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IRAQ : THE WEAK LINK IN THE WAR AGAINST THE ISIS

The war against the ISIS is being fought both in Syria and in Iraq. On the Syrian side the army and its allies are causing great difficulty to Al Baghdadi's militias. The same isn't true of the Iraqi side. Why? The weakness of the Iraqi army, founded on a sectarian basis, is one reason. But there are also other reasons, namely the problems between Shiites and Sunnis, the separatist drive of the Kurds, corruption and political feuds.

The rise of Haider al Abadi to the helm of the country, with the consequent expulsion of a sectarian figure like Nouri al Maliki still hasn't produced the much-hoped-for national reconciliation between Shiites and Sunnis; the only thing that could give some prestige to the central government.

Currently, the figures show that there is a creeping civil war in Iraq: 1320 casualties in January; 1090 in February and roughly 1200 in March.

In thirteen years of wars and intestine struggles - from the ousting of Saddam Hussein on - over 175 thousand people were killed. A huge amount of deaths that affects the social cohesion of the entire nation.

These casualties are not entirely ascribable to the fight against the ISIS, whose ruthlessness finds room nonetheless amid the social tension.

In 2015, out of 22 thousand casualties (and over 17 thousand wounded), the executions carried out by the ISIS amounted to 7000. The previous year, casualties and wounded totaled roughly 36 thousand.

There is, of course, a concentration of killings in the areas where the war is being fought (Anbar, Ninive, Diyala, Saleheddin) but what worries most is that roughly 23% of the victims have been killed in the area in and around Baghdad. This shows that Islamic terrorism is well rooted in the country and that it is supported by the code of silence of the Sunnis - not just the Baathist-sympathizing ones.

In the light of this and with an army that part of the population considers to be hostile (at least the Sunni 35-37% of the population); which is scarcely trained (despite the efforts by the US); which is surely less professional than Saddam Hussein's army (where the majority were Sunnis); that is plagued by corruption (see the "ghost" soldiers - non-existent soldiers, each paid 600 dollars per month by the government; there were roughly

50 thousand of them), it is quite difficult to put up a fight against the ISIS. In addition to all this, the fighting is concentrated in areas where the population is mostly Sunni.

This is the state of affairs as the government prepares to launch a campaign to re-conquer the city of Mosul, with roughly two million inhabitants; where the Islamic militias are barricaded while awaiting the mother of all battles.

If Mosul falls, the defeat of the ISIS will be tangible. Of course the terrorist attacks will continue, as they have since 2003 with or without Al Baghdadi (as they did with Abu Musab al Zarqawi before him).

Baghdad, where the campaign is being planned, is locked in a political stalemate that prevents the Prime Minister from taking any decision. This affects both the mobilization and the conscription of the troops.

Prime Minister Abadi is presently facing dissidence within the Shiite political community. Such dissidence is instrumental in the rise of Moqtada al Sadr, a cleric known for his radical ideas and for using a private militia, the “Saraya al Salam” (the “Brigade of Peace”) to enforce them. The same al Sadr who, shortly after the war in 2003, was heading another militia, the “Army of Madhi” and whom the US have repeatedly tried to eliminate. For five years (from 2004 to 2009), al Sadr fought the Sunnis and the US, then he hid in the shadow for a few years, only to resurface in a new, “reformist”, version as the self-proclaimed paladin of the fight against corruption.

Yet it is not just the political objections of al Sadr (who joined forces with Al Maliki) which divides the alliance of Shiite parties that currently run Iraq. There is the disastrous economic situation that weights on the population: unemployment, corruption of State officials, crumbling social services, reforms that are promised but never delivered.

Iran has recently tried to mediate in order to ease the differences within the Shiite community by sending General Qassem Suleimani, commander of the Revolutionary Guards, on a “diplomatic” mission to Iraq, with little success.

But that’s not all. Abadi also has difficulties coping with the Kurdish political group within the Iraqi parliament and this could enlarge the differences between Kurdistan – and its separatist aims – and Baghdad. As a matter of fact, Kurdistan will be holding a referendum on their independence from Iraq in November this year.

