PART 1

ISI, ISIS, ISIL, DAESH, IS...
A many-headed Hydra,
a Chameleon of
a Thousand Names
and Appearances

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A spectre haunts the Middle East today: the spectre of an Islamist movement that no one knows how to classify (although unhelpful adjectives are abound) and whose name no one can agree on. The words of the **Communist Manifesto** are uniquely suited to describe the phenomenon of this newly-emerged hybrid organisation, which at the same time is a professional revolutionary apparatus, localised insurgency movement, military force, terrorist organisation, and an expert propaganda machine in the use of the language of violence and of the internet as a vehicle to operate in a globalised and interconnected world.

Kobane City. Source: TELAM

Born under the name ISI (*Islamic State* in Iraq in English, ESI: Estado Islámico en Iraq in Spanish) in 2003 in the years of the American occupation of Iraq following the invasion, and as a franchise of Al Qaeda integrated by mujahedeen veterans that had returned from Afghanistan, this armed Salafist movement has changed its name to the rhythm of ruptures and alliances with other extremist movements in the context of a situation that some call the new Arab Cold War, in which Saudi Arabia and Iran fight for supremacy in the area through the actions of their local partners.

Considered to be too aggressive and violent by Al Qaeda once it distanced itself from their strategy of fighting the distant enemy (USA and Israel) in order to initiate a sectarian battle against the Shiites followed by a fratricidal struggle against those Sunnis who did not agree with their version of ideological and religious purity, ISI was reduced to a handful of irredentist refugee members in the Iraqi desert between 2007 and 2008. The Syrian war and the break with Al Qaeda saw ISI add *al Sham* to their name and develop their territorial claims: Greater Syria or the Levant, according to translations, a vast area that in a mythical and distant past covered fringes of what is now considered not only Syria but also Turkey, Kurdistan, Lebanon and Israel: it then called itself ISIL or ISIS in English (the American government uses the acronym ISIL in order to avoid confusion with the goddess Isis of the

Egyptian pantheon). In the Arab world, its enemies began referring to it as Daesh (due to the acronym of the Arabic name of the movement but also because that acronym sounds very similar to a series of expletives and derogatory words: it is said that ISIL abhors this and has threatened to mutilate those using it; the French government has adopted the word as an official way to refer to the movement). The people of the region also refer to them as *takfiris* (those who accuse others of apostasy, heresy, of not being good Muslims and which engage in violent excommunication), an indirect shot not only at their actions but also at their extremist version of Salafism and Wahhabism, as in Islam it is *haram* (sin) for a Muslim to kill another Muslim: to do so with impunity there is a need for prior excommunication.

On June 29th, 2014, this movement of a thousand names assumed yet a new one: on the first day of Ramadan, it proclaimed itself Caliphate and became the Islamic State (IS in English, EL in Spanish), calling on other extremist groups and those of faith not only to recognise it as such, but to swear an oath of allegiance. Al-Baghdadi, its leader, no longer considers Daesh a *primus inter pares* among the extremist movements with whom negotiations can take place on an equal footing, but instead that it is superior to the other movements, religious or confessional congregations and believers are subject to ties of allegiance and religious subordination. Its territorial claims expand: it is no longer just control of *al Sham* that the movement seeks but instead the Islamic domination of *Dar el Islam* (the lands of Islam, an appeal that includes old Al Andalus, ie, among others, the south of Spain) and areas that are religiously significant to the Islamic cosmogony, such as Khorasan (India, part of Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and parts of Central Asia), key territory for the advent of the Koranic version of Armageddon.

Through self-proclamation of the coming of the Caliphate followed by demands for the adhesion and loyalty of believers, congregations and armed groups use one of the two mechanisms established by the dogma, tradition and history of the Muslim world in order to give legality and legitimacy to their actions. In effect, in Islamic tradition the Caliph has the power to declare jihad, as was well known, for example, by Germany when she tried to get a statement from the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire against its enemies, France and the United Kingdom, during the First World War. In the name of the *Umma* (world/ nation of believers) that they have come to embody, they have declared the abolition of national borders and the distribution of areas of influence established by colonial mandates (the famous abolition of the limits set by Sykes-Picot, for example) and have adopted the medieval terminology of emirates as the new territorial subdivisions of power, influence and management. Through this, dressing itself as a mellifluous reference to a Golden Age, using the political vocabulary of a glorious past, they merely use the same formula that Pan-Arabism had in mind when it stated: *an Arab Nation sustained by nation states.*

Along this line it has been said, incorrectly, that it is the first time that a group defined by total Islamic extremist ideology has sought to embody its action in a territory (the so-called territorialisation of the movement). The Taliban ruled the *Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan*, establishing its capital in the city of Kandahar, from 1996 until 2001, with this Emirate recognised by three countries: Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates. AQIM (Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb), allied with Islamist groups (MUJAO, Ansar

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Dine) and Tuareg nationalists (NMLA: National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad), proclaimed the independence of Azawad in 2012, establishing Timbuktu as its capital. They briefly governed this desert territory under the principles of Sharia and destroyed every monument or library in their path that contradicted their version of Islam. Forced to withdraw from their territory and take refuge in the Sahara desert by the Serval operation (led by France), they left behind, in the liberated and semi-destroyed city of Timbuktu, entire files of documents on how they planned to administer and govern the territory.

