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WHY THE ISIS CONTINUES TO WIN

The military victories that the ISIS continues to reap are the fruit of a number of different circumstances, both political and military in nature.

On the political level, the evaluation of the degree of dangerousness of the ISIS is influenced by the fact that some of the countries in the region, such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, see Iran's future hegemonic role in the region - both in its coming to the rescue of the Alawite regime in Syria and in supporting the Iraqi regime - as the main threat at hand. This feeling was reinforced when Teheran managed to reach an agreement with the USA regarding its nuclear program. It is because of this fear that Ankara, Riyadh and Doha have decided to increase their military support for the factions that, albeit radical in nature, fight against Bashar al Assad's regime. The side effect of this effort is that both the ISIS and Jabhat al Nusra come out reinforced from the struggle. The crawling war between Sunni and Shiites has gained precedence over the jihadist threat, which is – perhaps not by hazard – of Sunni origin.

Ankara's fears

Turkey fears that the Syrian Kurds could manage to control a portion of the Syrian territory along the border where, in the future, they could try to establish their own State. That the Turkish 'ambiguity' was aimed at preventing such a possibility is by now a widely accepted truth. The Islamic 'volunteers' of the ISIS were allowed absolute freedom to enter and leave the Turkish territory while a guilty silence was kept on their arms traffics and on the smuggling of the oil coming from the fields controlled by the Islamic State.

Lately, this approach got worse: Turkey became an active party in supplying the Jihadists with weapons, making their military capacity grow exponentially. The dirty job was carried out by the National Organization of Information, the MIT (Milli Istihbarat Teskilati), the Turkish intelligence agency founded in 1965 which, despite the security precautions taken, was caught right-handed with a load of weapons hidden among medicinal supplies at the border with Syria.

Turkey also refused to allow the US to use the aerial facility of Incirlik to bomb the ISIS, asking that such treatment be reserved only for Assad's army. It is not a coincidence that, in a recent interview on the international broadcaster Al Jazeera – controlled by the Emir of Qatar – the head of al Nusra, Abu Mohamed al Golani, claimed that their main goal is that of ousting Assad, not fighting the US. The statement was thought as a reassuring message aimed at “quieting” Washington which, on the other hand, is more worried about

the advancing Islamic militias rather than the permanency of Bashar al Assad in Damascus.

The real question is whether the present policy of the main Sunni countries in the region is valid, seen that the imminent danger – that of the advancing ISIS army – is underestimated in favor of a potential future threat: that of the Iranian Shiite hegemony in the Middle East.

A dangerous game

This is especially true of Saudi Arabia, where recent attacks have targeted the Shiite minority. The condescending of the Gulf countries with regards to the ISIS finds its justification in the confrontation between the Shiites and Sunnis. This is clearly expressed in the strategy of Abu Bakr al Baghdadi. The more sectarian the struggle and the more it takes on connotations against heresy or apostasy represented by Shiism (and Alawism), the more sympathy and following it produces among the Sunni population. It is not by hazard that the TV channel of the Emir of Qatar diffused a poll which states that al Baghdadi's Caliphate is popular with 80% of the Sunni community.

It is still not clear whether the collapse of Assad's regime in Syria could produce a wave of instability that meets the interests of those that are trying to cause its fall. If Syria is destroyed by civil war and in the hands of radical Islamic factions, it would fuel further instability in a region where tensions are already strong. It is hard to say how Turkey would benefit from such a scenario, since it would share its border with a destabilized country headed by the ISIS. The same is true of the monarchies in the Gulf, because the Caliphate, in its theological essence, sees itself legitimized in taking the helm of the Islamic masses, the “umma”. And in the domino effect that the destruction of Syria would generate, it would be wise to think of the consequences on the stability of Jordan, Lebanon and on the security of Israel.

