



www.invisible-dog.com

invisibledog@email.com

ISIS: THE PROBLEM OF SUCCESSION AND RELIGIOUS LEGITIMIZATION

One of the main strengths (or weaknesses) of the ISIS is its need for a religious legitimization of its war against apostates and miscreants. It is in the name of this legitimization that the ISIS justifies deeds and misdeeds in the piloting of the armed struggle; in the elimination of its enemies; in the proprietary administration of an organization that should be stately; in the social regulations imposed on the conquered territories and peoples, etc.

That is why one of the most important, and most powerful, branches of the ISIS is the Council of the Sharia. The Council runs checks on the activity of the imams; on the religious quality of each rule or law that is imposed on its people; on the content of sermons; on the activity of tribunals (all of which are, of course, religious) and related trials; on the indoctrination of the key military personnel; on the propaganda and the messages in the media; on the teachings and on the administration of the education system; on the running of prisons; on the kind of punishments that are inflicted upon prisoners and hostages. The macabre beheadings and their promotion are also part of this long list and, last but not least, the Council also is in charge of issuing the Fatwa.

In practice, save for the preeminently military aspects on the terrain, everything that involves the social/religious aspects of the would-be Caliphate are within the bounds of the above-mentioned Council's reach. All of the most important decisions are systematically run through it.

The Council of the Sharia is presided by Abu Bakr al Baghdadi himself, and includes two mufti – also designated by Baghdadi; one for Iraq (Sheykh Abu Abdullah al Kurdi) and one for Syria. The other members are religious exponents among the most highly regarded and qualified who come mainly from Iraq and Syria. Underneath the central Council there are other, local, Councils of the Sharia of Wilayat which, in accordance with the decisions of the main Council, decide and exercise control over their territory. Within the Council itself there are various committees that are grouped by subject matter.

In order to give a more profound religious characterization to the Council, its members are/should be officially 6, the same number of councilors present in the days of the Caliph Omar bin Khattab who, on his deathbed, decided to form the Council for the first time with the aim of finding his own successor.

Islam's first Caliph was named Abu Bakr (that's why al Baghdadi chose to adopt the name). Omar bin al Khattab was his successor. Caliph Omar, who is historically

considered to be a man of undisputed prestige and influence in the history of Islam, decided that the designation of his successor would occur without resorting to nepotism. He decided that the new Caliph would have to be chosen among the Council's members within three days and that he would have to take oath on the fourth day.

In order to understand al Baghdadi's desperate need for pure Islam in the administration of his Islamic state, it is worthy to note that Caliph Abu Bakr (the first Caliph) had designated his successor himself, while Omar bin Khattab (the second Caliph) had preferred to have the Council carry out the task. Caliph Omar had explained his initiative by saying that, when nearing death, Mohammed had not designated a successor. In this respect, al Baghdadi is closer to Caliph Omar's experience – which is perhaps theologically purer, than to that of Abu Bakr.

Religious legitimization is a central problem for the leader of the ISIS, especially since al Baghdadi proclaimed himself Caliph in the Mosul mosque on July 5, 2014, and assumed a role which has a precise religious connotation in the history of Islam. It was a decision that al Baghdadi took without consulting the Council of the Sharia and which gave way to consequent struggles within the Salafite world. Seen that it decides on theological questions, the Council had become the main interlocutor for all the accusations that have been made on the conduct of al Baghdadi by various muftis, especially the great mufti of Saudi Arabia, Sheykh Abdul Aziz al Sheykh (who said that ISIS is Islam's number 1 enemy) and, most prominently, by the great mufti of Egypt Shawqi Allam.

The desperate need for a religious meaning in political/military/social matters is due to the fact that al Baghdadi can justify his actions only if he is operating within a framework of legitimization on the part of the Muslim world which he hopes to lead. In his eyes and in the eyes of those who follow him, the war that they are fighting is a religious struggle where, as Ahmad ibn Taymiyah, one of the most famous theologians of the past (who is also a part of the Salafite tradition), said, the guiding scriptures are supported by the sword.

That is why we see the sword, a symbol, playing a central role in the beheadings. The ISIS is not searching for any old state, they want an Islamic state.

