

The 2014 Global Terrorism Index tracks the rise and fall of the world's largest terrorist organisations since 1998. Whilst the vast majority of terrorist groups are only responsible for a handful of deaths, a select few are responsible for the majority of death and destruction caused by terrorism in the last fifteen years. ISIL, which emerged out of Al-Qa'ida in Iraq, is one such group. In this essay, terrorism expert Ekaterina Stepanova from the Institute of World Economy & International Relations, outlines a shift in two main trends, the broader network fragmentation of the global jihadi movement and the shift from top-down to bottom-up regionalization of violent Islamic groups. She also tracks the complex evolution of ISIL as a regional force in the Middle East, and what its continued growth means for the world and region.

TRANSNATIONAL ISLAMIST TERRORISM NETWORK FRAGMENTATION AND BOTTOM-UP REGIONALIZATION

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The rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL)¹ occurred in the broader context of the dominance of radical Islamist organizations among the world's most lethal militant-terrorist groups in the Middle East, Asia and Africa and the occasional outbreaks of homegrown, but transnationally inspired jihadist terrorism in the West. The ISIL phenomenon has also featured a higher-than-usual inflow of jihadists from other conflict hotspots and non-Muslim states. All this adds to the overall confusion about the different types and levels of transnational terrorism of radical Islamist bent and reinforces the demand for overly simplistic explanations. For instance, in official circles and media discourse both in the West and in the rest of the world the main direction of transnationalisation of Islamist terrorism is

often still interpreted as the top-down regionalization of al-Qaeda-centered 'global jihad' movement.

This article argues instead that the evolution of transnational Islamist terrorism is more complex and non-linear. Its cutting edge may be formed by two ideologically linked, but distinct and only partially overlapping processes:

- the network fragmentation of the global jihad movement, including in the West;
- the bottom-up, rather than top-down, regionalization of violent Islamism in the world's heavily internationalized centers of militant-terrorist activity in the Greater Middle East.

MAIN TRENDS IN TRANSNATIONAL TERRORISM

Of all trends in contemporary terrorism, the following three are of particular relevance to the evolution of transnational Islamist terrorism.

(1) Sharp increase in terrorist activity in the recent years, coupled with its disproportionately high concentration in two regions and two major trans-border conflict areas. No current international security crisis – from the outbreak of Ebola to the crisis around and conflict in Ukraine as the dominant European security issue – can undo or overshadow one simple fact: 2013 was the peak year in global terrorist activity not only in the early 21st century, but also for the entire period since 1970 that is covered by available

statistics. Disturbingly, the previous highs for terrorist incidents were recorded in 2011 and 2012 and for fatalities – in 2012.²

While terrorist activity is at its historical peak and continues to increase, it is very unevenly distributed around the world, with the bulk of it concentrated in just a handful of countries. The post-9/11 global terrorism statistics is heavily dominated by two regions (the Middle East and South Asia). The bulk of terrorist activity there is, in turn, accounted for by two regional centers of gravity – major armed conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan (and, more recently, in the broader Afghanistan-Pakistan and the Iraq-Syria contexts). The heavily internationalized wars in Iraq and Afghanistan both involved armed insurgent/terrorist movements in Muslim countries directed primarily against Western troops backing weak local governments. The Western withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan and changing forms of internationalization of the respective conflicts did not improve the situation.

(2) The general dominance of region-based radical Islamist groups and movements among the most active and lethal militant-terrorist groups. In 2012, the top 6 terrorist groups – all of the radical Islamist type – accounted for almost half (around 5000) of all terrorist fatalities in the world.³ In 2013, all of the most lethal terrorist groups in the world were radical Islamist organizations, including the Taliban in Afghanistan, ISIL (in Iraq and Syria), “Tehrik-e-Taleban” (Pakistan), “Boko Haram” (Nigeria), “Lashkar-e-Jangvi” (Pakistan), “Djabhat an-Nusrah” (Syria), “ash-Shabab” (Somalia). Remarkably, these groups, in addition to the use of terrorist means, have also been active combatants – military parties to major armed conflicts in respective states. All of them have or acquire a major trans-border dimension and evolve in the direction of further regionalization of militant and terrorist activity. In contrast to these groups, for instance, al-Qaeda as such has not committed a single terrorist act in 2012–2013.