The Iraqi army can conquer Mosul only with the military support of the Kurdish Peshmerga who would fight alongside the 30-35 thousand soldiers (as esteemed by US generals) that Baghdad is struggling to recruit. Also, if they are to conquer Mosul, the Iraqi army will have to strive to respect the social sensibility of the city’s population, who is mostly Sunni, and who will be alarmed by the presence of a Shiite army supported by Shiite volunteer militias (the “forces for popular mobilization” aka “al Hashd al shaabi” and the Iranian Pasdaran) and the Kurd Peshmerga. Last but not least, the Peshmerga have failed so far to strike an agreement with the army on how the operation should be carried out.

Various attempts by the US to train Sunni volunteer militias have so far produced scarce results (since 2003, the US have spent roughly 20 billion dollars to rebuild the Iraqi army and security forces). The underlying fear is that, by arming the Sunni militias, one would endanger the Shiite government in Baghdad. This has been true since 2004, when the reconstruction of the Iraqi army began. Back then, everyone feared that the army would become a sectarian tool in the hands of the Shiites. Since 2004, not only were the Sunnis not armed, but the Shiite army was also inadequately armed for the same reasons.

If the ethnic-religious issue is not handled with caution, the ISIS, backed by a good part of Mosul's population, could succeed in resisting. Urban combat is an asymmetric form of war where it is easier to defend than to attack. Also, when the ISIS is in a corner, they tend to become more aggressive: in the first quarter of 2016, the attacks by the Caliph's militias against Iraqi targets have increased by 40%.

Last year the US Secretary of Defense, Ash Carter, stated that the Iraqi army lacked the "will to fight". This criticism was followed by Abadi's protests, that forced the US vice-President Biden, who was visiting Baghdad at the time, to deny the circumstance. It is nonetheless an unequivocal fact that, when the ISIS conquered Mosul and Ramadi, the Iraqi army fled without even trying to put up a fight.

In Iraq, the ISIS managed to spread thanks to the connivance of the Sunni population (especially the cadres of the dissolved Baath party) and to the military support of the former members of Saddam Hussein's army. Logistically, the weapons taken from the fleeing enemy have made the ISIS stronger.

In Iraq, the contradictions of a mutating world are always present and the sides at war are ever changing. Today we see the US siding with Iraq, with the Iranian Pasdaran and with the Shiite militias that fight the ISIS; the airstrikes that destroy ISIS structures in Syria are coordinated with Russia.

There are currently 5 thousand US soldiers stationed in Iraq. These soldiers do not participate actively in the war (at least not directly, but they station in the front lines and suffer casualties nonetheless), they are supposed to provide training and technical support to the Iraqi army. In perspective, their presence is stronger than that of the 200/250 soldiers stationed with the Kurdish YPG in Syria.

Most of the Caliph's troops - about two-thirds of the 30-35 thousand ISIS combatants - are currently stationed in Syria, especially around the "capital", Raqqa. After all, the survival of Al Baghdadi's organization is founded on the logistical support and manual labor that travels across the border with Turkey, within a corridor no wider than 70 kilometers. Once that corridor has been closed, the defeat of the ISIS will be just a matter of time. But the fate of Raqqa and Mosul are interdependent; the former represents the symbol of the newborn Caliphate, the latter is the most important city therein.

But behind the military fate of the ISIS in Syria and Iraq there is another, creeping, war being fought: a war between the US and Russia that will influence the future balance of powers in the Middle East. There is an ongoing competition between the two superpowers

on who can acquire more negotiating power in the region. In this respect, Russia is facilitated by the fact that they are fighting the war together with Assad's troops, and every victory in Syria enlarges their prestige. The same cannot be said of the US which, with the Obama administration, practiced a non-interventionist line. The US tried not to get directly involved, save for training, procurement of arms and aerial strikes. Whoever will manage to topple the Caliphate by conquering Raqqa or Mosul will surely benefit politically from the victory in the near future.

In the light of all this, the current difficulties encountered by the Iraqi army in their plan to recapture Mosul have negative repercussions on US political aims. And that's why Baghdad has been visited so frequently by US government officials: first by the Secretary of State John Kerry, then by the Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter and, finally, by vice-President Joe Biden.