If Abu Bakr al Baghdadi were to be killed in the future (his recent wounding and attempted murder have made this possibility less remote, seen the early demise of his predecessors) there will already be someone ready to take his place. It is a choice that will have to be based on a criteria of religious competence and not just military experience.

And here is where another body of the ISIS comes into play. Like the Council of the Sharia, this next Council will play a central role in the designation of the next Caliph: the Council of the Shura (or “consultative council”). The Council of the Shura is a body that is heard, among other instances, on occasion of the designation or destitution of a Caliph. Once again, the Islamic tradition is prevalent, since the need for a consultative council is referred to in the Koran and in the writings of Mohammed.

The Council of the Shura is comprised of less than ten members, some of which are designated directly by al Baghdadi. The two top members of the Council of the Shura are the two military leaders of the ISIS: the one in charge of Iraq (originally Abu Muslim al Turkmani aka Fadil Ahmad Abdullah al Hiyali, who was killed in December 2014, and whose replacement's name was not rendered public) and the one in charge of Syria (Abu Ali Al Anbari, also Turkmen like Hiyali and also a former official of Saddam Hussein).

Their presence in the Council of the Shura proves that there is a merging, at the helm of the ISIS, of theology with the armed struggle. Both the Council of the Sharia and the Council of the Shura are in charge of supervising the affairs of state and of all issues military (among other tasks, they express their opinion on the designation of the members of the Military Council). Of course, the Councils are not just used for consultation. They are leading bodies of the ISIS and as such maintain an intricate web of contacts with the various governors – also designated by the Councils (initially the Wilayat were 8 in Iraq and 8 in Syria; now, with the latest military conquests, they have become 24). These governors provide the Councils with thorough analyses of the various local situations within the Caliphate.

At the central level of the ISIS' State there are other, important, bodies such as the Military Council, the Council of Security (which is in charge of the activity of intelligence), the Commission of the Mass Media (which stands out for its role in propaganda but also manages the preachers), the Commission of the Sharia (which presides the tribunals on the central, district and civil level), and the Cabinet (similar to a government). All of these bodies have precise roles, but are not as important as the Council of the Sharia and that of the Shura, which make up the real head of the ISIS.

When al Baghdadi was wounded in a US air raid, he was temporarily replaced by Abu Ala al Afri (battle name of Abdul Rahman Mustafa al Qaduli). It is still not clear whether this former Iraqi teacher, friend of Osama bin Laden, member of al Qaida who fought in Afghanistan is still alive (the Iraqi authorities had divulged news of his death without showing proof on the past 13th of March). Notwithstanding, it must be noted that, given the short life of their leaders, the ISIS has been provided with a revolving-door system in case one of them were to be killed.

In this respect, al Baghdadi has behaved differently from his predecessors (especially al Zarqawi) by coupling the organization's centrality with a system of decentralization of power which allows for independence in decisions even at the more peripheral level.

There are two reasons for this: Al Baghdadi sees his role within a messianic design which neither begins nor ends with himself (he must thus create the conditions for his project's survival in time); also, there is the problem of controlling a vast territory (with a population of roughly 8/10 million people over 200.000 square kilometers of land) in a state of war, which cannot be administered centrally.

And since this is, after all, a war of religion, the Koran and the Hadith are the sole source of interpretation for the actions of the ISIS. Every time that al Baghdadi, surrounded and supported by central and local imams, fights and wins, it is in the just cause of Allah. His

fighters, within the framework of a religion that refutes free will in favor of predestination, are supposed to push forth the design of Allah. Martyrdom is thus part of this logic. A war from which there is no turning back. And since al Baghdadi knows that its either victory or death, he has prepared the ground for his own demise. In other words, the story of the ISIS will not end with the killing of the self-proclaimed Caliph. Lately, during a speech at the Pentagon on July 6, even US President Barack Obama admitted it when he defined the war against the ISIS a “long term campaign”.

ISIS: NEXT STOP IN LIBYA

It is a hard fact that terrorism thrives and develops every time areas of social instability are created following traumatic events (such as wars), or thanks to the poverty and hardship imposed by totalitarian regimes on their subjects. It has already happened in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and elsewhere. Conflicts are definitely a factor and it is not a coincidence that terrorism finds space to operate each time a dictator or a regime falls. There are presently thousands of hardcore terrorists that move from one country to the next in search of adventure or of a cause to die for.