A heavy legacy

Apart from the short-sighted policies of the Gulf countries, which underestimate the Jihadist threat and overestimate the Shiite one, the successes of the ISIS on the ground have other, military, reasons. Firstly, they are caused by the scarce reliability of the Iraqi army, which chose to run when faced with the ISIS in Mosul and Ramadi, leaving an arsenal of weapons and vehicles behind them for the taking. In substance, the ISIS is favored not by its military prowess, but by the scarce belligerence of the enemy troops that it encounters.

The reason for this is rooted in the past: The fall of Saddam Hussain in 2003 and the consequent disbanding of the Iraqi army – through a decree of the US administrator at the time, Paul Bremer - and its successive reconstruction by the Shiites who, until that day, had been excluded from all things military. In practice, in 2003/2004 the Iraqi army was rebuilt from scratch without the supervision of qualified cadres with past military experiences. This bad start was immediately followed by another flawed step: the

Coalition, especially its Anglo-American part, didn't trust the new armed force and therefore refused to provide them with adequate weapons and/or training.

From the day of Saddam's ousting until the present, the only component capable of waging war in Iraq were the Peshmerga from Kurdistan. Those same Kurds that, because of Turkish susceptibility and of the threat of an ethnic re-partition of Iraq, are not receiving heavy weapons from the United States. The little aid that they receive does not arrive directly; it is made to pass through Baghdad first. As for the Sunnis who fought for Saddam Hussain, they have mostly joined the ranks of the ISIS by now.

Today's Iraqi army is the direct consequence of those circumstances.

The American stalemate

The above mentioned circumstances explain the beatings suffered by the Iraqi army and the recent statements by the US Secretary of Defense, Ashton Carter, who accused the them of not wanting to fight. The Iraqi PM Haider al Abadi and the US Vice President, Joe Biden, tried to ease the tension between the parties, but haven't managed to change the situation.

Before their withdrawal from Iraq in 2011, the US had spent over 25 billion dollars to train and equip the Iraqi army; a financial effort that hadn't produced the results that they hoped for. US President Barack Obama was quite clear in a recent public statement when he said that "If the Iraqis don't have the will to fight for their own security, we cannot do it in their stead".

In other words, the US is willing to support the Iraqi government in its war against the jihadists, but refuses to send their troops back on the ground, especially now that Abadi's regular troops are supported by Shiite volunteers, al Hashd al Shaabi (popular militias), and by Iran. This means that roughly 100 thousand Iraqi soldiers are currently operating independently.

Presently, there are roughly 3.000 US soldiers in Iraq, 800 of which are there to protect US structures and personnel, while the remaining 2.200 are supposed to supply training and logistic support to the local security forces. The support given to the Syrian rebels meets the same difficulties because there is a divergence in principles and interests: the rebels want to fight Assad, not the ISIS.

A ghost army

The number of soldiers that the Iraqi army has at its disposal is hard to evaluate. In 2009 they were about 210 thousand; the same number was confirmed in 2011, when the US left. Today, there are rumors that the number has decreased to approximately 140 thousand units, 48 thousand of which are not in fighting conditions. On paper, there are 14 divisions made up of a total of 263 battalions, but it's just empirical data. Two of these divisions, made up of approximately 30 thousand men, were the ones that escaped from Mosul when faced with 1.200 ISIS militiamen. It is not surprising that the same scene was played out in Ramadi on May 17 last year.

The inefficiency of the Iraqi army has various other origins as well, regardless of the mistakes made by Bremer in 2003. There is its ethnic composition: 90% of soldiers are Shiite and the remaining Sunni portion is reluctant to be employed in Sunni regions under the command of Shiites. The same is true of the Shiites employed in Shiite regions. The religious fracture in the country is so profound that none of the soldiers want to fight against their own brothers.

The numbers of deserters is also very high, about 2 to 3 hundred units per day, and the recruitment is slow due to the aforementioned religious divisions. Then there is the problem of corruption: the army officers often keep the money destined to the soldiers, take part of the funds for food and logistical supplies and produce disaffection among the troops. One striking case was that of the so-called "ghost soldiers": nonexistent troops that were meant to inflate the number of soldiers in the roster so that the officers could pocket their salaries. This phenomenon was opposed by the present Prime Minister, Abadi, who fired about 40 corrupt officers. In total, the "ghost soldiers" are allegedly 50 thousand; a third of the presumed members of the army.