Abadi's biggest challenge is to form a new, technical, government that can enact the reforms demanded by country's population in a series of demonstrations. And since Abadi is politically moderate and pro-Western, the demonstrations have been used by individuals like Moqtada al Sadr and by the former Prime Minister Maliki to gain consensus. Both of them would like to take the helm from Abadi's hands: the former through the force of "dissuasion" of his private militia "Saraya al Salam", while the latter though claim that he created and supported the "forces for popular mobilization".

The demonstrations were so vigorous that the crowd managed to break into the green zone and to occupy parliament, with the consequent proclamation of a state of emergency by police forces.

Political manipulations aside, the country is paying the price for 13 years of lacerating war and for the low price of oil, which is Iraq's main staple. Public employees, a category that is rapidly increasing in number due to nepotism, have seen their salaries withheld and the public finances are plagued by the price of war and reconstruction. Even here, sectarianism generates discrimination and resentment.

Since that decisive March 20th, 2003, when the international coalition of the "willing" began the second Iraqi war that ousted Saddam Hussain, to June 29, 2014, when Al Baghdadi announced the creation of the Caliphate in a Mosul mosque and up to this very day, the population of Iraq has seen nothing but suffering, mourning, wars, feuds and violence. They have gone from one social disgrace to the next and there doesn't seem to be any light at the end of the tunnel. All of this death and oppression has been coupled with mass destruction and the creation of about a million refugees that have lost everything.

There has been much war but nobody has ever bothered to build a chance for peace. Saddam Hussein's regime, although authoritarian and bloody, managed to ensure a sort of brutal social cohesion to the country. The disintegration of Saddam's regime caused a civil war; sparked sectarian claims; fueled separatist aims; did away with security and left the field right open to abuses of power. All of this is quite visible and should have been clear

enough to avoid – 8 years later - the same mistakes in Libya. Unfortunately, in the Middle East, history doesn't teach any lessons.

ISLAM AND ISIS

The ISIS is basically engaged on two fronts: one against the apostates, and the other against the non-believers. The apostates are those who have abandoned their religion, including rules and precepts, and are usually associated with the Shia. This explains the recent wave of attacks against the Shia in Iraq and Lebanon, and those targeting the Alawites in Syria. When the concept is stretched, the regimes of Egypt and Turkey are also apostates when they oppose the caliphate. And the penalty for apostasy is, according to several *hadiths*, death. Instead, the non-believers are the atheists, or those belonging to other creeds, like the christian “crusaders” – recently targeted in Paris and Brussels – or the yazidis, the jews and so forth.

This is what pushes the ISIS in the fight to create a caliphate, but it is also its Achilles's heel. Being against each and everyone will ultimately lead to Abu Bakr al Baghdadi's defeat. Nonetheless, both terrorism and the widespread Islamic ideology that fuels it will remain. To eradicate extremism will take decades and will not be accomplished without the direct support of muslim countries.

After the caliphate

Besides the fight against other religions, the main conflict is within Sunnism and between its fundamentalist salafist soul and the more moderate and ascetic sufi one. One could object that the rise of Sunni Islamic terrorism has been favored by a series of exogenous circumstances – the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Palestinian issue, the fall of Gaddafi, the restoration of the military dictatorship in Egypt – and endogenous ones – the lack of democracy and the brutality of the regimes across the Middle East – yet these are but mere side-dishes to the main and central theological war within Sunnism.

It is also clear that the political and military struggle between Sunni countries, with Saudi Arabia in the lead, and Shia ones, basically Iran, has favored radicalization and thus helped the ISIS. However, behind the theological smokescreen there are also a number of other elements at play: the fight for the hegemony in the Middle East, the strategic interests of the superpowers, the control of energy resources. The ISIS is never the cause, but the combined outcome of all of the above dynamics.

The West, Russia, some Arab or muslim countries all think of a military solution to defeat the ISIS. This was the same approach adopted by the United States in Afghanistan and Iraq and, more recently, in Libya. They only thought about getting rid of the enemy, but little did they think about what would happen next. We are now at risk of repeating the same mistake all over.