If tomorrow a deal for a decent transition were found in Syria, if social peace were re-established in Iraq and if ISIS, as promised by countries across the world, were defeated militarily, Al Baghdadi's adventure would definitely come to an end. But this would not mean that the terrorist phenomena that supported his rise would be over. The extremists would simply move somewhere else, be it the Middle East, Africa, possibly in Asia. They would have plenty of places to go to in order to continue their fight in the name of Islamic fundamentalism. The Sinai, Nigeria, Yemen, Libya, Mali, Somalia or even Afghanistan are all potential destinations for the professionals of terrorism.

It is hence legitimate to ask oneself which destination could become the ideal target in case of a defeat of the ISIS in Syria and Iraq. Where can we find the most favorable conditions to build a new Islamic State? This is a question that the leadership of the ISIS has already posed itself, and so have the countries that are fighting it.

Some analysts may object that the Islamic State has now become a brand that can be used in any circumstance, be it an attack in Sharm el Sheikh or in Paris or in any conflict involving a Muslim community across the Middle East or Africa. There could be no need to find a new haven, isolated incidents can virtually take place anywhere across the globe.

Yet the ISIS is not just a terrorist movement. It is terrorism aiming to transform itself into a State and if they fail in Syria and Iraq, they could propose that same model elsewhere. Hence the need to find the ideal location for a new Islamic State. In evaluating the pros and cons, the terrorists will surely take into account environmental, social conditions and the chance of succeeding or failing.

The promised land

The Sinai peninsula has some serious drawbacks: it is a deserted and scarcely populated area; the morphology of the terrain does not offer sufficient hiding places; there would be limited impact on mass media; the area would grant troops led by General Abdel Fattah al Sisi the possibility of operating freely without having the international community on their backs; it is too close to Israel, a country that will not spare efforts or resources in the fight against terrorism and will not shy away from a cross-border attack. Furthermore, if the Islamic State were to decide to resettle in the Sinai, the circumstance would probably lead to a stronger alliance between Israel and Egypt.

The Boko Haram stretches across the north of Nigeria and in some areas of Cameroon and Chad. They are an Islamist group that is definitely too African. The hardcore terrorists that form the backbone of the ISIS are mainly Arab and can be more effective in Arabic countries. They would be immediately singled out in a place like Nigeria. The same could be said of Somalia.

Although in Africa, Mali could be a potential target for Islamic terrorism. The country is poor and social unrest could be fueled across the Sub-Saharan region. Such a choice would spark a conflict in the desert, a complicated, scarcely populated combat zone that has witnessed in-fighting between the groups opposed to Bamako. Furthermore, Malians are predominantly Sunni Sufi Muslims, not Salafi. On the other side of the barricades, the terrorists would face both the French (and potentially the Germans) and the Algerians.

Yemen, instead, is a country where Al Qaeda and its Arabic Peninsula branch have been operating for quite some time. The civil war offers an opportunity to expand, but this would mean having to face Saudi Arabia. The kingdom is probably one of the few countries out there that cannot be accused of apostasy. It would be hard to push forward a religious conflict against them, despite the presence of the Zaydi Shia minority that represent 30% of the Yemeni population. Furthermore, Yemen's geography poses a series of logistical issues: the country is isolated by land (as it is surrounded by Saudi Arabia and Oman) and sealed off by the sea (several international military vessels patrol the area). Plus, on the opposite coast lie the military bases of both the French and the Americans in Djibouti.

Finally, Afghanistan brings back old memories for those that fought in the ranks of Al Qaeda, but such a choice could reignite the feud between al Baghdadi and Ayman al Zawahiri. A drawback is given by the fact that the Afghan civil war is not a religious struggle, but a sectarian one. It would be hard for the ISIS to exploit it in its favor and especially now that there is a lot of infighting among the Taliban. Yet Afghanistan remains an open option, one that could allow to expand or hide in an area spanning all the way to Pakistan.

