

# Daesh: The archetype of hybrid terrorist organizations

by Dr. Triantafyllos Karatrantos

Senior Advisor on Radicalisation, Organised Crime and Terrorism Research and  
Prevention Policies at the Center for Security Studies (KEMEA)

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49, Vassilissis Sofias Ave., 106 76 Athens, Greece

Tel: (+30) 210 7257110-1, Fax: (+30) 210 7257114,

e-mail: [eliamep@eliamep.gr](mailto:eliamep@eliamep.gr),

url: [www.eliamep.gr](http://www.eliamep.gr)

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## Author's Information:

**Triantafyllos Karatrantos** is Senior Advisor on Radicalisation, Organised Crime and Terrorism Research and Prevention Policies at the Center for Security Studies (KEMEA) and also Lecturer at the National Security School of Greece on the topics "Multiculturalism, Migration and Security, Intercultural Policing and Community Policing, Radicalisation and Jihadist Terrorism". He holds a PhD in European Security and New Threats from the University of the Aegean. Since 2014 he was working at the Center for Security Studies (KEMEA) on training programs and European and research projects. Furthermore, he is a certified by RAN COE trainer in Radicalization and Member of the RAN LOCAL Group and a CEPOL network expert and a specialized trainer on hot-spots trends and challenges and FTF's common identification indicators. Since 2005, when awarded him as a member of a youth team his first European grant from the Program Youth, he is actively coordinating and participating to the implementation of European and Research projects (HORIZON 2020, ISF- Police, AMIF, ERASMUS+). The last years he focus on first line practitioners training programs, especially short courses for Law Enforcement personnel on radicalisation and counter- terrorism and the linkages between security and foreign policy.

## Abstract

The rise and evolution of Daesh (al-Dawlah al-Islamiyah fi l-'Irāq wa-sh-Shām) marked a new and very interesting debate about the labeling of violent groups that are not traditional terrorist organizations and they are also acting with different roles and using alternate tactics and modus operandi, such as insurgency, within civil and regional conflicts. Furthermore, the establishment of the so called "Caliphate" includes a new parameter in the scientific debate, the quasi state dimension. Daesh is a modern archetype of this vivid scientific debate, but the difficulties in labeling, especially in cases where terrorist groups are taking part in civil conflicts, is not new. Labeling is not only a matter of "name and blame", is important in order to design an effective and holistic counter terrorism strategy. The aim of this chapter is to discuss the different approaches about labeling nontraditional terrorist groups and to present the terrorist activity of Daesh.

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# Daesh: The archetype of hybrid terrorist organizations

## Introduction

There is a general political and research consensus that Daesh is a terrorist organization. In details, the main international organizations (UN, NATO, EU) consider it a terrorist group, Daesh is in the US Department of State Foreign Terrorist Organizations List, around 60 states from different regions are members of the coalition against the organization, the majority of the Muslim organizations and an important number of religion leaders publicly condemn the organization as terrorist, RAND has a dedicated research project on Daesh as the deadliest terrorist organization and finally, Daesh is listed as terrorist organization at the Global Terrorism Database of the University of Maryland. However, a number of scholars are describing and analyzing Daesh in a different way. Some examples of this different typology are: a) a revolutionary group, b) a guerilla or insurgent group and c) a quasi- state.

Although the emergence of Daesh provides the ultimate case study for this new typology debate, the conceptualizations of terrorism is not a new research challenge. Actually, the roots of this debate are going back to the rise of terrorist studies as a distinct research brand. Even now, we don't have a single accepted definition for terrorism and as a result there are a number of problems concerning the labeling of organizations as terrorists or not. For example, it is well known the methodological and political framework of labeling disagreement if someone is a "freedom fighter" or a "terrorist" (Ganor, 2002).

Stathis Kalyvas labeled Daesh as a Revolutionary Group. His argument is that Daesh: "uses its clandestine organization to infiltrate territories held by its opponents, begins a campaign of selective violence there, and only attacks when the enemy has weakened. This is a hybrid strategy of guerrilla war in a first stage and conventional war in a second one. The main difference between ISIS military tactics and that of the older Marxist groups is the extent to which conventional military fighting is enacted from very early on, both in Syria and Iraq. Of course, the Maoist doctrine of irregular war posited conventional war as the final stage of the war" (Kalyvas, 2015:45). From another point of view Zenonas Tziarras argued that Daesh is not a "typical case of a terrorist organization. It is rather a fusion of a state, an insurgency, and a terrorist organization that could be best described as a "quasi-state." (Tziarras, 2017),

Cronin's main argument is that although Daesh uses terrorism as a tactic, it is not really a terrorist organization. "Terrorist networks, such as al Qaeda, generally have only dozens or hundreds of members, attack civilians, do not hold territory, and cannot directly confront military forces. ISIS, on the other hand, boasts some 30,000 fighters, holds territory in both Iraq and Syria, maintains

extensive military capabilities, controls lines of communication, commands infrastructure, funds itself, and engages in sophisticated military operations. If ISIS is purely and simply anything, it is a pseudo-state led by a conventional army. And that is why the counterterrorism and counterinsurgency strategies that greatly diminished the threat from al Qaeda will not work against ISIS" (Cronin, 2015).

