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THE ISIS AND ITS MILITARY TACTICS

On June 10, 2014 Mosul, a city of 1.8 million people 400 km north-west of Baghdad, falls in the hands of the terrorists from ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) following a brief siege. Facing each other are 3 000 terrorists on one side and 30 000 men from the Iraqi army on the other. The latter decide to flee rather than to fight. The Iraqi army can allegedly count on 50 brigades, but they are mainly composed of inexperienced, badly trained and majority Shiite soldiers. The world watches in disbelief as the ISIS takes over the Iraqi city. Not even the CIA, as its director has recently publicly admitted, had foreseen such a scenario and envisaged a strong, well organized and efficient terrorist army.

A terrorist army

The first question is hence: is the ISIS merely a group of terrorists or can they be considered an army? If we look at their discipline and organization, they can definitely be considered close to being an armed force. Apart from Iraq, the signs were already there in Syria. Bashar al Assad can rely on a well armed, trained army and is supported by the Lebanese Hezbollah militias. To date he has shown a great deal of resilience in resisting the attacks from the Free Syrian Army and Jahbat al Nusra. Yet, Bashar al Assad's army has suffered some significant setbacks when facing the ISIS.

The terrorist group is capable of continuing to reap more victories on the field in Iraq and Syria despite the international coalition's air strikes. The ISIS has pushed back even the Kurdish armed groups – whether they were the Iraqi Peshmerga who were used to fight against Saddam Hussein, or the PKK militants in Turkey or those from the YPG in Syria – without facing much opposition. This is the reason why the ISIS today controls a portion of territory between Syria and Iraq that is larger than Lebanon and where 8 million people live, or used to live before they fled.

Psychology and weapons

As several analysts are doing, it is thus necessary to pose more questions: where does this military strength originate from? How does the ISIS fight to reap so many successes?

A first factor is surely psychological. Religious fanaticism fuels the idea of fighting for a just cause, the will to engage in combat, the contempt for danger and death, martyrdom as a final goal, the inborn fatalism of Islam that dictates that each of our acts is defined by God

and not by our free will. All of these aspects have an impact on the field. These are people that fight knowing that they are faced with two only possible outcomes: victory or death.

Extremism then turns into cruelty during the clashes and against those defeated. This attitude generates fear in those opposing the ISIS and facing the possibility of suffering their wrath. Such ruthlessness is displayed, publicized by a sophisticated media apparatus and is central in the behaviour of the militants to install fear and demoralize their opponents. We can definitely state that there is a psychological warfare taking place along the fighting on the field. The terrorist is portrayed as being "meaner", thus weakening the determination of those confronting him. The militant that massacres his enemies is the same person that is well aware that his fight is a one-way ticket to martyrdom.

The second factor are the weapons currently available to the ISIS and that offer their army a far greater fire-power if compared to their enemies. These weapons mainly come from the stocks once belonging to the Iraqi and Syrian armies, but also from the illegal market that the ISIS can easily access thanks to its vast accumulated wealth. A provisional listing of the equipment in the hands of the ISIS comprises tanks (around 300 units, half of which are the US donated Abrams coming from Iraq) also employed during fighting at night, armored vehicles (around 3 to 4 thousand, including M1114 Humvees), artillery (1000/1500 pieces of varying caliber, including US 155mm howitzers that have a range of 22 km), missile systems, anti-tank weapons, sophisticated communication equipment. Lately the militants from the ISIS have also employed anti-aircraft portable systems, like the Strela-3 (with over 4 km of range), the Igla, the US Stinger and the Cobra. The ISIS has already downed Iraqi and Syrian helicopter and fighter jets in the past.

Furthermore, the militants have also used, in at least two different occasions, chemical weapons stolen from warehouse in Iraq (in Muthanna in June 2014) and Syria. They were used against the Syrian Kurds in Avdiko, a village east of Kobane, on July 12, 2014 and on Iraqi soldiers in Saqlawiya, in the Ambar province, in September 2014. In both cases, the ISIS employed mustard gas, a powerful blistering agent, and chlorine. The ISIS's chemical weapons seem to be stocked in Raqqa, the so-called Syrian capital of the group, to be presumably put to use again in the future.

