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ISRAEL. THE NEW TARGET OF THE ISIS?

Among the tumult of the Mid-East we can find civil wars, the restoration of military regimes, religious contests between Shiites and Sunnis, hegemonic problems between Saudi Arabia and Iran, a rebirth of Russian influence and the dissociation between US politics and that country's military strategy. These circumstances have upset the balance of powers in the region; they have caused friendships and accords to end, made alliances unstable and, all in all, have produced politically unnatural harmony between some states that were previously enemies.

In the end, the interests of each single nation have emerged as being paramount. Politics and diplomacy have made way for pragmatism. Barriers and alliances are finished and each nation has tried to make a profit from the rising social chaos.

In the fight against the ISIS, Israel has so far kept a very low profile because they thought that the Islamic movement did not constitute a clear and present threat for Israel. The ISIS was, after all, useful, because it weakened the various hostile Arab nations and organizations that represent a threat for Israel, such as the Hezbollah.

According to the Israeli army, the Hezbollah have suffered roughly 1500 casualties and three times as many wounded in their fight against the ISIS; a circumstance that leaves Jerusalem smiling. Yet there are always two sides to the medal, because, if Assad manages to hold on to power, the merits acquired by the Hezbollah during the war against the ISIS will allow the Party of God to thrive from Syrian support and to keep a direct line with Iran, which is the main military sponsor of the Lebanese Shiite movement. Also, the fighting experience gained by the Shiite militias could render them more dangerous in a future confrontation with Israel.

A distant observer

So far Israel has not mixed itself much with the war in Syria; they monitor the events and occasionally land air strikes against the Hezbollah or provide medical assistance (and military assistance, as demonstrated by the seizure by Assad's army of a load of Israeli weapons) to some of the rebel factions. At any rate, any future Syrian layout without Assad may represents a bigger threat yet for Israel.

Israel's primary objectives are to solve the problem of the intifada in the occupied territories and to strike against Hamas in Gaza. Once these primary issues are solved, then Israel may work to find a political positioning in the regional events. After all, the brutality displayed daily by the ISIS distracts the attention of the international community from the repressive measures enacted by Israel against the Palestinians and on the

growth of the Israeli colonies within the occupied territories. The world-famous 'Palestinian' issue, which was once a central element in the region, has now been cast aside to make room for bigger problems. There are no ongoing negotiations – Israel doesn't want any – no concessions or grants; there isn't even the international pressure to force such concessions on Israel's part. And it is now clear that, by refraining from supporting the Palestinian struggle, the ISIS has suffered from very few frictions with Israel. Israel is convinced, after all, that the ISIS will sooner or later be destroyed, while the Palestinian issue will remain.

Truth be told, it's not just Israel that has ducked out on the issue of the Islamic militias. The ISIS itself has kept a distance – for the time being – from the Palestinian issue because, in the Caliph's mind, the Palestinian claims are of a territorial nature, while al Baghdadi pursues a goal of global expansion, where nations and borders have no real reason for existing. The Palestinians fight in the name of a peoples, while the ISIS fights in the name of all Muslims. Hamas is closely linked to the Hezbollah and the Hezbollah are one of the main military adversaries of the ISIS. In addition to this, the Palestinian National Authority and the OLP are non-religious organizations.

So why should one rally in support of the Palestinian cause when its' population doesn't fit the religious guidelines of the ISIS? In a July 2015 video the ISIS even threatened to eradicate Hamas from Gaza. Last year, in Gaza, there were dozens of attacks and clashes between Hamas militants and ISIS sympathizers. These clashes occurred despite statements by the Israeli Intelligence Minister Katz about an ongoing collaboration between Hamas and the ISIS against Israel. Rhetoric left aside, it is more likely that Israel and the ISIS be united in the name of their hatred for Hamas.

But in the Middle Eastern chaos there are even more remote and unlikely possibilities, such as that of Israel making "secret" pseudo-alliances with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries (secret contacts between the two sides have already taken place) in order to contrast the Iranian threat.

The interests of Sunni nations and those of Israel converge in the name of the nuclear program. And it is this precise circumstance – after the signing of the international accord – that has soured the relationship between Netanyahu and the US President Obama. In this respect, and with the nearing of a change at the helm of the White House, it is better for Israel to keep a low profile in the region and wait for a better time to act.

