globalisation of Terrorism”, no. 1.
- Laurent S. (2014), *Kalifat terroru. Kulisy działania Islamic State*, Warszawa.
- McCants W. (2015), *The IS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State*, New York.
- Mironova V. (2016), *Understanding the Changing Tactics of so-called Islamic State*, „NATO Review Magazine”, 15.04.2016, [www.nato.int](http://www.nato.int), 17.06.2016.
- Niemiecki wywiad ostrzega przed zamachami. "Zagrożenie islamskim terroryzmem większe niż w 2001 roku"*, [www.newsjs.com](http://www.newsjs.com), 17.03.2016.
- ONZ: Już 34 ugrupowania ekstremistyczne przysięgły wierność Państwu Islamskiemu*, wiadomości, [wiadomosci.wp.pl](http://wiadomosci.wp.pl), 17.03.2016.
- Osiewicz P. (2014), *Zmiany społeczno-polityczne w państwach arabskich po 2010 roku: krytyczna analiza stosowanych pojęć*, „Przegląd Politologiczny”, no. 1.
- Park B. (2014), *Five Reasons why Islamic State will be Hard to Destroy*, „The Telegraph”, 15.08.2014.

- Relations between the European Union 2011 – determinants, areas of co-operation and prospects* (2015), eds. A. Potyrała, B. Przybylska-Maszner, S. Wojciechowski, Berlin.
- Wejksznar A. (2010), *Ewolucja terroryzmu motywowanego ideologią religijną na przykładzie salafickiego ruchu globalnego dżihadu*, Poznań.
- Wejksznar A. (2016), *Państwo Islamskie. Narodziny nowego kalifatu?*, Warszawa.
- Wojciechowski S. (2013), *The Hybridity of Terrorism. Understanding Contemporary Terrorism*, Berlin.
- Wojciechowski S., Siadkowski A. (2014), *Understanding Contemporary Terrorism and Counterterrorism*, Dąbrowa Górnicza.

---

### Przyczyny sukcesów „Państwa Islamskiego”

#### Streszczenie

Współczesny terroryzm ściśle związany jest z całym szeregiem różnorodnych zagrożeń. Obecnie najważniejszym spośród nich jest „Państwo Islamskie” (PI). Celem tekstu jest wskazanie najważniejszych przyczyn, które doprowadziły do gwałtownego wzrostu siły oraz znaczenia „Państwa Islamskiego”. Są one sumą składową szeregu ściśle powiązanych ze sobą różnorodnych czynników. Można je podzielić na dwie główne kategorie obejmujące przyczyny endogenne związane z różnorodnymi działaniami podejmowanymi przez „Państwo Islamskie” oraz źródła egzogenne obejmujące inne wydarzenia czy procesy, które także przyczyniły się do sukcesów PI. Pomimo kurczenia się wpływów „Państwo Islamskie” jeszcze długo będzie destabilizować sytuację międzynarodową i zagrażać bezpieczeństwu. Poznanie zatem źródeł jego sukcesów uznać należy za kwestę priorytetową, która może być pomocna nie tylko w pokonaniu PI, ale także uniknięciu wzrostu potęgi innych organizacji islamistycznych czy terrorystycznych w przyszłości.

**Słowa kluczowe:** „Państwo Islamskie”, ISIS, terroryzm, przyczyny terroryzmu, Al-Kaida