## The Terrorism and Insurgency Debate

We need to include this conceptual debate about the nature of Daesh in the broader debate about the differences between terrorist groups and guerilla and insurgent groups. According to Alex Schmid terrorists distinguishes itself from combat through disregards for principles of chivalry and humanity contained in the Hague Regulations and Geneva Conventions. Furthermore, Schmid stated that 'irregular fighters' (guerrillas, partisans, resistance groups) must fulfill four conditions in order to fall under the Hague Regulations and the Geneva Conventions:

1. Must be 'commanded by a person responsible for his subordinates';
2. Must have a 'fixed distinctive sign recognisable at a distance';
3. Must carry their arms 'openly';
4. Must conduct their operations 'in accordance with the laws and customs of war' (Schmid, 2004: 203).

Another important point raised by Schmid is the prohibition of violence against captives and certain forms of dealing opponents and especially:

- massacres of noncombatants, and taking of hostages for extortionist
- blackmail and intimidation;
- assassination of unarmed people;
- torture of prisoners;
- disappearances. (Schmid, 2004: 204).

Schmid's final argument is about targeting civilians: "most of contemporary terrorism is not a fight against the armed forces of an opponent; rather it is 'designed' chiefly against civilian targets who ordinarily, according to the rules of land warfare, enjoy immunity from deliberate attack. In this sense, terrorism is a countervalue, rather than a counter-force tactic, since civilians not involved in combat are the prime target" (Schmid, 2004: 204).

David Rapoport, from his point of view, made the following attempt at distinguishing military activity, guerrilla war and terrorism:

1. Military activity was bound by conventions entailing moral distinctions between belligerents and neutrals, combatants and noncombatants, appropriate and inappropriate targets, legitimate and illegitimate methods.
2. Guerrilla war was a special kind of military activity, in which hit and- disappear tactics to disperse the enemy's military forces were employed to wear down and gradually defeat the enemy.
3. The traditional distinguishing characteristics of the terrorist were his explicit refusal to accept the conventional moral limits that defined military and guerrilla action. Because a terrorist knew that others did think that violence should be limited, he exploited the enemy's various responses to his outrages. The terrorist perpetrated atrocities and manipulated reactions to them. (Rapoport, 1977).

Furthermore, J.M. Berger argued that the present Al Qaeda movement conducts activities that go beyond acts of terrorism. The current Al Qaeda movement, Berger argued, is more akin to a "wide-ranging fighting movement" involved in numerous insurgencies. To that end, it raises funds while mobilizing local, regional, and foreign fighters in a variety of theaters. To be sure, the movement continues to carry out horrific acts of terrorism, but that effort is "secondary in al-Qa`ida's portfolio." Although terrorism made Al Qaeda what it is today, and continues to matter, "it is no longer the main line of business". (Berger, 2014).

Finally, Moghadam, Berger and Beliakova argued the following about the interrelationship between terrorism, civil war and insurgency:

1. Terrorist groups use, almost without exception, terrorism in conjunction with other tactics, notably guerrilla warfare;
2. terrorist groups are becoming more sophisticated political actors, with some attempting to provide basic services to the population in an attempt to win over hearts and minds;

Terrorism is rarely a self-standing phenomenon. Instead, most terrorism occurs in the context of broader armed conflict, typically an insurgency and/or a civil war (Moghadam, Berger and Beliakova, 2014).



## Daesh's Terrorist Activity

The organization became recognized around the world for carrying out heinous acts of violence, including public executions, rapes, beheadings and crucifixions. The group has earned a notorious reputation for videotaping brutal killings and displaying them online. But, the most important turning point which lead to the assessment of the organization as the main security threat are the thousand of terrorist attacks that Daesh prepare, executed, claimed or inspired. Especially the deadly attacks in Europe and US raise Daesh as the deadliest terrorist organization and the main threat for Western security. The deadliest attacks against Western countries were the following:

- November 2015, Paris: In a series of attacks, bombers and shooters killing 130 people.
- December 2015, San Bernardino: A married couple opened fire at the Inland Regional Center in California and killed 14 people.
- March 2016, Brussels: Bombing attacks at Brussels Airport in Belgium and at the Maalbeek Metro station killed 32 people.
- June 2016, Orlando: A gunman opened fire inside a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida, and killed 49 people.
- July 2016, Nice: A terrorist driving a truck mowed down a crowd of people in the French Riviera town, killing 86.
- December 2016, Berlin: A man hijacked and drove a truck into a Christmas market in Berlin, killing himself and 11 others.
- May 2017, Manchester: A single suicide bomber killed 22 people during an Ariana Grande concert at the Manchester Arena in England.