Attack in Iraq. Source: TELAM

In this way, they are not the only ones using the application of Sharia for the daily administration and legitimacy of the regime. Without going any further, the movement takes the logic of Wahhabism, the political formula that serves as the ultimate justification of the Saudi regime, to its limits. Versions of the application of Sharia to everyday life are present throughout the Muslim world in different variations.

Nor is it true that it is the first time that foreign fighters are recruited to fight in revolutionary movements in this area. They were first recruited for the secular Palestinian cause in its various aspects, but already in 1995 - at the time of the creation of the Palestinian Authority's presence – the presence of the *Afghans* was noted, Palestinian fighters returning from the war against the Soviets in Afghanistan who wanted to impose sharia and ban the enrolment of girls in some remote villages in the West Bank. In Afghanistan, *Arabs* were spoken of in reference to Al Qaeda fighters and other factions of non-Pashtun origin, allied with the Taliban.

On the other hand, who does not remember the impetus of many of our young people in Latin America that led them to join revolutionary movements in foreign countries? Che Guevara, after all, was Argentine. And if we go back further in history, International

Brigades fought in the Spanish Civil War. The phenomenon of deterritorialised groups internationalising a revolution is not new even to fundamentalist extremism. And yet, it is the first time that the United Nations emits a Security Council resolution, passed unanimously, on foreign terrorist fighters, establishing measures to deter them that range from defining the act of joining foreign terrorists as a serious crime to restrictions on entry to their own country and not issuing travel documents.

The impact of the Islamic State is probably not so much due to the novelty of the movement but instead the combination of influences within the framework of the confluence of two factors. In an interconnected and globalised world, the efficient and effective use of social media and new communication technologies have made this phenomenon viral. Recruitment is no longer carried out face-to-face but instead via the internet and can happen anywhere, anytime, wherever there is a young person looking to make sense of their life in front of a computer, a tablet, a phone. The *Here there may be dragons* that in ancient maps showed the danger and uncertainty of the unknown is today just around the corner. The second factor that makes this recruitment shocking for many people is that we had accustomed ourselves to a narrative in which globalisation was synonymous with Westernisation, and in which the expansion of technology and the democratisation of its use would lead to progress. Instead, we find ourselves in a chaotic world in which the changes have not produced the expected results in and for the West – they generated higher unemployment, income concentration and exclusion, in addition to the greater concentration of power in a few hands – at the same time as the combined forces of globalisation and technology are used by fundamentalists to advance a project of *perverse modernisation*, as Zizek calls it, in which technical progress is used to establish, consolidate and solidify an archaic political order (as was done by the Meiji dynasty in Japan between 1868 and 1912).

The revolutionary techniques used by Daesh are not new. They infiltrate the cracks of societies, particularly those that have religious minorities; they harness the anguish and resentment of a Sunni community that feels (for good reason, in countries such as Iraq) marginalised and oppressed by autocratic governments; they make pacts that they will then betray with local elites left aside by arbitrary if not authoritarian central governments; they reach agreements with organised criminal groups (smugglers, drug traffickers, bandits) so that they provide them with funds, infrastructure and logistical support for their actions; they flirt with competing regional powers, achieving concessions, money, support, or at the very least inaction; they restore law and order in their path, although the law is Sharia and the order oppressive; they recruit young people in crisis and offer a romantic meaning to their lives ... those who closely follow the antics and pronouncements of Daesh will find echoes of the Bolshevik AGITPROP, the 'guevara-esque' focus, the theory of the Maoist and Shining Path guerrillas, and the practices of the Khmer Rouge, in their thinking and actions. They are, in this sense, an example of the syncretism of revolutionary theories and practices that precede them, syncretism developed by professional revolutionaries that launched their careers more than fifteen years ago. They devote their full time to their profession and know the terrain, problems and opportunities at their fingertips.

Before them lay collapsed or sclerotic Arab states, whose authoritarian reflexes

provide the raw material and a permanent source of labour to a flexible and adapting movement, and a confused international community that still does not know if they are fighting a war or conducting counterinsurgency operations, nor how to qualify the enemy, but that is sure that the fight is going to last more than thirty years.

So, Shakespeare was wrong... What is the power of a name? A rose, by any other name, may not smell so sweet. In the case of this yet unnamed movement, the combination of factors resulting in the name changes do matter. The rose is no longer a rose.

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Latin American Security and Defence Network

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