Then there are organizational issues: logistics don't work, maintenance is nearly non-existent, there are communication problems within the chain of command, strategic planning is superficial at best, access to training is limited and weapons are lacking.

The inefficient army is sided with inefficient intelligence services, always because of the same 2003/2004 dismantling of the existing structures and the subsequent creation of new structures without qualified personnel in them. The reasons: lack of capabilities and operative attitude, thus substantial inefficiency; scarce vigilance over the territory; the designation of high-ranking officials being based on ethnic-religious criteria and on political portioning; a lack of coordination between structures, both on the analysis and operative level; the doubling up of roles in the technical and administrative milieu; lacking organizational and technical means; bureaucracy, superficial training and a scarce tendency to rely on new technologies.

The only line of continuity between the old intelligence services of Saddam and the new ones is the perdurable abuse of power, the recourse to torture and the systematic violation of human rights.

Without a way out

In 2013, during the mandate of the former PM Nouri al Maliki, the figure of a Political Commissioner in the Armed Forces was created. The promotions in the military were no longer dispensed based on meritocratic criteria, but on the sole basis of political loyalty. These circumstances were all inherited by the current PM, al Abadi, and currently have a very negative bearing on the morale of the Iraqi army. It is not easy to persuade a Sunni to fight for his country when most of his brethren live in areas that are controlled by the ISIS. All of these elements show a clear state of social dismemberment that Iraq has undergone since the fall of Saddam Hussein: Sunni and Shiites hate each other, while the Kurds live in a situation of full independence from the State. Last but not least, the deployment of

Shiite paramilitary units alongside the regular army in the fight against the ISIS have increased religious and sectarian differences.

All of this explains why the ISIS controls a third of Iraq and two-thirds of Syria. The more successes are reaped by the Islamic militias, the more volunteers join their ranks. Today, according to Iraqi PM Haider al Abadi, 60% of the ISIS fighters are foreigners. This also explains the reluctance of the US to provide sophisticated equipment and weapons for them, since there is a high risk that these could land into the hands of the ISIS.

THE WANNABE JIHADIST'S HANDBOOK - PART I

It is universally recognized that the ISIS has been capable of putting in place an efficient media campaign that, over time, has played multiple roles. On one side, the propaganda has been used to emphasize its victories and threaten its enemies, on the other it also served the purpose of recruiting and attracting flocks of volunteers to fill the ranks of its militias.

Some analysts claim that 60% of the troops presently fighting for the ISIS are formed by foreigners coming from different parts of the world. The proselytes were recruited using mainstream media tools: the internet, Facebook, Twitter. We intend to delve in detail with the message and the instructions the ISIS passes out to its potential volunteers.

A pamphlet in English has been circulating on the web. It is entitled "Hijrah to the Islamic State" or, as the file is actually called, Hijrah to Al Dawla, as the caliphate was originally named in the Abbasid tradition. The handbook for hopeful candidates to the jihad starts off with a series of phrases from famous Islamic scholars that underline two basic religious concepts: the Hijrah, i.e. the migration to the land of Ibrahim, aka Abraham, and that recalls Prophet Mohamed's journey from Mecca to Medina, and the prophecy that on judgement day Islam will surface in Syria, where worshippers will finally rejoin Ibrahim. The foreword to the handbook thus seeks a theological legitimacy for the self-proclaimed Caliph Abu Bakr al Baghdadi and, therefore, also for those individuals who decide to go to Syria to join the ISIS, and thus undergo a hijrah, just like the Prophet did.

The trip

These opening words are immediately followed by a series of practical provisions on how to reach the Islamic State. The terrorists outline what the standard itinerary is: the landing at the Turkish airport of Sanliurfa, the border crossing with Syria at Akcakale and all the way to Raqqa, the "capital" of the ISIS. A total of 127 km that take for granted that the sole possible entry route to Syria is via Turkey.

