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LEBANON: THE NEXT CRISIS ZONE?

In March 2015, General Martin Dempsey, then-US Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman, stated that the ISIS will “surely” become a threat for Lebanon in the near period. The same is bound to happen in Jordan in the mid period. Dempsey’s high rank and his access to reserved military and intelligence information suggests that his statements are not just hypotheses but forecasts, which are surely backed by hard facts.

We need not refer to reserved information to find that Lebanon, since its foundation, has always been an unstable country. First it was part of the Ottoman empire, then it was occupied by France during the times of the “Great Lebanon” (which included Syria as well). The country, which won its independence in 1943, was scarred by a civil war that raged from 1975 to 1990. Instability is constant in Lebanon, country that is constitutionally based on the distribution of power on a confessional basis; something that was never amended by the government, despite the rapid demographic growth.

In Lebanon, every little regional mishap triggers a repercussion and an impact, usually a negative one, on the country’s internal stability. It happened with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which triggered Lebanon’s invasion by Israel in 1978 and in 1982; it also happened with the clashes between Israel and the Hezbollah; with the presence of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon; with the intrusive and overbearing Syria, which interfered with Lebanon’s internal affairs and had a military contingent stationed in Lebanon for over 29 years (until April 2005); and the same thing is true of the present Syrian civil war.

Lebanon harbors 12 Palestinian refugee camps with over 450.000 refugees in them. And that’s just the ones who are registered with the UN; the illegal refugees are at least twice as many. The Palestinian refugees began to settle in the camps when they were ousted from Jordan in 1970 – the famous Black September – and continued to arrive in waves after every new Arab-Israeli conflict and intifada. Within these refugee camps, Lebanese jurisdiction is quite limited.

If that weren’t enough, the Syrian civil war produced roughly one and a half million Syrian refugees that flooded Lebanon, causing a number of social problems and adding to the instability. These numbers are impressive if we consider that, overall, the Lebanese population counts roughly 4,5 million individuals. The refugees, mostly Sunni Muslims, triggered a political-institutional shift in Lebanon’s already shaky confessional balance. That is why Lebanon hasn’t carried out a census since the 1930’s.

Everything that happens today in Syria has repercussions in Lebanon on the social, political and military level. And this is not only due to the common border between the two countries, but also to the alliance between the Lebanon-based Hezbollah and Syria's leader Bashar al Assad. In the case of Lebanon, the militiamen of the Party of God are like a State within the State.

Saudi retaliations

The Saudi aversion to the Hezbollah's support of Assad sparked a financial retaliation against Lebanon, a country that survives thanks to the economic support of the of the countries in the region. The top financiers of Lebanon were, of course, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf nations. Now over 3 billion dollars of military funding which was destined to the purchase of French weapons were blocked. There followed a prohibition for Saudi, Kuwaiti, UAE and Qatari citizens to travel to Beirut, even on vacation. Finally, the Lebanese workers in the Gulf were expelled.

The Saudi's intend to follow up with further economic 'sanctions', such as the withdrawal of Saudi money from the Lebanese Central Bank, the stop to investments and to the importation of Lebanese products, the need for a visa for any Lebanese entering Saudi Arabia and the forced closure of the Lebanese companies that operate in Saudi Arabia. Riyadh would like to extend these measures to other Gulf countries as well.

To close the circle, the Gulf Cooperation Council has recently included the Hezbollah in their list of terrorist organizations. This decision hints at further measures that will soon befall the Lebanese authorities, which are accused of crimes that they cannot be responsible for, since the Hezbollah operates independently from the Lebanese government. The Secretary General of the Shiite movement, Hassan Nasrallah, publicly dared the Saudis to confront Hezbollah directly, without inflicting their punishment on the innocent Lebanese population.

On March 10, 2016, Saudi Arabia urged the foreign ministers of the Arab League to list the Hezbollah among terrorist organizations despite the objections of both Lebanon and Iraq. Tunisia and Algeria reluctantly agreed. The next step could be to try to do the same with the UN, since there are already a number of nations, including the US, since August 1997, which have sanctioned the group. This would be hard to achieve, seen that there are 40 countries that contribute troops to the UNIFIL contingent in Lebanon and, as a matter of fact, the UN peacekeeping mission in Lebanon operates with the approval of the Hezbollah.