(3) Further transnationalisation of terrorism at different levels that could be distinguished primarily by the ultimate scale of a group’s end goal(s) – local, regional or global. At the present stage of globalization, terrorism at different levels of world politics from local to global differs more in terms of degree and quality of transnationalisation, than by whether or not it is transnationalised. Furthermore, transnationalisation primarily manifests itself

in qualitative rather than quantitative terms. Despite the fact that out of a couple of thousands of terrorist groups tracked by the Global Terrorism Dataset (GTD) only few attack soft targets on foreign territory,⁴ the very boundary between ‘domestic’ and ‘international’ terrorism gets increasingly blurred. Even terrorist groups with localized political agenda tend to increasingly transnationalise some or most of their logistics, fund-raising, propaganda and training activities. Terrorist actors of certain motivational/ideological types, such as the jihadist cells and individuals in the West, may address their terrorist acts to ‘the world as whole’ and act to advance explicitly transnationalised or global goals, even as they rely primarily or solely on local resources and do not necessarily travel out of their country of citizenship. In addition, in today’s globalized world, transnationalisation does not exclude – and is often dynamically interlinked with – the fragmentation of terrorism and other forms of collective violence.

In sum, as all terrorism today is transnationalised to some degree, of critical importance is to distinguish between different levels and qualities of transnational terrorism. In the world where even a group with localized agenda can develop a wide transnational fund-raising network or hit citizens of many states by attacking civilians in major urban centers, the main criterion to establish the qualitative level of transnationalisation of terrorism is the scale of an organization’s ultimate goals and agenda – local, regional or global.

NETWORK FRAGMENTATION OF ‘GLOBAL JIHAD’

The bulk of terrorist activity in the world is accounted for by militant actors that pursue relatively limited goals in local or regional contexts. In contrast, the more recent phenomenon of ‘global terrorism’ associated primarily with al-Qaeda advances an explicitly universalist agenda and ultimately pursues existential, non-negotiable and unlimited goals. Such terrorism is truly extraterritorial: while it is not specifically tied to any single local or regional political context, it does not have to be global in its physical reach to have a global impact. Despite minimal number of incidents, operatives and ideologues, al-Qaeda continued to attract disproportionately high attention well after 9/11. This may be partly explained by the fact that most of its high-profile targets have been either located in or associated with the

developed Western world, partly – by the significant anti-system potential of the supranational ideology of global jihad that offers a very radical and reactionary response to very modern challenges of a globalizing world.

However, in the mid-2010s, following a massive anti-al-Qaeda campaign and liquidation of most of its first generation leaders, including Osama bin Laden, the following question seems appropriate. How come that the al-Qaeda-centred global jihad is still considered to pose the main terrorist threat to international security, if in the early 2010s, al-Qaeda as such did not even make it into the top 20 most dangerous terrorist groups (in 2011, it was responsible just for one kidnapping out of over 5000 terrorist incidents⁵ and, in 2012–2013, did not commit any terrorist attacks)?⁶ The answer is complex and linked the dynamic structural transformation of the global jihad movement and its adaptation to changing circumstances.

There are two main interpretations of the evolution of the global jihad movement. While both imply a degree of fragmentation of the original ‘al-Qaeda’, the first framework interprets this process as top-down regionalization. Since the late 2000s, this approach has prevailed in mainstream expert and political discourses in the United States and in the West at large. It disaggregates ‘global jihad’ into three levels. First, it leaves some direct strategic command and control role to what remains of the ‘al-Qaeda core’ based in Pakistan/Afghanistan. Second, it argues that the movement’s main center of gravity has shifted towards several large, well-structured and organizationally coherent regional affiliates in Muslim regions (ultimately subordinate to ‘al-Qaeda Central’). This usually refers to ‘al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula’, ‘al-Qaeda in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb’, ‘al-Qaeda in Iraq’ and even ‘al-Qaedas’ in the Horn of Africa and in Southeast Asia. The third level is formed by al-Qaeda’s ‘ideological adherents’ – small cells and individuals, most active in the West itself, who ‘know the group only through its ideology to carry out violence in its name.’⁷ The loose network of these micro-cells, however, is commonly interpreted as a sign of al-Qaeda’s organizational degradation that is claimed to have resulted primarily from counterterrorist pressure by the United States and its allies.