Is it that simple? Apparently yes, if you follow the instructions that is: don't tell anyone that you are going to fight, buy a return ticket that stops over in a country where tourists usually go on vacation (Greece or Spain) and then head for Turkey. Furthermore, you can always reach the Turkish coasts with a car or a boat; this is a far less suspicious way of arriving and is subject to minor controls.

Once in Turkey, the wannabe jihadist will go in a hotel and will have to get in touch with the person that will have to guide and instruct him on what to do next. This contact will take place over Twitter and the physical contact will happen inside a refugee camp bordering Syria.

Reaching the border crossings under the control of Islamist militias, in Öncüpınar/Bab al Salam or, farther north, Bab al Hawwa, will require the volunteer to dress "casually" and not "religiously". You don't want to attract the attention of the Turkish border guards. The pamphlet claims that if the candidate complies with these precautions he could even well obtain a Visa for Syria. Alternatively, you can always bribe a Turkish policeman.

There are chances that the Visa for Syria is refused and that our volunteer be rejected. Here is how to go around that problem. Once again using Twitter, a representative will come from Syria and will join our candidate in his hotel. Together, they will travel to Akcakale, or Tel Abyad as it is called on the Syrian side of the border. In this locality there is no border crossing; it will suffice to elude the controls of the Turkish police, run across the border and reach a car waiting for you inside Syria. And Raqqa is now even closer. This itinerary does not take into consideration the fact that Tel Abyad was recently conquered by the Kurds and that it is not in the hands of the ISIS anymore.

The instructions on how to enter Syria are also accompanied by other provisions: if crossing the border becomes more difficult, there are safe houses where to hide, but only a limited number of members of the Islamic State know about them. You can recognize these people because they carry along with them a “tazkiyah”, a paper that has been signed to prove their reliability. Furthermore, the Turkish security services are hostile. If the volunteer is spotted, he could be arrested although the Turks tend to leave the recruits alone in fear of reprisal attacks on their territory. Finally, there is the possibility of using smugglers or middle-men to cross the border or to obtain fake papers.

What to do if you're stopped in Turkey

The handbook takes into consideration the possibility that during your hijrah you might be stopped, deported or arrested. The candidate shouldn't feel discouraged, but will have to keep his faith in Allah. When he lands at the airport and has a Visa, no criminal record, is not wanted by the police, is not on the terrorist list and is not carrying anything suspicious in his suitcase, chances are he could be stopped, but not arrested.

In that case, the pamphlet helps you to answer the questions the Turkish police may pose:

- What is the scope of your trip to Turkey?
- Tourism. It is advisable to research before time what the tourist attractions in the country are.
- Do you plan to go to Syria?
- Absolutely not or, alternatively, state that you have watched the suffering of the Syrians and would like to help out, but never admit you intend to cross the border.
- Are you a terrorist? Do you have links to Al Qaeda? Do you want to go to Syria to join Al Qaeda? - No. Stick to your tourism cover story. The Turks, claims the handbook, cannot distinguish the ISIS from Al Qaeda. This circumstance is underlined as if it were a serious “mistake”. Nevertheless, the document stresses how important it is not to have anything “compromising” in one's luggage that could give away the true scope of the trip. Thus avoid knives, weapons, war boots, camouflage etc.

There are also a number of other recommendations: if you have a tourist Visa don't lose it, the same goes with your passport, show a good knowledge of the country's tourist attractions and of your itinerary, travel South only at night and never during the day.

What to bring along

In this respect, the handbook is full of suggestions. The first one is on how many and what types of bags you should be taking along with you: a suitcase, a satchel-type bag and a backpack. That's it. The booklet details each piece of luggage, one by one.

The satchel-type bag will have to contain "vital" personal belongings. It is preferable to use a belt bag. The fundamental elements to put in this bag are the passport, airline tickets, wallet, cash, mobile phone and charger and some additional things, such as handkerchiefs, glasses and sunglasses, medicines, band-aids, pen and paper, a torch and anything else that will allow you to survive for 24 hours in case your main luggage goes missing. The advice is to stick to the airline rules: no scissors, knives, liquids, explosives etc.

