

Preface

Historical developments and processes generally evolve gradually and below the surface of public scrutiny, and it is difficult to foresee starting points and often equally difficult to identify end points. In contrast, dramatic moments that are seared into collective memory can be pinpointed. One such moment, in effect a watershed, was recorded in June 2014, when the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) seized a dominant position in the global consciousness with its occupation of the city of Mosul in Iraq, and thereafter with its announcement of the establishment of the Islamic State headed by Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

The conflation of impressive military achievements and the challenge to the hundred-year-old state order that existed in the areas occupied by the Islamic State and in the greater region, along with the radical ideology painted in bright shades of Salafi jihadi Islam that drives Islamic State activity, took the Middle East and the international arena by surprise. Since then, there have been numerous attempts to understand the origins of the Islamic State; the essence of this particular phenomenon; its characteristics; its growth; and the various implications of its actions. In tandem, there have been increasing efforts to devise ways to cope with the challenges it poses.

The Islamic State currently lies at the heart of international discourse, researched and analyzed by decision makers and intelligence bodies, academics, and journalists alike. This may be attributed, *inter alia*, to the fact that the Islamic State is understood to be a multifaceted challenge – security-military, political, economic, legal, ideological, cultural, and moral – on national and regional levels, as well as a challenge to the stability of the entire world.

This volume is part of the intellectual effort currently underway at many research institutes throughout the world that are closely following the phenomenon of the Islamic State in order to offer plausible interpretations of its nature and contribute to the efforts to eradicate it. More specifically,

the objective of this volume is twofold, incorporating two complementary dimensions. First, it represents an attempt to establish a rich research foundation and knowledge base on the Islamic State that will help advance further research in this area. Second, it enables an understanding of the complexity and difficulties inherent in the Islamic State challenge, which should assist in the examination and selection of ways toward an informed and effective response.

The book is a compilation of articles written by researchers at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) and experts from other research institutes in Israel. The structure of the volume reflects the various and diverse aspects that the Islamic State phenomenon represents. The articles present a broad and comprehensive picture: an explanation and analysis of the historical, religious and geopolitical context for the growth of the Islamic State, the characteristics of the entity, how it acts, its effects on various states, the challenge that it presents to regional and world powers, its possible future directions and development, and the types of action required for weakening and even obliterating it.

The book is divided into eight sections. The first section includes articles that examine the ground from which the Islamic State sprouted forth: the growth of the Salafi jihadi stream, the development of the concept of the caliphate in Islam, the theoretical geopolitical context of the breakdown of the nation state in the Middle East, and the practical background for the rise of the Islamic State from the radical camp. The second section deals with the various aspects that define the Islamic State primarily since its establishment, the many levels on which it operates, and the challenges that it presents for its rivals. To this end, the military and intelligence contexts that pertain to the patterns of action by Islamic State are analyzed, and issues of governance, economy, and law, as well as the use of media and social networks – a significant component in Islamic State activity – are probed as well.

The following four sections of the volume address the geopolitical level and geographical context of the Islamic State phenomenon, broken down by states and organizations. The analyses look at the various actors and their respective attitudes toward the Islamic State, and deal with the impact of the Islamic State on particular states within their borders, as well as each response to the Islamic State in its areas of operation. The third section looks at the region where the Islamic State first emerged and its immediate surroundings,

namely, Syria, Iraq, the Kurdish areas, Lebanon, Jordan, and among the Sunni population in the State of Israel and areas of the Palestinian Authority. The next section relates to the leading regional powers in the Middle East – Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Israel – vis-à-vis the challenge. The fifth section examines the expansion of the Islamic State’s sphere of influence to areas beyond the primary territories that it captured – Egypt, Libya, Central Africa, and South Asia. The sixth section observes the developments from the wider prism of the superpowers, and attempts to analyze the relationship between the Islamic State and the actors that largely dictate the international agenda: the United States, Russia, the European Union, and China.

The seventh section of the volume explores the intensity of the threat that emerges from the direction of Islamic State, and the strategic vision with which to address this threat. The section’s two articles present various perspectives for analysis of the phenomenon and ways of dealing with it. The final section presents insights that derive from the preceding articles’ examination and analysis of the Islamic State, in an attempt to contribute both to the discourse on the phenomenon and the choice of the most effective alternatives for dealing with the challenges it presents.

An important issue, ostensibly semantic, in fact has material significance in the context of this compilation. The terminology chosen for the entity under examination is specifically “the Islamic State,” rather than ISIS. In our view, the reluctance of world leaders and others dealing with this subject to use the term Islamic State due to a fear of strengthening the “brand,” or alternatively, because of their reservations about identifying the phenomenon with Islam in general, is mistaken. In point of fact, use of the name adopted by the Islamic State as a title that embodies it clarifies its nature, vision, and perception of itself as a preparation for the caliphate. Its definition as “Islamic” accurately reflects its nature, ambitions, and guiding ideology. The Islamic State is also not defined as a terror organization in this volume, because we believe that this designation does not reflect the greater dimensions of the phenomenon, and using it is liable to diminish the sense of the Islamic State’s full power and multiple dimensions and the potential risk it poses.

Predictably, the articles included here include numerous expressions and names from foreign languages, primarily Arabic. The phrases and transliteration that were selected conform to the style in INSS publications. The goal is to adhere strictly to a common language and uniform style, even if it causes a certain deviation from official customary transliteration rules.

Furthermore, the subject is part of the broad spectrum of studies about the intellectual and operational streams behind the Islamic State. In this context, several terms can be used, with each symbolizing a slightly different meaning, e.g., radical/extreme Islam, fundamentalist Islam, Islamists, and jihadists. We have chosen the term Salafi jihad, in its various forms, in order to describe this stream. Clearly the choice of this term is subject to debate, but for purposes of the discussion, this is the vocabulary that we feel is best suited to reflect the phenomenon. While occasional use may be made of other terms for lack of a suitable alternative, in general, and for the sake of uniformity, we have adhered to use of the term Salafi jihad.

Several restrictions have shaped this volume. Despite the many and far ranging topics included here, there are additional aspects of the Islamic State phenomenon that are either not covered at all or are not dealt with comprehensively. In addition, practical considerations forced us to limit the scope and length of the articles. The desire to produce an integrated, clear, and relevant study dictated the relatively restricted framework for each article. Furthermore, the articles reflect the situational reality at the time of their writing, but clearly a highly dynamic struggle is at work. There will no doubt be changes in the relevant regional and international environment of the Islamic State following publication of the volume, as there have been even in the period of time between when the articles were completed and their publication (the terror attack in Paris on November 13, 2015, for example). Consequently, we have tried to refrain from time dependent interpretations, and have chosen instead to deal with the phenomenon through a long term, process-oriented view and not make do with a description of specific events that have occurred since the Islamic State was established.

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