The alternative approach promoted in this article emphasizes the genuine ‘network fragmentation’ of global jihad as the cutting

edge of the movement's evolution.⁸ It denies residual strategic command functions for 'the al-Qaeda core' at the present stage, beyond the symbolic and inspirational role of its ideology and remaining leaders such as Ayman az-Zawahiri. This approach does not in principle deny the existence of al-Qaeda's regional affiliates in Muslim regions (this role best fits 'al-Qaeda in the Arabian peninsula' that retains a genetic link with the original al-Qaeda and, to a lesser extent – 'al-Qaeda in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb'). It does, however, question the vision of global jihad as the 'top down', hierarchically integrated 'Islamist International' clearly divided into large well-structured regional affiliates. It points at the fact that most of the so-called regional affiliates have long and solid local pre-history and strong homegrown roots. Their main agendas and priorities are inextricably tied to respective regional contexts and local/regional armed conflicts. When they upgrade and expand their activity to the regional level, it is by following the 'bottom-up' logic rather than any 'top-down' impulse or command from some master HQs. These groups' occasional statements of support or even pledges of loyalty to al-Qaeda have been more of a symbolic and declaratory than substantive nature.

Instead, smaller autonomous cells⁹ that are linked by a loose ideological network, are active in several dozen countries and promote an explicitly globalist agenda are seen as the most committed ideological adepts of global jihad and as the cutting edge of the evolution of its organizational patterns. Such network fragmentation was best captured by Abu Musab as-Suri's theory of 'jihad by individual cells' (and, in the West, by the 'leaderless jihad' theory).¹⁰ Network fragmentation does not imply aggressive recruitment into a pre-existing framework – rather, adepts are encouraged to start their own cells to further the shared ideology and the movement's ends. The idea of starting a violent cell appeals as much to young people's desire for glory and personal conscience as to their political or ideological beliefs. In contrast to Islamist groups and movements tied to the specific local/regional contexts and armed conflicts in the Middle East, Asia or Africa, this type of cell is truly extraterritorial in its outlook and goals, with most of such actors emerging in Western rather than Muslim states. These cells display diverse radicalization paths and are often not linked to one another in any formal way, but they share the ideology of global jihad and together form – and see themselves as part of

– an adaptive and resilient transnational network-type movement.

Despite its marginality, this movement can still pose a serious terrorist threat to international security in two main ways.

First, there has been a gradual rise in homegrown jihadist terrorism in the West, despite continuing fragmentation of such violence underscored by dominance of mini-cells and the growing proportion of single actors. Some of them – the so-called 'lone wolves' – act entirely on their own (e.g., Nidal Hasan in the 2010 Fort Hood shooting), others act either as network agents or on their own initiative, but with some operational or other network connections.¹¹ Fragmented jihadist terrorism in the West is hard to track as individuals or cells may not be in contact with other/known terrorist actors, do not necessarily get external training, and often acquire weapons and materials independently and from open sources. However, it also tends to produce a mismatch between the Western jihadists' high ideological ambition and their relatively limited capacity to launch terrorist attacks (they generally lack experience in violence unless a group involves a veteran/returnee from a foreign armed conflict or have got some professional training). This mismatch often results in failure and partly explains why, while half of jihadist plots in the West involved plans to cause mass casualties, very few have led to actual mass-casualty attacks.¹²

Secondly, the fragmented network of 'global jihad' adepts forms a natural pool for influx of Western jihadist fighters to various conflicts in the Muslim world. More limited connections – a few foreign contacts and visits to conflict-torn regions for ideological inspiration, sometimes also in hope to get some training – while not a must for jihadists¹³ in the West, have not been uncommon either. The two-way nature of such flows and links has become more disturbing than ever in view of the rise of radical Islamist organizations in the Iraq-Syria context (such as 'Jabhat an-Nusra' and, above all, ISIL). They have attracted more foreign Islamist fighters than any other theater since Afghanistan in the 1980s, with Western, mainly European, fighters comprising no less than a quarter of all foreign jihadists – a disproportionately high share. For the West, this has alarming implications. Possible return of some of these seasoned fighters could stimulate new extremist networks and do a lot to bridge the mismatch between jihadists terrorists'

ambition and qualification (even as only a limited percentage of such returnees from previous conflicts have turned back to terrorism so far).¹⁴

While certainly a serious concern, the network fragmentation of global jihad (that manifests itself more in the West than anywhere else) is a less critical international security problem than the challenge posed by the bottom-up regionalization of Islamist militancy and terrorism.