According to the Global Terrorism Index Daesh was the deadliest terrorist organization for 2016. In details:

1. The number of attacks rose by 18.5%, from 955 in 2015 to 1,132 attacks in 2016.
2. The death toll of the organization increased by nearly 50% to 9,132 people.
3. The group's effectiveness has also increased with an average of 8.1 deaths per attack in 2016 compared to 5.7 deaths per attack in 2014.
4. Organisation's activities affected 308 cities in 15 countries around the world.
5. Over the 93% of the attacks took place in Iraq and Syria. (Global Terrorism Index, 2017: 73).

In terms of target groups and tactics:

1. More than half of the attacks targeted private citizens and property, which resulted to more than half of all deaths.
2. Attacks on police accounted for 9.5% and caused 14.2% of all deaths.
3. The military was targeted in 6.6% of Daesh attacks and accounted for 9.4% of all deaths.

Daesh's most common method of attack are bombings or explosions, which were used in 753 attacks and which accounted for 66.5% of all attacks in 2016. Suicide bombings were the most effective with a death rate of 14.2 per attack. These attacks accounted for 43% of deaths but only 24% of incidents. (Global Terrorism Index, 2017: 73).

EUROPOL estimates that "IS is actively propagating terrorist acts on EU soil by any means available, increasingly inspiring radicalised individuals to act. IS has proven to be very effective in both moving people to commit terrorist acts and to set these actions in motion themselves" (EUROPOL, 2016). Furthermore, in this special report about the modus operandi EUROPOL argues that "the majority of attacks carried out in the name of IS appear to have been masterminded and performed by individuals who were inspired by IS, rather than those who worked with the terrorist organisation directly. Intelligence suggests, however, that IS has also put together teams in Syria which are sent to the EU tasked with carrying out attacks" (EUROPOL, 2016).

According to the 2018 Terrorism Situation Report issued by EUROPOL Daesh is related with the majority of the jihadist terrorist attacks in Europe in 2017. Furthermore, the Organisation estimated that although the degradation of Daesh organizational structures may reduce the attractiveness of the group, this may not affect the threat of jihadist terrorism, as disaffected IS members and sympathisers – including those residing in EU Member States – will likely continue to adhere to jihadist beliefs and might be drawn to join other groups, such as al-Qaeda (EUROPOL, 2018).

## **A Hybrid Terrorist Organisation**

In order to present the overall picture about the nature of Daesh we need to return back to the discussion about similarities and differences between insurgent and terrorist groups. For the purposes of this chapter we will compare the characteristics of Daesh in accordance to the characteristics of Terrorism, Guerrilla, and Conventional War as Modes of Violent Struggle based on the work of Ariel Merari.

**Table 1: Daesh and the Characteristics of Terrorism, Guerrilla, and Conventional War as Modes of Violent Struggle<sup>2</sup>**

	<b>Conventional war</b>	<b>Guerrilla</b>	<b>Terrorism</b>	<b>Daesh</b>
<b>Unit size in battle</b>	Large (armies, corps, division)	Medium (platoons, companies, battalions)	Small (usually less than 10 persons)	Medium and Small
<b>Weapons</b>	Full range of military hardware (air force, armour, artillery, etc.)	Mostly infantry-type light weapons but sometimes artillery pieces as well	Hand guns, hand grenades, assault rifles, and specialised weapons, e.g., car bombs, remote-control bombs, barometric pressure bombs	Armour, guns, surface-to-air missiles, some aircraft, anti-tank missiles, Hand guns, hand grenades, assault rifles, and specialised weapons, e.g., car bombs, remote-control bombs, suicide bombs, IEDs, knives, cars etc.
<b>Tactics</b>	Usually joint operation involving several military branches	Commando-type tactics	Specialised tactics: kidnapping, assassinations, carbombing, hijacking, barricade-hostage, etc.	<b>Conventional battle tactics, Hit and run type tactics, Specialised tactics:</b> kidnapping, assassinations, carbombing, hijacking, barricade-hostage, etc.
<b>Targets</b>	Mostly military units, industrial and transportation infrastructure	Mostly military, police, and administration staff, as well as political opponents	State symbols, political opponents, and the public at large	Citizens and property, Police, military.
<b>Intended impact</b>	Physical destruction	Mainly physical attrition of the enemy	Psychological coercion	Physical destruction, Psychological Coercion
<b>Control of territory</b>	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
<b>Uniform</b>	Wear uniform	Often wear uniform	Do not wear uniform	Wear uniform in accordance with the region and the operation.
<b>Recognition of war zones</b>	War limited to recognised, geographical zones	War limited to the country in strife	No recognised war zones. Operations carried out world-wide	Establish the Global Caliphate Operations carried out world- wide
<b>International legality</b>	Yes, if conducted by rules	Yes, if conducted by rules	No	No
<b>Domestic legality</b>	Yes	No	No	No

<sup>2</sup> This table is based on the work of A. Merari. In: V.S. Ramachandran (ed), Encyclopedia of Human Behaviour, Volume 4 (San Diego: Academic Press 1994) p.401.