The Libyan option

Technically speaking, the Libyan option is the most attractive one for the ISIS. It is a huge country in a state of complete social dissolution ruled by a number of factions, including Islamic ones (Ansar al Sharia and the Council of the Shura of the Mujahidin); it has rich oil resources that can be exploited (as is happening in Syria and Iraq); Islam already has an outstanding influence on the population (just think of the Senussi Confraternity); local tribes can be bought or become allies of your cause; its coast is so long that it is difficult to control and the same can be said of its land borders stretching out to a number of unstable countries that can be easily drawn into the equation. Finally, Libya would also overcome the geographic limitations imposed by the Middle East and project the ISIS towards a fresh perspective: a war targeting Europe and an extension of its influence in North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa.

It is just not a coincidence that among all the affiliates of the ISIS, the Libyan branch has been the only one to have direct links with the Islamic State founded by al Baghdadi. The

circumstance is confirmed by the fact that in 2014 the creation of the Libyan ISIS was headed by an envoy of the Caliph: Abu Nabil alias Wisam Najm abd Zayd al Zubaidi. A former police officer in Iraq and an Al Qaeda militant, Abu Nabil was allegedly killed in a US air strike on November 13, 2015, in Derna. Before being killed, he was able to create, expand and consolidate the military presence of his militias in Libya. Another high ranking ISIS official has also been spotted in Sirte. His name is Abu Ali Anbari, an Iraqi Turkmen and Major General under Saddam Hussein. He allegedly reached Libya via sea.

What this means is that the expansion of the ISIS in Libya was a plan conceived in Raqqa and carried out by personnel ferried on location by the Islamic State. Presently the majority of the militants deployed in Libya are foreign fighters from Tunisia, Sudan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia. The leadership is composed of mainly Iraqi commanders. The ISIS exported its franchise and added local forces from Ansar al Sharia and other extremist groups to its nucleus of hardcore fighters. The estimated force is between 3 to 4 thousand combatants.

The potential offered by Libya is proven by how much the ISIS has been capable of expanding its influence in a short period of time, from scratch, with very few fighters. The group has taken control of Sirte and is now targeting neighboring areas. What is striking is that a majority of foreign manpower was employed in the operations. The infighting between Libyan factions has paved the way for the expansion of the Islamic State. Such a careless approach has allowed ISIS to consolidate and move on. Similarly, the international community paid very little attention to what was happening.

The conquest of Sirte has a strong symbolic value (this is where Muammar Gaddafi was born) and is a strategic point (Fezzan is somewhat out of the struggle between Cyrenaica and Tripolitania). Furthermore, Libyan factions have facilitated and bankrolled the expansion of the ISIS. The Libyan Central Bank has continued to pay the wages of all public employees, even those living in the areas controlled by the Caliphate. Weapons are purchased thanks to a deal with the militias in Benghazi that are opposed to General Haftar. Oil, instead, is supplied directly through the seizure of trucks that transit on their territory and on the black market.

To consolidate its power, the ISIS has also negotiated a series of deals with local tribes and, most importantly, with the influential Awlad Suleiman tribe. Clashes with other groups have been resolved through donations or compensations (as Gaddafi did to support his own power). Similarly, a non-aggression agreement has been reached with the militias of Misrata that are against the expansion of the ISIS.

In the territories under its rule the ISIS has begun to gradually impose its repertoire of social norms, religious schools, Islamic tribunals, religious police, bans on music and smoking and its financial system that imposes zakat, taxes and levies on commercial activities and lorries. And, as usual, the media machine was put into motion with its beheadings, crucifixions and killings (as for those 20 Egyptian Copts that were slain on a beach in February 2015). A situation that we've already seen in Raqqa and that tries to balance consensus with threats on the road to an Islamic State on Libyan shores.

The road ahead

Now that power has been consolidated in Sirte, the ISIS will try to expand. The local militias will not be able to stop them unless the army led by General Khalifa Belqasim Haftar gets in their way with the support of Egypt. The deal reached with Misrata and the indirect support coming from Tripoli mean that Cyrenaica could be their next target.

Several analysts fear that the next city to fall to the ISIS will be Abajdya. There are several elements pointing in that direction, as a series of targeted assassinations of notable individuals that usually anticipate the advance of the ISIS are already taking place. Abajdya could complicate things terribly for those opposing the Caliphate. The city controls maritime trade, it is a crucial passage for migrants coming from the desert and controls oil routes. Furthermore, Islamic militias are already present in Derna and Sabratha.