The backpack is the next piece of luggage and can weigh up to 7 or 8 kilos. The handbook suggests to check each airlines' policy before boarding your flight. The backpack should be resistant, packed, you should be able to run with it on your back and it doesn't have to fall into pieces if circumstances get rough. A backpack is recommended, no to trolleys, handbags or anything else. It should have a number of compartments and pockets to ease the task of placing your stuff in it. Following instructions, the booklet underlines, will help you during the hijrah to Syria.

As far as what goes inside the backpack, there are a number of suggestions: a change of clothes (once again, in case you lose your luggage), plug adaptors (which types are specified in the document), hair clipper (cordless and rechargeable are better), a portable wifi modem (also available locally), a flashlight, a headlamp (very important), a camping lamp, a hardcover notebook and pens (you'll have to take notes), a jacket to protect you from the rain and the cold (a series of suggestions are provided), shoes (trainers, military, trekking or sandals that protect your ankles; 4 pairs of robust socks), gloves for the cold and to shoot, knee and elbow protection (there'll be much crawling to do), beanie hats and headwear, spare glasses, a sports water bottle or a camelback type water reservoir, binoculars, compass and measuring tape (3 meters should do), carabiners and S-biners.

The advice is to bring all of your electronic devices in your hand luggage, although once in the caliphate you could be faced with electricity shortages. The suggestions is to bring solar powered chargers. If this could be seen by our candidate as a major setback, remember the land belongs to Allah, we should not pollute or harm the environment with our batteries.

As far as the suitcase is concerned, the main advice is to bring only one along, regardless of what your airline grants. The motive: you should be as agile as possible. A good alternative is a bigger backpack. It could also be a trolley, as long as the weight is the right one.

What goes inside the suitcase is once again the strict minimum. The author of the booklet even mocks the sisters that “fainted after reading this bit”. Nonetheless, here's the list: two changes of clothes, hard-wearing with multiple side pockets trousers, fast-drying clothes, T-shirts, a sleeping bag, a toothbrush, nail clippers, skin lotion, camping utensils and a spork, sewing kit, first aid kit, medication and medical supplies.

The psychology

Once the instructions on what to bring along have been addressed, much like in a boy-scout's manual, the booklet deals with the psychological aspects of the mission: you have to know yourself, the talent that you will offer to the ISIS, your strengths and weaknesses, what is right and what is wrong. This part of the document is accompanied by a series of theological quotes. The ISIS stresses that they are in need of fighters, but that also other profiles are necessary.

The core of the problem are your strengths and weaknesses. The first ones need to be nourished with training. The latter are split in two: the innate weaknesses (the term “Qadr” or “predetermined” by Allah is used to refer to them), and the ones that can be tackled with hard work, be modified and improved.

As the booklet states, quoting Sun-Tzu, knowing yourself means you have won half the battle.

THE WANNABE JIHADIST'S HANDBOOK - PART II

Advice for women traveling through Turkey

An entire chapter is dedicated to the trip, or the hijrah, to Syria undertaken by women, here referred to as “sisters”. The author of the booklet's opening remarks claims that he will not get into the theological argument of whether women are allowed to travel to Turkey without a “mahran”, a male member of the family. This is not an issue for the sisters wishing to join the ISIS.

The instructions start off from the airport of arrival in Turkey, usually Istanbul's Ataturk, although the Turkish capital has two airports. A woman traveling alone and with hand luggage is discouraged from taking a bus across the country for security reasons. The suggestion is to hop on a plane, thus avoiding going out of the airport, taking a taxi, a subway or roaming around Istanbul looking for a ticket.

If the candidate has already been in touch with the Office of Borders of the Al Dawla, aka the caliphate, or, as quoted in the booklet, the Madrasat al Huda, i.e. the koranic school for the right path, she could already have a telephone number to call upon landing. There are a series of recommendations to follow on where to conceal this number. If you save it on your phone, the ironical author of the manual states, don't put it under Osama bin Laden's name. The suggestion for the sisters is also to learn a number of phrases in Turkish, from how to ask for a taxi, to specifying she is not traveling alone, or how to purchase a SIM card.