As someone can understand from the table Daesh is according to its battle teams, weapons, tactics, targets, intended impact, no recognition of war zones, no international and domestic legality a terrorist organization. The most important point in order to label Daesh as a terrorist group is the targeting of civilians and the violent treatment of captives. As Boaz Ganor argued "Islamic State is a terrorist organization expressly because it perpetrates extremely barbaric attacks – including mass murder, kidnapping and beheading, mutilation, rape and maiming – against the civilians under its control and elsewhere in the world" (Ganor, 2015: 57).

However, reading the table more carefully we can observe that Daesh has also a number of Guerilla/ Insurgent characteristics (medium size battle units, conventional weapons, conventional and insurgent battle tactics, control of territory, wear of uniform). From this point of view someone can say that Daesh is also an insurgent group. Moreover, as Moghadam, Berger and Beliakova argued "Terrorist groups, however, regularly carry out guerrilla operations as well. Guerrilla attacks typically emphasize extended campaigns of assassination, sabotage, and hit-and-run attacks carried out by small and highly mobile paramilitary units" (Moghadam, Berger and Beliakova, 2014). Furthermore, as Robert Scales and Douglas Ollivant argue, a growing array of Islamist "terrorists" have turned into "skilled soldiers" who increasingly use a blend of traditional terrorist tactics and modern war-fighting techniques. Contemporary militants continue to use terrorist tactics to intimidate potential supporters and enemies alike, but their modus operandi has evolved into skills that can pose considerable challenges to states and their populations. They now "maneuver in reasonably disciplined formations... and employ mortars and rockets in deadly barrages." They rely on ambushes, roadside bombings, sniper fire, and other tactics. Groups such as the Islamic State, Hizballah, and Hamas are able to handle second generation weapons such as Russian RPG-29 and possibly wire-guided anti-tank missiles, and build sophisticated underground tunnel systems" (Scales and Ollivant, 2014),

Finally, the best way to label Daesh is a hybrid terrorist organization<sup>3</sup>, the concept introduced by Boaz Ganor: "the Islamic State is a "hybrid terrorist organization", a sub-state actor, which operates simultaneously in the military, civilian and political spheres. Through its terrorist acts and crimes, IS severely challenges international norms, defies morality, and breaks international humanitarian law. In so doing, IS has positioned itself as an enemy of the enlightened world" (Ganor, 2015: 62).

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<sup>3</sup> For the concept of hybrid terrorist organizations see Ganor B., (2012), The changing forms of incitement to terror and violence: the need for a new international response, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung- Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs.

## Conclusions

It is obvious that Daesh is a terrorist group, the deadliest of the last four years. The most important argument about the terrorist nature of the group is the targeting of civilians and the violent treatment of captives. However, is not only a terrorist group. Daesh is involved in conflicts and is using violence in different ways. From conventional warfare during the first months of the so called "Caliphate", to insurgent involvement in the civil war in Syria and finally to the preparation, inspiration and execution of deadly terrorist attacks in different regions. As Boaz Ganor said: "we can see the Islamic State as a new and dangerous trend in modern terrorism, one that has brought the heartlessness and barbarism of terrorism to previously inconceivable extremes. However, the Islamic State has not changed the rules of the game or altered the strategy of modern terrorism adopted by multiple organizations worldwide during the past half century; rather, it has intensified and enhanced that strategy through its skillful wielding of propaganda" (Ganor, 2015: 58).

The military defeat in the ground and the loss of territory left Daesh only with the choice of terrorist activity and actually this side of the group is the main threat for European security. Moreover, as Ganor argued "the Islamic State is brainwashing young second- and third-generation immigrants to Europe, recruiting them to its ranks and inspiring them to carry out "lone wolf" terrorist attacks in Western countries". (Ganor, 2015: 63).

But, if we want to prevent and avoid a new resurrection of the organization in the Middle East, we need to better understand the hybridism of this group, the way it uses insurgent tactics and state-centered propaganda in order to mobilize and recruit soldiers. This understanding its necessary to be part on an effective and holistic counter- terrorism strategy with a special emphasis in the external security dimension.

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