BOTTOM-UP REGIONALIZATION: ISIL

Regionalization of territorially based insurgent-terrorist Islamist groups could be traced in various regions. However, it only tends to become an issue of major international concern in regional contexts characterized by a combination of chronic state weakness or failure, protracted major conflicts and all-out civil wars and high degree of transnationalisation and/or even formal internationalization (foreign military presence). It is in these conditions that regionalization of a more localized movement is coupled with consolidation rather than fragmentation of its military-political potential and with a qualitative upgrade of its militant/terrorist activity, rather than decline in its intensity. Nowhere does this trend manifest itself better than in the context of the ongoing crisis in and around Iraq and the trans-border ISIL phenomenon.

Iraq has led the list of countries most affected by terrorism since the mid-2000s – well before ISIL has taken full shape (in the first post-9/11 decade Iraq alone accounted for over third of all terrorism-related fatalities worldwide).¹⁵ However, a decade later, it is the activity of ISIL and some smaller radical Islamist groups in the extended, cross-border Iraq-Syria context that has become the main impulse and driver of anti-government militancy, terrorism and sectarian violence in the region. Acting in two (semi-)failed state contexts – in Iraq as a chronically failing post-intervention state and in Syria seriously weakened by an ongoing bloody civil war – ISIL provides an even more impressive example of the full regionalization of a militant-terrorist movement with a powerful ideology, major state-building ambitions and quasi-state potential than the cross-border activity and phenomenon of the Taliban in the Afghanistan-Pakistan context.

The emergence and evolution of ISIL in the direction of 'bottom-up regionalization' has to be addressed in two main contexts: (1)

internal dynamics and conflicts in Iraq and Syria, including the overlap with intra-regional dimension and (2) broader links and connections to transnational Islamism.

First, no other major regionalizing Islamist movement has been so strongly driven by intra-state and intra-regional factors, even as these dynamics were partly distorted, stimulated or set in motion by previous external intervention in Iraq. The informal transnationalisation of a civil war in Syria on both sides has also largely, although not exclusively, been a product of intra-regional dynamics.

Of all the factors and conditions that can explain the rise of ISIL and its major military and modest state-building successes since the summer of 2014, the more specific and directly relevant ones are internal to the countries and the region in question. They include the genuine discontent by very diverse groups of Iraqi Sunnis – from the former Baathists to tribal groups to radical Islamists – with their growing political and socio-economic marginalization and repression. This rising discontent had earlier helped feed the anti-U.S. insurgency, but continued to accumulate during the rule of the increasingly sectarian al-Maliki government. That was coupled with the general limited functionality and low legitimacy of the unpopular, but increasingly authoritarian Iraqi regime inherited from the times of the foreign security presence. The bloody civil war that erupted in the neighboring Syria provided an ideal ‘window of opportunity’ to ISIL as the most radical part of the Iraqi Sunni opposition to get a haven, secure the second country-base, continue fighting and acquire financial self-sufficiency through control of the cross-border smuggling of oil and almost anything else, even before it shifted its main center of activity back to Iraq.

Not surprisingly, the worst and most direct implications of the ISIL activity once it has taken its full shape affect, first and foremost, the region itself. The ISIL phenomenon threatens to deal a massive, if not necessarily final, blow to at least two already failing or seriously weakened states at once, adding new quality to the broader destabilization in the region that has already for over a decade been the world’s main center of terrorist and militant activity.

Second, ISIL’s links to transnational Islamist terrorism remain a contested issue. In policy and media circles ISIL, as well as its previous

‘editions’, are often portrayed not as self-sufficient organizations but as a branch of al-Qaeda-inspired ‘global jihad’. This interpretation usually emphasizes two issues: (a) ISIL’s pre-history in Iraq, with a focus on the so-called ‘al-Qaeda in Iraq’ and (b) the unprecedentedly large presence of foreign jihadist fighters among ISIL’s command and rank-and-file alike.