The military approach is logical when facing a traditional warfare. But in this case, this is a non-conventional war, this is terrorism and the strength of one's army has only a limited value. Terrorism cannot be erased with a conflict, but has to be eradicated from the social texture where it breeds and finds support. This will only be possible through a revision of Sunni theology on one side, and an improvement of the living conditions of the Arab people on the other. Will this be possible?

The fundamentalist soul in Sunnism benefits from a wide support due to two factors: the economic power of Saudi wahabism and the social engineering of the Muslim Brotherhood. We also always have to keep mind that Islam has no Vatican; there is no central authority to define the interpretation of the sacred books and thus guide the community. Any school of thought can come up with its own interpretation of the same lines and thus twist their concepts in the direction it likes. This approach results in the muslims being told everything and its opposite. Salafism wants to reinstate the Islam of the origins, it is against any modernity and is at the basis of the extremism that bursts into terrorism. It is hence not just a theological problem, but also a cultural one. And when you enter this time warp, you find yourself in the era that followed the death of Mohamed: territorial conquests, the fight against the infidels, the beheading of the enemies.

The concept of jihad

One of the key concepts that has been transformed into a tool of war is that of jihad. In Islamic culture, the term was initially employed to identify a series of practices to free the spirit from vice and from religiously inadequate behaviors. A series of spiritual rites to discipline and purify the believer that are typical of moderate sufi Islam. The predominantly moral role of the jihad did not prevent, when needed, to it being used when defending oneself during a conflict. The salafis have twisted the concept and turned it into an offensive one, politically motivating the recourse to the jihad. The ISIS, as other groups before it, employ the jihad in their armed struggle, to recruit and to dominate power.

More than any other religion, Islam has a strong social impact and results in the overlapping of religion and politics. This is true for Sunnism and, even more, for Shiism. Khomeini claimed that "Islam is politics, otherwise it is not Islam". The Muslim Brothers are the Sunni equivalent of the ayatollah's regime. This is why they are banned in several Arab countries as they try to overstep their religious role. What has happened in Egypt, where the confraternity was originally founded, is a clear example of this.

In such a radical view of Islam, the establishment of a caliphate tops the list also for the Muslim Brotherhood. What differs is how to reach that target: through a social process and not via a military conflict. One of the slogans often repeated during their rallies sums this up: "Islam is the solution". And when we talk of "offensive" jihad, one of the first proponents to develop and promote the fight against western culture was one of the Brotherhood's most important theologians, Sayyid Qutb.

The schools of thought

There are a series of schools of thought in Islam. The four main Sunni ones were born in the years immediately following the passing away of Mohamed: the moderate "hanafi", the "shafi'i" focusing on Islamic law, the "maliki" that has always been opposed to sufism and the "hanbali", the most radical one and the basis for modern day extremist and salafi ideology.

What differs from one school of thought to the next is their approached to the sacred books. They shift from a literal and uncritical reading of the texts to an historical, analogical

and contextualized analysis of the words of god. In the first case, whatever is on paper is just sacred and cannot be altered by time. There is no way the preachings can be adapted to a mutating world. This is the dogma. The truth, the *haqiqa*, of the sacred texts is immutable.

It is pretty clear that the literal approach is the simplest one to put into practice. It doesn't require any theological dissertation or understanding and can be easily assimilated and applied even by uneducated people. This is what also facilitates the ISIS, although we should not forget Abu Bakr al Baghdadi studied Islamic law at the Baghdad university and is an expert manipulator.

Another characteristic of the Islamic dogma is that god decides our fate, there is no such thing as free will. If a combatant dies or wins it is for god to decide, that's it. We are all at the mercy of a superior being. The ISIS militant faces his destiny with the awareness that he is just a tool fulfilling a divine scheme. This explains why so many people are willing to turn into "martyrs". Life has no value if it cannot be sacrificed to one's god.

The history of the spreading of Islam is associated with military conquests spanning from the Dar Islam, the land of the muslims, to the Dar Harb, the land of the infidels. This is familiar to other monotheistic religions as well, although in different historical periods. We should always remember about the crusades from 1099 until 1272. In other words, Islam is a millennium late in terms of religiously fueled conflicts. The same goes for the literal interpretation of the sacred books. If one were to do it with the Bible, he would probably reach similar conclusions as the salafis.