A new proxy war?

The Hezbollah have had the support of the Arab world in virtue of their history with Israel. To oppose them will weaken Lebanon further, with all that this entails in the general picture of the Middle East. Once again Saudi policy seems driven by resentment rather than by the evaluation of the long-term effects that such policy will produce.

The US have expressed their preoccupation about the worsening of Saudi relationships with Beirut; they are well aware that the region has no need for further instability.

Furthermore, the peace process in Syria will forcibly have to make use of the Hezbollah. The Saudi reprisals are just creating useless difficulties. The new, more pragmatic, American stance contradicts the US Department of the Treasury which, in July 2015, sanctioned military members of the Hezbollah for their involvement in Syria. But in today's Middle East, convenience and interests are fast changing.

Presently, Lebanon can make use of the American, French and British support. London has promised the Lebanese army weapons and training. The British fear a potential expansion of the ISIS in Lebanon in virtue of the country's persistent instability. The truth is that the Hezbollah, despite being allies of Iran and Russia and despite being independent in the Lebanese context, are fighting the ISIS and ensuring security in Lebanon. The political and financial sanctions imposed on Lebanon by Saudi Arabia are - once again - going in the opposite direction.

To use Lebanon for a proxy war against Iran isn't in anyone's interest and therefore lacks a logical purpose. Thinking of opposing the Hezbollah to produce effects on the Syrian war and on the alliance between the Hezbollah and Iran, or thinking of destabilizing Lebanon to oppose the Iranian hegemony in the region, is pure madness.

The Lebanese stalemate

Today Lebanon is going through an internal stalemate. It lacks a president since May 2014. Michel Suleiman's mandate has already expired and parliament doesn't seem to be able, after 36 attempts, to reach the two-thirds of the votes that are needed to elect his successor among the country's Christian leaders - according to the Lebanese constitution, the office of president is reserved to the Christian-Maronite.

About one quarter of the 128 deputies sitting in the Lebanese parliament are siding with the Hezbollah but they are not the only contenders. Saad Hariri, the son of former PM Rafik who was murdered in 2005, leads the 'March 14' alliance and his Sunni party, Movement for the Future. Hariri, who has both Lebanese and Saudi passports, has been known for his anti-Syrian, and anti-Hezbollah, stance. On the other front there is the 'March 8' alliance, which includes the Free Patriotic Movement of the Maronite Gebran Bassil, the Shiite Amal Movement and the Socialist Progressive Party of the Druse leader Walid Jumblatt.

The institutional paralysis, with the government left to administer only the current affairs, gives further freedom to the activity of the Hezbollah, both on the inner front - the Party of God controls much of the south of the country - and on the outer front, Syria, where they have a contingent of roughly 7.000 men.

The shadow of the Caliph

Over this institutional chaos and on the Hezbollah-Saudi feud there looms the shadow of the ISIS. In January 2014, a video announced the creation of a Lebanese branch of the Islamic State. In the meanwhile, there was talk of an agreement between Abu Bakr al Baghdadi and Abu Mohammed al Golani (Jabhat al Nusra) to militarily infiltrate Lebanon in order to create a new Wilayat (province) to add to those conquered in Syria and in Iraq. In

the same month the ISIS claimed responsibility for a suicide attack in the southern suburbs of Beirut, the area controlled by the Hezbollah. Terrorist attacks in Lebanon have been recurrent since July 2013, always in Shiite areas.

The ISIS militias are present on and around Lebanon's border, in the areas of Arsal and Qalamoun. They are currently opposed by the Hezbollah's militias in the Bekaa valley and, in the north, by the Lebanese army. Small portions of the country are controlled by the Jihadists. In June 2015, the ISIS tried to occupy the Christian village of Baalbek.