The Islamist core of what is now known as ISIL (and was previously known as Islamic State in Iraq and earlier as ‘al-Qaeda in Iraq’) formed in the aftermath of the 2003 US-led intervention in the course of escalating and radicalizing resistance to foreign forces and their local allies. A few statements of support and loyalty to al-Qaeda made by the group’s first leader Abu Musab az-Zarqawi (a controversial figure with ambiguous connections in and beyond jihadist circles), the reference to al-Qaeda in the group’s name under Zarkawi (removed shortly after his death in 2006) and his increasing reliance on demonstrative use of mass-casualty terrorist sufficed to degrade the group to little but ‘al-Qaeda off shoot’. While this might have served well to discredit the genuine nature of the armed Sunni opposition to the US presence in Iraq, it did not reflect the real nature and composition of the group. Its main goal remained the liberation of Iraq and the establishment of an Islamist state in Iraq and the overwhelming majority of militants and commanders were Iraqi (while the proportion of foreign fighters did not exceed 4-10 per cent).¹⁶ By the end of 2006, the group became one of the largest insurgency forces in Iraq, formed the core of the coalition of the anti-government Islamist actors and renamed itself into Islamic State of Iraq.

The intensifying pressure by the US forces and some loyal Sunni tribes, as part of the ‘surge’ campaign of the late 2000s, and later also by the government and its Shia allies pushed part of the movement out of Iraq to the neighboring Syria. The escalating civil war there since 2011 gave the group a major boost and upgraded it to one of the largest forces on the radical Islamist flank of the armed opposition. While the group had joined the Syrian civil war on the side of the jihadist part of the opposition, after it upgraded itself to the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant and tried to unite other Islamist groups under its control, it fell out with the another largest jihadist organization ‘Jabhat an-Nusra’. Remarkably, in the conflict between ISIL and ‘an-Nusra’ in Syria the political and ideological support of ‘al-Qaeda Central’ was

not on the ISIL side. As the ISIL shifted the main focus of its activity back to Iraq and seized upon the rising tensions between the al-Maliki government and the Iraqi Sunnis, al-Qaeda’s main voice Ayman az-Zawahiri formally denied any support or affiliation to ISIL in February 2014, months before its victorious march deeper into Iraq.¹⁷

The absence of al-Qaeda blessing did not stop thousands of foreign fighters (some of whom switched the front from Syria) from joining ISIL, increasingly well-funded and well-organized militarily. Their overall numbers, proportion and composition are dynamic and yet to be clarified, but two preliminary conclusions can be made even on the basis of available information. First, while the ISIL army-style combat potential is largely attributed to the presence of the Iraqi ex-Baathist professional security and military cadre (who may comprise up to a third of ISIL’s leader al-Baghdadi’s deputies), foreign jihadists appear to play a disproportionately large role in the ISIL terrorist attacks and other atrocities, including beheadings. Second, it is the influx of ‘global jihad’ fighters from the West in particular, with their distinctively universalist agenda, that may provide the region-based ISIL with its main link to a truly globalized agenda. In this respect, they may play an even larger role than either the ideological symbolism of the historical al-Qaeda core or the influence of jihadists from other local/regional ‘fronts’ (that range from major conflicts in failed states such as Afghanistan, Somalia or Yemen to peripheral Islamist/separatist insurgencies in many fully functional states in Asia and Eurasia).

Obsessive attempts to trace or link any Islamist insurgency/terrorist movements in areas of heavily transnationalised armed conflicts to the ‘core al-Qaeda’ in line with the strict ‘top-down regionalization’ scheme might have played their own part in overlooking the rise of ISIL. This trans-border, regional movement is not only extremely radical in ideological outlook and methods, but also efficient in combat and, potentially, basic governance and quick to adapt to the limited anti-ISIL air campaign launched by the US-led coalition of Western and Arab states. The regionalization of ISIL largely followed the ‘bottom-up’ rather than ‘top-down’ pattern and was primarily driven by intra-regional dynamics, state weakness and sectarianism (exacerbated by previous international interventions). ISIL’s main link to

the 'global jihad' agenda and ideology is provided by the significant presence of foreign fighters, especially Western jihadists with their markedly universalist outlook.