The ISIS can also now count on 3 MIG 21 airplanes taken from the Syrian regime. They have never used them in combat just yet because they know they would be easily downed by the Americans. Nevertheless, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi's militants currently own fighter jets.

Tactics and strategies

The issue of armaments is relevant is they are properly employed, of course. This is where the professionalism of the soldiers once belonging to the dissolved army of Saddam Hussein comes into play. They are the ones helping the ISIS oust the Shiite government in Baghdad. They are responsible for teaching the militants how to use the weapons they own, prepare their strategies and draft their tactics.

From a strategic viewpoint, the objectives of the militants from the ISIS are usually major roads, oil fields, refineries, dams and power plants. They know they don't have enough troops to control large areas and hence focus on infrastructures or key points that grant them supplies, financing, freedom of movement and predominance on the ground. Using terror as a weapon, they control areas that have become increasingly depopulated.

From a tactical viewpoint, instead, the militants fighting on the field is interspersed by forms of traditional warfare, combined with bomb or suicide attacks. These often target the enemies' frontline with car-bombs that anticipate the advance of the militants.

On an operational level, the ISIS's modus operandi grants the commanders on the field a great level autonomy. Once a strategic target to conquer has been identified, it is up to the commanders on the ground to decide how to do it. We are thus facing a decentralized command and control system that is highly flexible and that leaves a lot of room to adapt to the mutating circumstances on the ground. This means that tactics, strategies and operations are just one. They advance on the ground, step by step, and any upcoming military initiative is based on this parameter. By doing so the ISIS have been capable of creating an upside-down command and control system, that uses a bottom-up approach, instead of a top-down one.

Such a system relies on the single militant's combat skills and not on the organization he belongs to. At the same time, the militant is also a disciplined fighter, regimented within an efficient hierarchical system composed of platoons and companies. A structure such as this one can easily adapt to mutating scenarios.

The militants from the ISIS usually fight in small groups, they exploit opportunities, the terrain, the surprise factor. If need be, they also resort to employing armored vehicles. Combat units and logistical support gather in proximity of the theatre of operations shortly before any attack to coordinate their activities. In urban areas the ISIS prefers urban guerrilla, fighting building after building, block after block.

Since the beginning of the US air strikes, the ISIS has moved its headquarters on the ground, reducing their size and multiplying them. They have given up setting road blocks, spread their troops on the ground and pulled their vehicles out of the barracks. They have moved into the cities, mixing with the local population. They have also drastically reduced their use of mobile phones (which they turn off to avoid being spotted) or radio communications. Their black flags are now everywhere to confuse their enemies on which targets they should bomb. Motorbikes are currently preferred to cars when key figures have to move from one place to another. During their attacks they constantly burn tires or oil to create a black cloud of smoke that prevents from air strikes.

Conventional tactics are also accompanied by terrorist ones. Apart from suicide bombers, car-bombs are used, roads are mined, explosive traps are set, religious or tribal leaders are eliminated, sleeping terrorist cells have been disseminated.

Targeting Baghdad

The future of Baghdad is now at stake. The Iraqi capital is the ISIS's final destination. If they were to conquer it, the ISIS would be able to establish its caliphate and could also exert its predominance over other radical groups. This would also be the first step towards the creation of a territorial entity defined by the Umma, the Islamic community, and not by national borders. But the jihadist militants currently don't have the strength to take over or control the Iraqi capital. This is why they have changed their strategy. Counting on the support of the Sunni diaspora that supported Saddam Hussein's regime, the ISIS has taken over the control of some major roads that lead to Baghdad with the intention of putting the city under siege. They intend to choke its supplies and to create a climate of insecurity for the population with the objective of forcing it to flee under the menace that there shall be no pity for the vanquished. Whether this plan works out will determine the future success of the ISIS.