The mobile phone is an essential element of the trip. The incipit to the handbook is pretty clear: don't attempt the hijrah if your parents have confiscated your mobile phone. The Islamic State prefers Android operated smart-phones, suggests purchasing a SIM card at the airport – not just any SIM card, but one from Turkish mobile phone operator Turkcell – and enough credit on your phone to call and access the internet. One gigabyte of data traffic will suffice. If you're traveling in a group, each sister will have to buy her own SIM card.

At this point, the sister will have to call the number she was provided with, specify that she has landed in Istanbul and that she is trying to reach Syria. She will hence receive the instructions on what to do next. If a group of women reaches the same destination, it is recommended to avoid being in a group and to communicate via internet with the freshly purchased SIM card. The advice is to move in groups of twos, three people at the most, even when you're buying the tickets for your next destination. Tickets should be purchased separately, no group tickets.

Once the new destination has been reached, don't talk to the police, you're just a tourist. Call the number you have been provided with, confirm you've landed and wait for further instructions. Generally, they will tell you to go in a hotel. Take a taxi and make sure it's an official one, not an illegal cab. If you land at night and there are no taxis around, call the Syrian number and ask for someone to come and pick you up.

There could be people at the airport that will try to harass you. They have no evidence that you're on your hijrah. They've seen dozens of people take the same trip. If someone offers you a ride to the border, refuse it and ignore him without attracting attention. Just go to your hotel and wait for instructions. If they tell you to wait for a phone call, then wait for a call. The bottom line is, as the document states, "hear and obey".

If you're told you have to wait for one or two days, don't be impatient and always keep your mobile phone charged and by your side. If you realize you were not picked up, or if you find a missed call on your phone, don't worry, they will call you back. If the person coming to collect you smokes or doesn't wear a beard, worry not. It is better not to leave your hotel, unless it's strictly necessary and, if you really have to, notify the people in Syria. A piece of advice is repeated several times: stick to instructions, no paranoia even if there are delays.

The cost of the taxi that will take you to the border is roughly 50 dollars and will take the sisters on dirt and possibly dark roads and up to a safe house where one of the ISIS's sympathizers will host them. Once there, there will be rooms for women and food and beverages will be provided until the crossing of the border. Inside the safe house, the sister will also be granted the possibility of being alone in her room.

From there on, new instructions will be provided on how to cross the border. This will generally happen at night or at dawn. The sister will be told just a few minutes before hand, although delays could be caused by the transit of Turkish police border patrols. The luggage will be left in the safe house and the volunteer will have to take along all of her valuables. This is because the unattended luggage could be searched by the owners of the house that, the manual underlines, are not Islamic fighters, but mere sympathizers. The bottom line is: the ISIS doesn't steal.

When the right time comes, the crossing of the border will take place. Usually it will be running (wear comfortable shoes and clothes) and if there are children along someone will help them out. The suggestion is to bring along another dress, called "Abaya" in Arabic, because during the border crossing the sister might have to crawl under the barbed wire and one will have to cover her "awrah". The term refers to the intimate parts in Islam, their exact definition is a matter of debate among muslim scholars.

Once the Al Dawla has finally been reached, the handbook suggests you take a breath of fresh air: "That's how the Shariah feels like".

On the other side of the border the sisters will be taken to a "madhafah", a guest house for women. If the candidate is married and her husband is training with the ISIS, she will stay in the home until her spouse comes to pick her up. If the sister is not married, instead, she will be transferred to a house for single women in Raqqa together with other wannabe jihadists. If the candidate wants to marry, she will have to apply for a husband. If she wants to stay single, she is free to do so.

Finally, there are some bureaucratic instructions. The luggage might be taken to a male madhafah and, if not requested, it could be transferred to the Border Office in Raqqa.