Lacking any other ideological alternative – communism was for the christians, while Arab socialism served the purposed of keeping the Baath parties into autocratic power – the Middle East has not been able to free itself from political Islam. It should hence not come as a surprise that anything, from class struggles to war, is fought in the name of Allah.

Presently, those inspiring armed salafism are the Algerian Djamel Beghal, hosted in French prisons and affiliated with al Takfir wal Hijra, Abu Khalid al Suri – nom de guerre of Mohammed Baahaiah – one of the leaders of Ahrar al Sham killed in Aleppo in 2014, Jordanian Abu Mohammed al Tahawi, alias Abdul Qadir Shahada, and the Syrian Abu Musab al Suri, aka Mustafa bin Abdelqadir Setmariyan Nasser, author and theorist of the jihad. They have all replaced traditional theologians and provided an alibi to extremists. Their ideas are the one we have to fight.

AFRICA: A CONTINENT FIT FOR ISIS

If there is one continent where the conditions are ideal for the expansion of Islamic terrorism that is surely Africa. Widespread poverty, non-existent democracy, endemic corruption, low education, unemployment, low expectations for a decent life. There is a social humus capable of harboring the most extreme ideas and where violence can be fueled by resentment. And this can potentially happen anywhere across the continent.

Firstly, Africa is a region where about half of the population is muslim. In some countries there is a clear predominance: Algeria, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Gambia, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Libya, Mauritania, Mali, Mayotte, Morocco, Senegal, Sudan, Somalia, Tunisia. If we take a closer look, in some of these countries Islamic terrorism is already present. Unlike the Middle East, this is not a sectarian terrorism because there is hardly any Shia in Africa. Apart from a few minor groups in Senegal and Nigeria, the overwhelming majority of muslims are Sunni. Yet, there is ample room to fight against the apostates: the Sufi confraternities that are widespread throughout the continent.

Secondly, there are those countries where christians and muslims are equally divided: Burkina Faso, Chad, Sierra Leone, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Ivory Coast. In these cases it is also possible to wage a war against the infidels. Surely, Islamic terrorism in Africa does not share the same characteristics as the one in the Middle East. It is less dogmatic and rooted in doctrine, it is often associated with tribal or ethnic issues, but this does not imply it is less dangerous or bloody.

The afflux of terrorists from Syria and Iraq to Libya shows that if things go wrong over there, the ISIS will seek new bases and hideouts elsewhere. Libya, just like Tunisia and the other countries in the Maghreb, all share similar characteristics with the Middle East. Yet, the biggest threat is the spread of terrorism along sub-Saharan Africa. The recent wave of attacks in Bamako, Ouagadougou and Grand Bassam point to a real and growing threat.

Gaddafi's intuition

Muammar Gaddafi was an expert in terrorism, both because he employed it during the first phase of his reign, and then fought it during his last days in power. What the Libyan leader feared was the expansion of extremism in the Sahel. This is why he had proposed to the West to create an anti-terrorism center in Bamako, Mali, and to train a rapid intervention force that could be activated if need be. At the time, the French opposed the idea because it threatened their hegemonic political and military role in the French-speaking countries in the region, the Americans and the British simply didn't trust the Colonel, while the Libyans themselves pitched the proposal, but never detailed what exactly they had in mind. And so the Libyan dictator's intuition never saw the light.

What everyone feared was the soldering of Algerian Islamic terrorism with the Somali al Shabaab, thus creating a unique terrorist conglomerate along the sub-Saharan belt. Circumstances have proven Gaddafi was right. Although it hasn't still reached Somalia, Boko Haram in Nigeria have started to share the modus operandi and the techniques

employed by the ISIS, including the preparation of explosive devices. This has been confirmed during the recent visit to Chad of US General Donald Bolduc, in charge of operations in Africa.