Libya has a population of around 6 million people and a vast territory. Back in 1969 it had been extremely easy for Gaddafi to take over power in a bloodless coup. The same could now happen with the ISIS thanks to its consolidated know how.

The defeat of the Islamic State can come from two directions: a negotiated solution between Libyan factions that will unite to fight the Caliphate or a direct international intervention. The first option is difficult to achieve and time has nearly run out. The increasing aerial campaign in Syria and Iraq has already pushed thousands of combatants from the ISIS towards Libya and Afghanistan. The second option will depend on the will of the international community. There could also be a third option that could be faster and more effective: give Egypt the mandate to deal with the ISIS together with the Libyan national army supported by the internationally recognized government in Tobruk and just look the other way as they deal with the terrorists.

LIBYA, SOCIAL REBRANDING AND A NEARLY IMPOSSIBLE PEACE DEAL

If you were to find a meaning to what is currently happening in Libya, the news that Abdel Hakim Belhaj is sitting at the negotiating table to decide on his country's future would probably suffice. Belhaj, also known with the nom de guerre of Abu Abdallah Assadaq, is a former Emir of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group that opposed Muammar Gaddafi. He fought in Afghanistan in the 80s against the Russians, then returned again in 2002 and fought alongside the Mullah Omar and the Taliban; in his second Afghan spell Belhaj ran one of the training camps for foreign recruits. He is to all effects one of those Islamic extremists that has moved from one hot spot to the next for decades.

Abdel Hakim Belhaj's roaming around the world ended with a one way trip to Libya organized by the CIA, that apprehended him together with his wife in Malaysia and extraordinarily renditioned him to a welcoming Gaddafi in 2004. In those days the Libyan Supreme Guide had mended his fractures with the West and the US had diligently executed the arrest warrant issued by Tripoli. Belhaj spent the next six years behind bars and was freed in 2010 when Seif al Islam, the dictator's son, sought national pacification and granted an amnesty to Belhaj and other fighters from the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group. At that time Abdel Hakim Belhaj paraded in front of a camera from Al Jazeera to claim he was not a terrorist anymore, that fighting was wrong, that he felt regret for his misdeeds.

When the war in Libya broke out in 2011 and an international coalition started bombing the country, Abdel Hakim Belhaj resurfaced once more at the head of a militia fighting against Gaddafi's loyalists. He was so effective that he was eventually appointed head of Tripoli's Military Council. A year later, in 2012, Belhaj turned into a politician and founded the Watan party, an Islamic group. Dressed up in his politician's clothes, he now sits at the table to discuss national reconciliation.

But that's not all: Belhaj is also a businessman. He has leased two Airbuses in Dubai and has them stationed, for security reasons, in Malta. These are the first two aircrafts of a new flagship airline named Libyan Wings. The plan is to fly between Tripoli and Istanbul. And since business and politics go hand in hand in today's Libya, Belhaj also owns a Tv channel called Al Nabaa. Last but not least, he is also allegedly accused of trafficking arms coming via air from Turkey.

The metamorphosis of the likes of Belhaj can be associated with the evolution of the situation in Libya: a lawless country where everything and its opposite are both possible. An Islamic terrorist before, a regretful terrorist later, a military commander, a politician and a shady businessman can all coexist under one cap. This has been possible following the international armed intervention that led to the defenestration of a ruthless dictator such as Muammar Gaddafi. The void that was created has enabled people like Abdel Hakim Belhaj to steal the scene.

Several other small or big Belhaj

Libya is presently infested with people like Belhaj, individuals that have recycled themselves shifting to the other side of the social farce.

People like General Khalifa Belqasim Haftar. One of Gaddafi's staunchest supporters – he participated in the 1969 coup that brought him to power – he is presently the Supreme Commander of the army put in place by the legitimate government in Tobruk. While he was Commander of Libyan forces in Chad in the 80s he was captured by the Chadians. A few months later he popped up again only to lead a fighting formation against his former employer. Then, in 1990, when Hissene Habré was replaced by Idriss Deby in N'Djamena, Haftar was forced to flee and landed in the United States with the help of the CIA.