Other, less known, factions affiliated to the terrorists – the Farouq Brigade, the Green Brigade, the Fajr al Islam Brigade, the Ghuraba Brigade – operate in the vicinity and, if defeated, will most likely flee to Lebanon, producing more instability. Furthermore, the ISIS ideology has had a discrete following among the Sunni populations of Lebanon, especially in the area near Tripoli, and this has brought tens of volunteers to join the ranks of the Caliphate.

The perennial uncertainty of Lebanon makes the country partially immune from traumatic events. However, its military and demographic weakness makes it an easy prey for hostile forces, because Lebanon is a country where internal policy is systematically conditioned by the pressure of external powers.

Whatever may happen in Syria, the future of Lebanon does not appear to be rosy. If Assad manages to hold on to power, Syria will try to annex Lebanon once again, only this time they will be supported by the Hezbollah and their Iranian sponsors. On the other hand, if Syria disintegrates in the hands of the Islamic extremists, the risk will be even higher as the internal social, religious, and sectarian conditions of Lebanon could spark a new civil war. This circumstance could be fueled by the 375km-long border that Lebanon shares with Syria. Finally, there looms the Israeli shadow over Beirut; Tel Aviv thinks that it is their right to interfere militarily with the events in the Land of the Cedar.

AN EVALUATION OF THE WAR ON ISIS

The military situation on the ground in the war against the ISIS looks less favorable to Abu Bakr al Baghdadi than it did in the recent past. Both on the Syrian front, where they have lost about 22% of territory under their control, 8% only in the last three months, and on the Iraqi front, where they gave up 40%, the Islamic militias are on the retreat. What worries the caliph is not the loss of territory, but the lack of access to the resources that fuel the survival of his organization.

The smuggling of oil has seen a drop in revenues of 40%, the supplies of weapons, ammunitions, the influx of volunteers have all become increasingly difficult. In this respect, the situation is becoming critical, as some escapees have confirmed. After all, it was logical that an increase in the forces fighting against the Islamic State would have led to a downfall of the Islamist militias. The question is merely how long until they are totally defeated.

An international coalition

There are presently 65 countries that, with varying degrees of involvement, are contrasting the ISIS. There are about 7 thousand Russians in Syria, including regiments of Spetsnaz, about 50 aircrafts, helicopters and tanks. Around 4.500 US troops station in Iraq, both with special forces and trainers. Then there are the Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga, the Syrian Kurdish YPG, the Yazidi and Christian militias, the Shia volunteers, the Hezbollah and the Iranian Pasdaran, plus the Iraqi and Syrian armies. It doesn't come as a surprise that the least significant contribution is from Arab countries.

Warplanes from France, United States, Jordan, Canada, Australia and, following the attacks in Brussels, Belgium, Netherlands and United Kingdom bombard both in Syria and Iraq. Fighter jets from Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and Russia target the ISIS in Syria, while Denmark only flies over Iraq. According to the US, over the past nine months aerial strikes have eliminated around 10 thousand enemy combatants.

International inter-forces commands have been established in Damascus, Baghdad and Amman to coordinate the efforts against the Islamist militias. It is also significant that the war against the ISIS has helped overcome a series of international hurdles: the Russians communicate with the Israelis to avoid incidents, the Americans work hand in hand with the Russians to support the YPG, Iranians, Americans and Russians consult each other on the way forward in Iraq and so on.

The control over the airspace has been crucial. The ISIS doesn't have an aviation; they can rely on 6 airplanes that are grounded due to lack of maintenance, pilots and because they would surely be destroyed as soon as they take off. The weakness in the air is balanced by a strength on the ground, where the Islamic State is definitely more effective because its fighters are ready to die for the cause. They have recently been capable of flying drones for recognition missions over Iraq, but they have been incapable of arming them.