This is part of their gamble and of their unscrupulousness. The ISIS has forced their potential enemies to deal with the contradictions generated by a foreign military intervention. They know the United States seek to destroy them, but, at the same time, that the US is not willing to help Bashar al Assad in the process. The ISIS is also aware that Turkey has an issue with supporting Kurdish fighters in Syria. Finally, the terrorist group is conscious of the fact that it will not cease to exist unless a ground assault against them is launched, airstrikes will never solve the issue. And this is probably what the ISIS and Al Baghdadi are longing for.

THE WALLS DIVIDING THE WORLD

The Berlin wall was built by East Germany as an “anti-fascist protection” on August 13, 1961. 28 years later, in November 1989, it was taken down. Walls – history has often taught – don't solve any issues. On the contrary, they emphasize them, underline differences, become a symbol of lack of communication and, sooner or later, are demolished. But since we hardly ever pay any attention to the lessons from history, anywhere there is an ongoing conflict for coexistence or survival, new walls are built.

Fort Israel

The building of walls is a vital component of the relationship between Israelis and Palestinians, a controversy that has been dragging on since 1948. The barriers that have been raised have become a symbol of this conflict, qualifying and quantifying the contrasts and the differences of opinion. At the same time, they embody the feelings of oppression (for the Palestinians) and of insecurity (for the Israelis).

There is wall dividing Israel from the West Bank that was constructed along a border whose definition was never negotiated, but that was instead unilaterally decided by Tel Aviv. The Israelis claim it represents a protection against Palestinian terrorists and had to wait for a verdict of their Supreme Court in 2004 to confirm its legitimacy against international laws. Such a self-acquittal confirms that there were serious doubts over the legality of this barrier.

After all, the UN's General Assembly approved a resolution in October 2003 stating that the wall with the West Bank is illegal in the portions that do not reflect the so-called “Green Line” or armistice line. In 2004 the International Court of Justice declared the wall to be illegitimate. But, as often happens when Israel's security is at stake, these legal opinions were simply ignored. As where the protests by human rights groups, like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, or by the International Red Cross.

Therefore, this barrier has become the symbol of the Apartheid endured by the Palestinians. The wall is 700 km long, has a height of 8 meters, is surrounded by barbed wire on both of its sides and is filled with surveillance posts. Its construction costed around 2 billion dollars, a sum that leaves out the money that was spent on roads or channelizations. Needless to say the wall was built over Palestinian private property, that some Arab communities were split in two, that water basins were redirected towards Israel.

If we ask whether this wall has improved Israel's security, the answer is definitely positive. Nevertheless, Israel's interests don't take into account the fact that this initiative has lead to a change in the relationship with the Palestinian National Authority. The decrease in the number of attacks from the West Bank didn't solve the absence of any agreement over a permanent deal capable of eliminating the risk of any act of terrorism altogether.

Israel has extended the same approach to the border with the Gaza Strip by building 55 km of barriers along a buffer zone marked by barbed wire. The latest round in the war against Hamas has confirmed that walls are not the solution to insecurity when rockets can be launched over them or tunnels dug beneath them. If the Iron Dome defense system has

worked pretty well against the rockets, the Israelis are now planning to excavate a moat along the border with Gaza to stop the digging of tunnels. A ditch 20 meters deep and reinforced with steel that should become insurmountable for the Palestinians.

A similar concept was supposed to be applied – but never has been to date – along the so-called Philadelphia Corridor between Gaza and Egypt. According to the peace treaty signed with Egypt, the Israelis patrolled these 15 km of border until 2005 to prevent Hamas from digging tunnels underneath it. One of the proposals evaluated was to dig a canal along the border and fill it with water. This is the same project that is being taken into consideration to mark the border between Gaza and Israel.