Other general provisions

The handbook shows what a Visa granted at a Turkish airport looks like. It underlines once more how the scope of the trip should be “tourism” and not, although it appears on the form, “Commit Jihad in Syria”. If the volunteer were to mark the latter he would probably end up in jail. Overall, the instructions are so basic that the average candidate is presumably not very educated nor smart. The low level of the candidates implies the need for such repeated and basic suggestions on how to behave and on what to take along.

For example, the booklet stresses once more not to look nervous at the airport. No shaking hands, no rapid breathing, cold sweats and lack of eye contact. All of these signals could be detected by trained security officials.

Success stories

The booklet also contains a number of success stories of those who actually made it to Syria.

There is the case of a British convert that skipped bail in the United Kingdom and fled with his family and four children via France and Turkey and ended up in Raqqa before his passport was impounded by authorities.

Then there is the story of a group of Saudis that fled to Yemen, from Yemen they hopped on a boat to Sudan, from Sudan to Egypt, from Egypt to Libya, and from Libya by boat to Turkey and finally in Syria. This epic journey is told in great detail, from the prices paid, to the corruption of border guards and militias etc. and is available on Twitter.

There are several success stories that end with a happy ending, of course. Each of them bears a teaching: the religious call, the determination to find the funds for the trip, the help from friends, the motivations, the hardships that were overcome in crossing the border (sometimes thanks to the corruption or the indifference from Turkish soldiers), the diffidence in relying on people you don't know, the existence of spies and undercover policemen, the ridiculous amounts of money asked by middle-men or smugglers.

A success story told by a sister tells about a woman getting arrested by Turkish police, receiving an expulsion order, then getting bailed out by a lawyer paid by the ISIS and finally crossing the border at a checkpoint manned by the Free Syrian Army. Her ordeal was not over, as the sister was forced back into Turkey and eventually made it back into Syria at a border crossing controlled by the ISIS.

The handbook ends with a final account, that of a “shaheed”, a martyr, a US citizen. The man blew himself up and killed 30 Syrian soldiers, “apostates”. The last message the booklet sends out is that “he was true to true to Allah and Allah was true to him”.

Commentary

The provisions and the recommendations that are given on how to behave outline what a wannabe Islamic volunteer has to do to reach Syria. The fact that most of them require continuous basic suggestions is a signal of their inadequacy. Between the lines there are

also a number of other facts that emerge from the text: there are electricity shortages in the caliphate, there is the corruption and, above all, the silent complicity of Turkish authorities, there is a network of contacts and safe houses operated by the ISIS and used to channel the volunteers into Syria. Visually speaking, the candidate will not look like a religious fanatic as he gets closer to the border.

The booklet also highlights the strained relationship between the Free Syrian Army and the ISIS and the ongoing competition with Jabhat al Nusra. The ISIS also tends to distinguish itself from Al Qaeda, as if being associated with Osama bin Laden's former group had a negative connotation to it. The key advice for the volunteers is not to look suspicious, nervous, not to panic. By doing so he will be able to avoid embarrassing questions.

Overall, the idea of using the cover story of being a tourist close to the Syrian border when you're carrying inside your backpack binoculars, equipment to face the winter cold or war boots doesn't seem like a great idea. This implies that, if they wanted to, the Turkish Security Services could easily identify, stop or reject the volunteers for the jihad. Probably it is Turkish policy to turn a blind eye. A reason for this could be, as the handbook suggests, the fear of terrorist attacks on their soil.

But the most important point is: if Turkey were to block the human, financial and logistical traffic along the Syrian border, the ISIS would be in great difficulty.

Finally, there is the issue of how internet is used and how communications are exchanged between jihadist candidates and their recruiters. Europol has recently decided to create a special unit tasked with identifying the networks and the online contacts of the ISIS. There are presently an estimated 50.000 active accounts (and 90.000 Twitter profiles) on which 100.000 messages are exchanged on a daily basis. This confirms that one of greatest successes of the ISIS has been the capability using modern social media to convey an archaic and historically primitive vision of Islamic society.