Thanks to his “institutional” role, Haftar aims to become the Gaddafi of the future. In a February 2014 statement he tried to dissolve Parliament and form a so-called “Presidential Committee”. This failed attempt was supported by both Egypt and, unofficially, by the CIA. After all, Haftar is an American citizen.

The General is not alone. There are a number of former regime members that have rebranded themselves as revolutionaries. One of them is Mahmoud Jibril, former head of the National Council for Planning and of other economic organizations during the old regime. He was one of the first Prime Ministers during the civil war. His close friendship with Saif al Islam Gaddafi, still in jail in Zintan, did not influence his political recycling.

Similarly, Mustafa Abdul Jalil has become the President of the National Transitional Council, a de facto head of State, at the beginning of the civil war. Jalil had been a Minister of Justice under Gaddafi; he was accused of repeated human rights violations and then he abruptly turned into a revolutionary.

Another shocking example is the former chief of the Libyan External Security Service, Mousa Koussa. When the conflict broke out he immediately sold his know-how on the Libyan security apparatus to the British. Directly involved in the elimination of Libyan opponents abroad, loyal executor of his master's orders, he now lives a quiet life in Qatar. A gift granted by the British and Americans.

Apart from these blatant cases, several other cadres from the Libyan army and security forces have jumped ship.

Not even the UN is immune

Playing more than one role in the same comedy was not just a Libyan thing. The UN's former envoy for Libya, the Spanish diplomat Bernardino León, negotiated his hiring and salary by the UAE's Diplomatic Academy while serving the United Nations. A series of emails with the Minister of Foreign Affairs from the Emirates, Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed, have been exposed. This could have been a legitimate affair if it were not for the UAE's stance on Libya and their support for the government in Tobruk. León has damaged the UN's impartiality despite the appointment of a new mediator, the German national Martin Kobler.

Despite this incident, the volatility of the Libyan establishment will seriously affect the conclusion – if any – of the current negotiations. A positive result will depend on the decisions of people like Belhaj, individuals that have played more roles in this tragedy. People who are willing to rebrand themselves as they please tend to have an extremely low rate of reliability. This is just one aspect to take into consideration for what seems like a nearly impossible negotiated solution.

The international community is currently facing a country that has been disintegrated both socially and militarily. There are a number of militias that don't follow anybody's orders and that will have to be taken down by force for them to accept any political solution. Even within the armed groups belonging to the governments in Tobruk and Tripoli, or the tribal militias that respond to the Kabyles, there will be resistance against attempts to diminish their power or influence.

Furthermore, there are criminal bands that pose as militias and that profit from illegal traffics and extremist groups representing ISIS or other extremist factions, such as Ansar al Sharia of the Shura Revolutionary Council in Benghazi. Recently, in Kufra, rebel groups from Darfur, the Sudan Liberation Army, and Hissene Habré's militias have also put a foothold in Libya.

A complex issue

People like Haftar will not accept the idea of being downgraded. In the event of a deal and of a Government of National Unity, the General will dislike not being the supreme commander of the so-called Libyan army anymore. It should not surprise that recently the Prime Minister of the “legitimate” government in Tobruk, Abdullah al Thinni, was blocked from leaving for Malta for an international conference by Haftar's men. Al Thinni has risked being kidnapped and has survived a couple of assassination attempts. His predecessor, Ali Zeidan, fled to Germany after being kidnapped and then released.

In present day Libya any deal signed on paper will only apparently be shared by all actors and will hardly become effective. There are way too many differences, too much social rebranding, exceeding personal ambitions, too many factions at war with one another and too many weapons around. There are also too many external actors: Egypt and the UAE support the government in Tobruk, while Turkey and Qatar back Misrata and Tripoli.

Since 2012, when a National Transitional Government was hailed as the solution to the crisis, several things have changed: only for the worse. The latest round of negotiations aims at a Government of National Unity. Whatever the wording, the issue doesn't change. Despite the attempt to hold, as for Syria, an international conference in Rome with the intention of bringing together all the countries that could be part of the solution, the attempt will hardly succeed.

What is at stake today is Libya's territorial integrity. Envisaging a peaceful diplomatic exit to the crisis, one that does not contemplate the use of force is simply not realistic. And while

the conflict continues to unfold several people inside Libya regret the days when Gaddafi was still around.