The turning point

The progressive defeat of the ISIS has coincided with the Russian support to Bashar al Assad. Since September 2015, a number of commanders from the Islamic State have been targeted and eliminated. It was the case of the commander of military ops in Syria, Abu Omar al Shishani, the Red Emir, whose real name was Tarkhan Batirashvili, or Abu Sayyaf, in charge of the oil sector, and Abu Ala al Afri, al Baghdadi's deputy and responsible of the group's finances. The targeting of the leaders of the ISIS by the US has been possible thanks to an improved intelligence. This usually means that the security apparatus of the militants is showing some cracks. Someone is now starting to talk or collaborate.

The military might of the ISIS is directly proportional to the influx of volunteers from across the globe. The United Nations estimates that there are about 30 thousand Foreign Fighters. 3/3.500 are Europeans, half of them French, around one hundred Americans, 2.500 Russian (4.700 if we also add those coming from former Soviet republics), and thousands of Arabs, mainly Tunisians (6.000), Saudis (2.500), Jordanians and Turks. This is more than double the amount of foreign fighters that went to Afghanistan. This influx is influenced by the evolution of the conflict and by the role played by neighboring countries. Now that Turkey seems to have closed its gates, the traffic to and from Syria has been reduced. Since the beginning of the caliphate, around 28 thousand militants have been killed.

How the fight will evolve

Does this imply that Islamic terrorism is heading towards a sound defeat? The answer is no. Both because the ISIS fights a non-conventional warfare with terrorist attacks, kamikazes and guerrilla, and also because its struggle is fueled by the fanaticism of those who believe in a religious conflict.

The strength of the ISIS is not only in the control of territory – although this was al Baghdadi's initial objective – but rather in preventing others from controlling it. If and when the Islamic State is ousted from Raqqa, it will revert to its main tactic of organizing terrorist attacks across the world. We've had some blatant examples in the past months. As a matter of fact, there is a direct correlation between the military defeats of the caliphate and the exponential growth of attacks elsewhere. This is mainly a psychological need to boost the morale of the fighters on the ground. But there is also a practical necessity linked to the fact that the ISIS doesn't have enough forces to control a vast amount of territory and cannot sustain a war of attrition.

Furthermore, the attacks abroad are generally organized by extremists that have returned home from their experience in Syria or Iraq. An estimated 15% of foreign fighters go back to their countries of origin, while 10% die in combat. This has been possible thanks to the access to both the printing machines that produce Syrian passports and the personal data registry of the Syrian population.

This shift in strategies is particularly evident in Iraq, where it is relatively simple to exploit the sectarian divide between Sunni and Shia. The ISIS stages its attacks away from the combat zones and inside Baghdad. The Iraqi army is even thinking about building a

fortified trench around the Iraqi capital to control the access to the city. In January 2016, 1.320 Iraqis were killed in terrorist attacks, 1.090 in February; around a quarter of these victims were in the Iraqi capital.

The Iraqi test

The fate of the ISIS will be determined by the efficacy of the Iraqi army. After having fled from Mosul and Ramadi in 2013 and giving up the two cities to the Islamic State, and after retaking Ramadi and Tikrit in 2015 with the help of Shia volunteers, Baghdad's army is now preparing to attack Mosul.

With the help of the Kurdish Peshmerga, supported and trained by the Americans, the Iraqi will have to regain the control of a city of two million people and a symbol of the conquests of the ISIS. Just like Raqqa in Syria, Mosul has a high symbolic value. It won't be easy to chase out al Baghdadi's men whom, in urban centers, can sustain a fight against forces that outnumber them and are better equipped. The US is training the Iraqi army to face a guerrilla war inside the city.

The tactics of the ISIS have already been tested in Ramadi. They will disseminate traps and mines, exploit tunnels and underground passages, use suicide bombers that will strike against the enemy front lines with armored trucks loaded with explosives, they will hide among the civilian population and use it as human shields. The Islamic States will go for a flexible defense, avoid high intensity direct clashes and carry out small counter-offensives, with the ultimate aim of gaining time and lose small portions of territory at a time.

The outcome of the fight in Mosul will also be linked to the behavior of the local majority Sunni population, that is generally hostile to the government in Baghdad. Put in a tight spot, the ISIS might resort to using chemical weapons, as it did in June 2015 against the YPG in Hasaka. The atrocities committed over the years by al Baghdadi's militias leave no room for surrender.