However, in contrast to al-Qaeda or 'global jihad' adepts in and beyond the West, ISIL does not appear to pursue or prioritize totally abstract and utopian global goals. It is precisely the fact that ISIL is fully mired in the regional context, sets up more tangible and realistic goals and does not (dis)miss a chance of building a trans-border regional Islamic state *here and now* that makes it today a no lesser, or even a greater, challenge to international security than al-Qaeda and its direct off-shoots and self-generating micro-clones.

Whether the ISIL phenomenon is more of an outlier or signals a broader trend may yet to be seen. However, some of the deadliest Islamist militant-terrorist groups in the world's worst conflicts (ranging from the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban to 'Boko Haram' in Nigeria or 'ash-Shabab' in Somalia) – appear to or may evolve in the same direction, especially if a combination of dysfunctional or failing states, deep regional divisions and unsuccessful past of present external interventions is in place. This provides sufficient grounds to consider the 'bottom-up regionalization' as one of the most potentially disturbing trends in transnational Islamist terrorism.

NOTES

1. On 29 June 2014, the movement changed the name to Islamic State (IS), but is more widely known in English as ISIL or ISIS – Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (the Arabic for Levant) or Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.
2. 2013 is the last year for which full GTD statistics was available at the time of writing. Global Terrorism Database (GTD) / National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), University of Maryland. <http://www.start.umd.edu/data/gtd>.
3. Testimony by W. Braniff, Executive Director, START, University of Maryland, before the U.S. House Armed Services Committee Hearing on the State of Al Qaeda, its Affiliates, and Associated Groups: View From Outside Experts. Washington, DC: United States House of Representatives, 4 Feb. 2014, P. 3.
4. Global Terrorism Database 2014.
5. Global Terrorism Index: Capturing the Impact of Terrorism in 2002-2011 (Sydney; N.Y.: Institute for Economics and Peace, 2012), p. 6 http://www.visionofhumanity.org/sites/default/files/2012_Global_Terrorism_Index_Report.pdf
6. Testimony by W. Braniff. p. 3.
7. National Strategy for Counterterrorism (Washington D.C.: The White House, 28 June 2011), p. 19.
8. Stepanova E., 'The evolution of the al-Qaeda-type terrorism: networks and beyond', in L. Bossi et al. (ed.), Dynamics of Political Violence: A Process-Oriented Perspective on Radicalization and the Escalation of Political Conflict (Farnham, VA: Ashgate, 2014), pp. 288–305.
9. Al-Suri A.M., The Call to Global Islamic Resistance. CENTRA Technology, Inc. / trans. From Arabic (DCIA Counterterrorism Center, Office of Terrorism Analysis, 2004), pp. 1367–1368.
10. Sageman M. Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).
11. See, e. g., Nesser P., 'Single actor terrorism: scope, characteristics and explanations', in Perspectives on Terrorism, vol. 6, no. 6 (2012), pp. 61–73.
12. There were only 4 rarely successful mass-casualty jihadist attacks in the West after 2001: the 2004 Madrid bombings, the 2005 London bombings, the 2009 Fort Hood shooting and the 2013 Boston Marathon bombings.
13. For numbers on Syria, see Zelin A.Y., 'Up to 11,000 foreign fighters in Syria; steep rise among Western Europeans', ICSR Insight, 17 December 2013. Estimated numbers for foreign fighters in ISIL in the Iraq-Syria context are higher, but vary significantly.
14. For more detail, see Hegghammer T., "Should I stay or should I go? Explaining variation in Western jihadists' choice between domestic and foreign fighting," in American Political Science Review, vol. 107, no. 1 (Feb. 2013), p. 10.
15. Global Terrorism Index 2012, p. 12.
16. Baker J., Hamilton L. The Iraq Study Group Report (Washington D.C.: Iraq Study Group, 2006).
17. Bayoumi A., Harding L., "Mapping Iraq's fighting groups", Al-Jazeera (27 June 2014); The Evolution of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL): Relationships 2004-2014, START Fact Sheet, June 2014.