Tel Aviv has also built 265 km of wall along the border with Egypt and the Sinai peninsula. The project was initially designed to prevent illegal immigrants from entering the country – mainly Eritrean and Ethiopian refugees – but has now become a tool against the Islamic militants roaming around the Egyptian peninsula. This barrier is about 5 meters high and is equipped with cameras, barbed wire and walkaways for patrols. It costed 416 million dollars and the Israeli government is currently debating whether to increase its height to 8 meters.

As a matter of fact, Israel is basically entirely surrounded by walls or barriers. The Israelis have built a number of fortifications, walkaways, tunnels and bunkers along the border with Syria and the Golan heights since the 1973 conflict. The buffer zone between Syria and Israel is under the control of the UNDOF (United Nations Disengagement Observer Forces). The same can be said for the border with Lebanon: protection barriers, observation posts and patrols monitor the area controlled by UNIFIL.

It is legitimate to ask whether such a protection system is capable of granting Israel the security it longs for. It can be true in the short term, not in a future perspective. Tel Aviv will have the security it deserves once it will cease to need walls and barriers to protect its citizens.

Walls in the Middle East

There are several other countries in the region that solve, or wish to solve, their problems by building yet more barriers.

There's a security risk for the ships that go through the Suez Canal because of the threat posed by Islamic terrorists operating in the Sinai? General Abdul Fattah al Sisi has just approved a project to build a 6 meters high barrier on both sides of the 164 km long canal. Estimated cost: 200 million dollars. Will this help solve the security issue? Hardly, if the real issue is having active terrorist groups in the country menacing Egypt's security. A barrier will not put a halt to the activities of the Beit al Maqdis. And one wall will not be sufficient if Al Sisi goes ahead with his plans to build a second canal running parallel to the existing one.

Saudi Arabia is planning a mega-wall with Yemen to block both the flow of immigrants and contraband and the terrorists from Al Qaeda in the Arabic Peninsula (AQAP). The structure should be 1800 km long and go from the Red Sea to the border with Oman. Ryad has also

begun constructing a barrier along the 900 km it shares with Iraq. This consists of 5 lines of wire-fences and barriers, 78 control towers, 50 radars, 8 command and control centers, 32 quick response posts. The cost is not a problem for the Saudis. This defensive system is the reign's first response to the threat posed by the ISIS in Iraq.

There are yet more walls in the Arabian peninsula between the United Arab Emirates and Oman and along the 193 km separating Kuwait from Iraq.

A world of barriers

The rest of the globe is infested with walls that usually represent an inadequate, but fast reply to more complex issues.

There is the wall built between the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla and Morocco in 2005 to block illegal migrants from crossing into Europe. They are 20 km of barriers, 6 meters high, that are illuminated day and night. It should be sufficient to watch what happens to the boats that cross the Mediterranean to understand how difficult it is to stop the flow of migrants fleeing poverty and wars. For similar purposes, the United States have spent several billion dollars to build a 4 meters high wall along the 3200 km it shares with Mexico.

The list could continue: Greece has built a wall 10 km long and 4 meters high at the border with Turkey, Turkey has raised one in the area of Nusaybin along the Syrian border, Bulgaria has put up a barrier along the 33 km it shares with Turkey and Ukraine is planning to seal its border with Russia with a wall long 1920 km. India is building a barrier at its border with Burma (1624 km), another one along the 3000 km it shares with Bangladesh, while it finished constructing a wall 550 km long in Kashmir and at the border with Pakistan. At the same time, there are walls under construction between Iran and Pakistan (700 km), Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan (45 km), Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan (1700 km), Uzbekistan and Afghanistan (209 km) and Uzbekistan and Kirghizistan (870 km).

Moving to Africa, there is the sand barrier, euphemistically called "hard shoulder", erected by Morocco following their invasion of Western Sahara. The wall is 2720 km long and is mined to protect from potential invaders. The same could be said of the barriers South Africa has built with Zimbabwe and Mozambique, or the one between Botswana and Zimbabwe, or between Greek Cyprus and Turkish Cyprus, North and South Korea and so forth.