Who fights against terrorism in Africa

The colonial heritage, which we now call spheres of influence, implies that it is the former colonial powers that are now in charge of the fight against terrorism. The UK acts under the umbrella of the Commonwealth in the 18 African countries that are still members of the Queen's club, the French use the CFA (Communauté Financière Africaine), Italy helps Somalia, Spain, Belgium and Portugal their former colonies, while the United States, lacking its own colonial past, deploys its troops across the continent simply because it is a superpower.

The French have the biggest military presence in Africa, with soldiers stationed in several bases in the French-speaking countries. The Foreign Legion counts on 2 thousand men in Djibouti, 1.500 are in the Central African Republic, around a thousand in Gabon and Chad, 400 troops in Ivory Coast under the mission "Licorne", and several other smaller contingents scattered across Senegal, Guinea, Niger and Cameroon. The biggest deployment is in Mali, where Islamic terrorism almost took over the country and 3 thousand men of the Operation Barkhane are there to prevent it will happen again. France has shown it is ready to intervene in case of any regional emergency. It did so in 2013/2014 in Mali with Operation Serval, and before that in Chad with Operation Eparvier, and earlier in Ivory Coast and so forth. Paris still intends to play a lead role in any upheaval or unrest capable of threatening the status quo, whether it is terrorism-related or not.

The US military is more discrete, but not less efficient. The main American base is in Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti, where about 4 thousand men are deployed, together with airplanes and navy. The operations are under the command of AFRICOM, that is based in Germany. The air raids against the al Shabaab in Somalia take off from Djibouti. The US is planning to open two more bases, one in Cameroon and another one in Agadez, in Niger. The United States are training, supporting, carrying out joint exercises with most of the sub-Saharan countries. They can also count on 57 of what they call "Cooperative security locations" across the continent. They train Special Forces in at least 30 countries under the ATA, Anti-Terrorism Assistance, budget.

Several other countries also offer their assistance to African countries, like the Italians in Somalia. But despite all these efforts, African nations are still incapable, at least in most cases, of defending themselves from terrorism. Nigeria, possibly the most blatant example, had to resort to hiring private military companies to fight Boko Haram. Mercenaries that were paid 400 dollars per day. The African Union has tried to propel the idea of a rapid intervention force against terrorism, but nothing has been achieved.

The different faces of terrorism

There are several and diverse terrorist or rebel groups in Africa. A lot of them are inspired by religion, most are Islamic, but some – like the Lord Resistance Army (LRA) in Uganda – are christian. They usually emerge where there is a widespread social discontent and often resort to a religious justification at a later stage. In some other cases, they are linked to liberation struggles or independency movements, like the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad in Mali (NMLA) and the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) in Nigeria. Often tribal ties bring the members of these groups together. This is the case for Boko Haram, whose militants are mainly Kanuri; of Ansar Eddin and the NMLA, composed of Tuareg; of the LRA and its Acholi base; of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), whose members are Arabs; the Macina Liberation Front in Mali composed mainly of Fulani and so forth.

The common denominator between all these different groups is the exploitation of social discontent, injustice and misery. The bigger the despair, as in the Sahel, the higher the terrorism. Sometimes other factors are also at play. A criminal element, for instance, prevails in Mokhtar Benmokhtar's Mourabitoun. The famous smuggler pursues a so-called “economic” jihad. In other instances, what is originally a national phenomenon spills over into neighboring countries. The aforementioned Kanuris also live in Chad, Niger and Cameroon. It is not a coincidence that Boko Haram found a safe haven in these countries across the border.

Islamic terrorist groups in Africa are either associated with Al Qaeda or the Islamic State. The choice reflects the success of the moment and is not based on ideological or theological criteria. Furthermore, unlike in Syria, belonging to either one does not imply a conflict between opposing factions, although this may happen as in the case of Benmokhtar's affiliation with Al Qaeda during his infighting with other local groups. Very few groups have expressed their allegiance to the ISIS in Africa. The al Shabaab did so after a bloody internal debate. Boko Haram's chief Abubakar Shekau, instead, adhered enthusiastically. Either way, this does not diminish the threat posed by Islamic militancy. It is fortunate that AQIM and the ISIS haven't put in place a strategic cooperation in Africa. At least for now.