The Iraqi Prime Minister, Haider al Abadi, claims that the ISIS will be totally defeated in 2016. This is definitely an optimistic prevision. The issue is not wiping out al Baghdadi and his militants, but rather diminishing the appeal of the ideology that goes with the Islamic State. Unfortunately, a so-called caliphate has ruled over a territory for almost 3 years, with its law, victories and conquests under the flag of Islam. This has such a fascination for many that the appeal that once belonged to Al Qaeda is now owned by the ISIS. Terrorism needs to be defeated on the ideological and theological front. And only Islamic nations can contribute to its downfall. If they intend to do so, of course.

A EUROPEAN INTELLIGENCE AGENCY?

The latest attacks in Paris and Brussels have raised, once again, the issue of the cooperation between the intelligence agencies of the different countries member of the European Union. Showing a limited knowledge of how confidential information is shared, some have evoked the creation of a European Intelligence Agency. Any secret service protects the national security of the country it belongs to. Cooperation among agencies only happens if and when national interests overlap. When individual country's interests prevail, there is no collaboration, or just a very limited one. This is an inescapable rule.

The rules of collaboration

Islamic terrorism and the hunt for ISIS cells in Europe are surely primary targets for all European intelligence agencies. This will mean countries will seek renewed forms of cooperation, but to think of a unified intelligence service is a totally different issue. Firstly, when intelligence agencies cooperate they rarely share the details of how they acquired a specific piece of information. Rightly so, everyone safeguards their sources. During their research activities, every agency works with non-conventional methods, often beyond or at the limits of the rule of law.

Another limit to increased collaboration is the possibility of carrying out joint operations. Even if two agencies happen to share a common informative target, they will still each act on their own. The case of physically joint operations are extremely rare. Every agency has its own modus operandi, its own techniques, different sets of rules and diverse guidelines. Two agents from two different secret services never work together. They may share information, but will operate independently once on the ground. While carrying out an investigation, each of them will make his own choices, take risks and be held accountable for his actions. He can't be responsible for the actions of a colleague without the knowledge of his counterpart's operational guidelines. In this context, it is worthwhile keeping in mind that infiltrating a terrorist group puts the life of the personnel involved at peril.

As far as the sharing of information is concerned, European countries have put in place a cooperation mechanism. On specific topics, data is share in real time via telematic channels, or through the representatives of foreign secret services that station, sometimes in a regime of reciprocity, in any given country. Furthermore, there are also bilateral or multilateral mechanisms that are activated either on a regular basis, or when the circumstances require to do so.

The Berna Club

Europe can count on a series of forums where secret services come together to cooperate or reinforce bilateral relations. The Club of Berna is one of them. All of the 28 countries of the European Union and their respective intelligence agencies, plus Norway and Switzerland, are part of the club. The Club of Berna meets annually and sees the Directors of each agency come together to share opinions, analysis, share ideas and propose joint initiatives.

The organism was founded in 1971 and, following the downfall of the Soviet Union, gradually absorbed also the countries from Eastern Europe. The club does not have a structure and the meetings are held on rotation in the different European capitals. The host country sets the agenda and organizes the event. Following the attacks on the Twin Towers in 2001, the club has created another organism: the so-called Antiterrorism Group. Its task is to fight the threat of terrorism in Europe. This is probably the most important structure that sees the cooperation and the sharing of intelligence among the countries of the old continent.

Other intelligence forums

There are also other forums that meet on a regular basis for the sharing of intelligence and to promote cooperation. There is the Brenner Club, that gathers intelligence agencies from Western countries, the Megatonne, dedicated to the fight against Islamic terrorism, the Star Group, that focuses on drug trafficking from Asia and features the US DEA, the MedClub, whose members are the secret services of the countries in the Mediterranean with the exception of Libya until Gaddafi was the ruler, the Kilowatt Group, founded by Israel following the 1972 Munich attacks and that sees the participation of 24 countries including the United States and Europe, and many more.