Each wall exists because of an alleged or real menace and brings along some form of misunderstanding between conflicting parties. By counting them, we can verify the number of crisis zones still affecting our world.

THE TUNNEL WAR AGAINST ISRAEL

The recent military confrontation between Israel and Hamas has unveiled a new form of warfare enacted by the Palestinians: the construction of subterranean tunnels which the Israeli found very difficult to spot, if not through the invasion of the Gaza strip. It is an operative novelty that is not entirely alien to preceding armed confrontations, but which has now become central in the overall strategy against Israel. It is a tactic which, in the near future, both in an offensive and defensive way, could become widespread throughout the middle east.

Hamas has dug a subterranean network of tunnels underneath Gaza for several reasons. The most obvious one derives from the need to defend themselves from an enemy that controls the skies. But the tunnels serve a wide scope of purposes: the contraband with Egypt, the storage of weapons, the protection of Hamas' leaders and, last but not least, the carrying out of offensive operations. Hamas dug the tunnels with the technical and operative assistance of the Hezbollah, as confirmed by a number of documents found by the Israeli during the invasion of the Gaza strip.

If the Hezbollah taught Hamas how to build tunnels, it is because it is a skill and expertise that they have and which they used with good operative results in the past. One good example is the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah; even then the militia of the Shiite movement hid inside tunnels. After all, the south of Lebanon is similar to the Gaza strip in that Israel controls its skies and the territory is under the constant threat of invasion.

Korean lessons

The Hezbollah have made use of a specific skill developed in North Korea, where the same technique was used along the border with South Korea. This know-how was passed on to Iran which then taught it to the Lebanese militia. Operative experiences and technical, tactical knowledge are the object of exchanges that don't mind geography. You learn the trade elsewhere and apply it to your specific context.

The North Korean tunnels were dug at a depth of 70 to 80 meters in order to shelter oneself from possible nuclear attacks. Those in Gaza and Lebanon should only be about 25 meters deep. The Hezbollah, however, have made an exception for their command structures, which are located 40 meters underground and lined with reinforced concrete.

The Hezbollah's technique of building tunnels, like that of training their militiamen in the construction of rockets, is inspired by the teachings of Imad Mughniyeh, a longtime terrorist from Lebanon who was killed by the Israelis with a car-bomb in Damascus in 2008 after a manhunt that lasted for over 20 years. Two years ago the Lebanese newspaper 'al Joumhouria', quoting anonymous European intelligence sources, said that the Hezbollah have built, extended and reinforced a network of tunnels both in the Bekaa valley (where the majority of Lebanon's Shiites dwell), on the border with Syria (to guarantee more security to the traffic and support of Bashar al Assad and to move arms towards Lebanon), and in the south of Lebanon between the river Litani and the border with Israel (called the "Blue Line" by the UN).

The Hezbollah have built this noteworthy underground network with the same goals as Hamas, but the 'God's' militias have surely a military capability which is a lot more advanced than their Palestinian colleagues: Hezbollah have more weapons, more money, and more freedom of movement on the Lebanese territory. In the eyes of Israel they pose a greater threat to the security of the Jewish nation than does Hamas.

According to the aforementioned Lebanese publication, the tunnels of the Hezbollah have lighting, ventilation and fiber optics for communications. These are all vital elements which would allow the Hezbollah to endure a prolonged attack and bombing by Israel. Some parts of the tunnels have allegedly been structured to serve as dormitories, moving hospitals, bathrooms, kitchens and food deposits that would allow for a long stay underground to any head of the militia that might need it. They could even lead operations from there, if need be.

The long hand of Iran

Hezbollah's tunnels were allegedly built with the financial support of Iran which, in some cases, helped the Shiite militia by providing technical personnel up to the task. Such aid was needed because, unlike the sandy Gaza, the ground in Lebanon is rocky, so more efficient instruments and a more qualified personnel are needed to excavate it. In the past, until the end of the Syrian civil war, Iran financed these works with roughly 200 million dollars per year. Successively their contribution has decreased but, in the meantime, the Hezbollah were able to achieve financial independence thanks to dubious commerce practices (among which the diamond trade), the sale of fake documents, the traffic of drugs and the affairs of a number of investment companies.

Another newspaper, 'Al Watan al Arabi', revealed in early 2014, information allegedly obtained from within the Hezbollah. The newspaper spoke of large tunnels, not unlike the tunnels of the metro in European cities, that had been fit out to serve as operative commands. The other news was that, with the support of Iran, the Hezbollah would have been developing underground missile facilities. They would have adopted this measure after the losses suffered during the war in 2006, when missile ramps were carried on trucks. During said conflict, despite the constitution of special teams (one to position the launcher, one to carry the rocket and the third to fire away) trained to carry out the operation in a maximum of 28 seconds, the Hezbollah were crippled by the Israeli strikes.

It is logical to ask oneself how the Hezbollah can go about digging tunnels and filling them with arms and equipment under the eyes of the UN mission UNIFIL, which officially controls the entire southern part of Lebanon. A mission which has been operative since 1978 with 'peacekeeping' duties, not 'peace enforcement' ones. The answer is that the UN has enacted superficial controls without carrying out in-depth investigations. UNIFIL operates with the support of the Lebanese army and, since Hezbollah are a State within a State, it is highly improbable that the Lebanese would take a stand against the Shiite militias. The result is that the Hezbollah can dig around in southern Lebanon and build their structures there undisturbed. Israel, which systematically violates the Lebanese airspace with airplanes and drones and which does not disdain invasions and incursions, is well aware of the problem.

Overall, the Hezbollah allegedly have access to 600 arms caches, mostly rockets, in the south of Lebanon. The Lebanese militiamen took security measures to prevent these caches from being uncovered. Every commander knows the location of his own cache and of two subsidiary caches. If the commander is captured by the enemy, he will not be able to disclose information about the location of the remaining structures. This compartmentalization is true for the Hezbollah connection systems as well, so that, if the central command is hit, the rest of the network remains in place. The Hezbollah have attempted to diversify their operations in order to prevent being completely destroyed by Israeli bombings.

A long term threat

Hezbollah's structures are articulated and positioned according to the range of the rockets that they fire against Israel: from the Katyusha (5-9 km) to the Grad (15-36 km), the M-75 (80 km) and the Fajr 5 (190 km). Their missiles in southern Lebanon are managed in a centralized way by the three brigades that operate in the region (Nasser and two others, the names of which are unknown). Great operative discretion is left to the other cells that comprise Hezbollah in order to prevent any single one of them from becoming a target or constituting a significant objective. These cells enact guerrilla techniques that are borrowed by the Vietcong experience against the USA.

It is alleged that the Hezbollah own roughly 60.000 rockets (a number that has been publicized by Israeli authorities in 2013). The fact that only about 4.000 rockets were fired during the war in 2006 gives us an idea of how disproportionate this firing potential is. This is probably due to the intention of the Hezbollah to fire many rockets at once in order to saturate the reaction capabilities of the Iron Dome. Also, faced with so much dispersed abundance of enemies on the territory, no bombing by the Israeli could actually hinder the firing capabilities of the Hezbollah in any significant way.

From the defensive point of view, Israel has not yet found a way to defeat this kind of threat without, as happened in Gaza, invading and materially looking for the tunnels on the ground. There have been recent tests with sensors by specialized military groups, but their projects are still in an experimental phase and are not yielding satisfactory results this far.

On the offensive front, the tunnels have not become such a threat to the Israeli population like their constructors wished they would. Only the future will tell if this technique can effectively condition the coming wars that Israel will likely fight along its borders.