Besides these gatherings of intelligence agencies, there are also cooperation forums for police forces: the Vienna Group, with the Interior Ministers from France, Germany, Italy, Austria and Switzerland, the TREVI (Terrorism, Radicalization, Extremism and Political Violence), founded in 1975 and now replaced by the JHA (Justice and Home Affairs) of the European Union, the Police Working Group on Terrorism, that features all countries in Europe including Norway and Switzerland, and so forth. The most prominent agency for police forces is obviously Europol, that coordinates police activities and is not solely dedicated to the fight against terrorism.

Police vs Intelligence

Despite the proliferation of agencies, meetings, forums, two details emerge: within the European Union there are no organisms specifically dedicated to the fight against terrorism; secondly, police and intelligence services work on parallel tracks. There is no synchronization, no common European security apparatus or activity. There are several attempts to cooperate. These initiatives are often dictated by traumatic events, but there is no such thing as a common European security policy, both in practical and cultural terms.

Furthermore, there is a constant overlapping between the duties and activities of police forces and intelligence agencies. What news is acquired on the intelligence circuit is not transmitted to the police and vice-versa. These two systems do not communicate because they are employed by different organisms. The activities of police forces rely on the authorization of the judiciary, the intelligence doesn't.

Although lacking a specific unified structure, one could object that there are a myriad of European organizations tasked with sharing analysis, informations or initiatives, both on a bilateral and regional level, to tackle the threat deriving from terrorism.

The issue of the originator

To this effect, there is an underlying issue when dealing with news coming from an intelligence agency. A secret service that obtains a piece of information decides who to share it with. The agency that receives it is not allowed to transmit it to another one. This procedure, that is accepted by all parties, has a technical motivation: if an information is passed on from one secret service to the next (and, keep in mind, no agency ever provides the source of its infos), there is a risk of confirming a given data and making it seem as if the same piece of information is coming from more sources when there is only one originator. This is a crucial issue when it comes to the reliability and credibility of a news that, if confirmed by more sources, becomes an actual piece of information.

Such an impasse could be circumvented by creating a unique channel for the transit and transmission of information. But such a channel doesn't exist in Europe. The Turkish secret services claim they informed their Belgian counterparts on a possible attack in Brussels and on the people that could have carried it out. One should verify whether the information was passed on to the French services or if the Belgians kept it to themselves, with the results we've all seen.

Any solutions?

Terrorism is such an extended and articulate social phenomena that it requires a joint international effort. Our common interest should prevail over national egotism. As we've mentioned, every secret service acts on behalf of its national security guidelines. It is hard to envisage a shift towards international goals. This will be possible only if interests will converge. There is no such thing as a European intelligence agency, nor will there be one in the near future. It would be sufficient to point out how not even NATO has an intelligence service of its own, but relies on the contributions of the countries part of the Alliance.

What is foreseeable is the creation of a European mechanism dedicated to the fight against terrorism and capable of channeling all of the intelligence and policing informations that the member countries decide to share. One could envisage something similar to a European anti-terrorism prosecutor.

The issue is that, in each country, anti-terrorism activities are managed by different organisms. In Italy, for instance, the proliferation and dispersion of efforts was tackled with the creation of a "Comitato di Analisi Strategica Antiterrorismo" (Committee for Anti-terrorism Strategic Analysis, CASA), where both police force and intelligence services meet. A similar joint-forces structure could be formed in Europe and focus on operational initiatives.

Will this be enough to prevent a repeat of terrorist attacks on European soil? Probably not, but it would be a first step in the fight against terrorism. Europe will also have to curb some of its libertarian ideals in the name of security. Controls will have to be reinstated over the Schengen countries and on the free circulation and transit of citizens. A security mechanism will have to put in place over public transport (airports, train stations, subways, ports) because this is where terrorists will want to strike. Following 911, security measures

on airplanes have proven to be successful. We now have to focus on the access points to public transport. Making Europe more secure will curtail the liberty of its citizens in terms of both privacy and controls. This is the price to pay.