Growing tension

Yet it will be hard for Israel to stick to this policy. On March 19, in Istanbul, an ISIS sympathizer blew himself up amid a group of tourists, killing 3 Israelis and wounding 11 more. And there were news of a possible ISIS attack against Jewish schools in turkey, forcing the Israeli government to raise their level of alert and invite its citizens to leave the country. During the previous months there had already been signs of danger: in October 2015, during the Palestinian revolts, the ISIS had aired a video in Hebrew in which they announced their intent to eliminate every last Jew in Jerusalem. In December, Al Baghdadi released a recorded message, threatening to attack Israel in the near future. Then, a few weeks ago, a new video was published in which Ayman al Zawahiri invites the Salafite

militiamen to unite in their fight against Israel. A similar statement by Osama bin Laden's son, Hamza, followed shortly thereafter.

What is most worrisome for Israel is that, on the 7th and 8th of May, they received about ten messages simultaneously from various ISIS-controlled territories (Syria, Iraq, Sinai, Libya). Each of the messages threatened Israel in what appeared to be a planned and motivated strategy. It is not yet clear whether this is a strategy aimed at motivating the Salafite combatants, who are facing a difficult situation, or if it is a sudden change in policy.

Either way, Israel has never underestimated the threat posed by the ISIS which, apart from being present on the Syrian front, is also stationed in the Sinai (the "Beit al Maqdess" militias, officially affiliated with the ISIS). On July 3, 2015, three Grad missiles were fired from the Sinai into Israeli territory, forcing the government to close the border with Egypt. There are therefore two potential threats for Israel, one in the north, along the border with Syria, and one in the south, near the border with the Sinai peninsula. In August 2012, a group of Beit al Maqdess combatants crossed into Israel from Egypt on board a military vehicle. The vehicle was immediately destroyed by an Israeli fighter jet.

A new brigade

To face these growing threats, Israel has put together a new commando Brigade dedicated to non-conventional warfare. The Brigade is made up of various units of the Israeli army's special forces. These include the unit specialized in covert operations in enemy territory (the "Duvdevan"), the one specialized in interfering with enemy systems and in data gathering and transmission (the "Maglan" or "Unit 212"), the special counter-guerrilla unit (the "Egoz") and the special reconnaissance unit (the "Rimon"). This new Brigade is an elite corp that is ready to face the enemy outside Israel's national territory with non-conventional engagement methods. Furthermore, Israel has set up a new secret central command from which they can monitor the borders and the nearby nations; the command has the capacity to monitor multiple missions at once.

Israel's danger list

Iran (which has recently tested a ballistic missile with a range of 2000 kilometers) tops the Israeli danger list, the Palestinian conflict comes in second and the ISIS threat is only third. Even when examined militarily, the ISIS is no match for the Israeli army – both numerically and qualitatively. It doesn't possess adequate weapons, has no aviation and is now facing growing difficulties both in Syria and in Iraq.

The two potentially dangerous fronts for Israel – Sinai and Syria – are already covered by other national armies (the Egyptian army in the Sinai, the Russian, Syrian army and their allies in Syria). In both theaters of war a direct confrontation between the ISIS and the Israeli army appears to be an unlikely possibility for the time being (despite the video and voice recordings). On the third front – the Jordanian one – the ruling Hashemite monarchy is one of the Caliph's most formidable foes.

Of course, just like Europe and Turkey, Israel is also exposed to terrorist attacks against its citizens and institutions, both at home and abroad – like the recent attack in Istanbul. This kind of threat is difficult to foresee and oppose, not to mention the fact that it should be opposed by the country that suffered the attack. Israel is very active in the international

collaboration against terrorism but its knowledge of the ISIS is limited compared to other kinds of terror.

Inside Israeli borders, the Shin Bet monitors the Arab and Muslim community to discover any potential infiltration by the ISIS and to spot sympathizers and emulators of the Caliphate. Two recent incidents have caused Israeli authorities some worries. On February 7, in Ashkelon, a Sudanese national stabbed a soldier in a bus station before being gunned down. The man had previously been jailed in Israel for violent crimes. Then, towards the end of March, two Palestinians were arrested in east Jerusalem as they prepared to carry out an attack with a car-bomb. Authorities have found that the two were affiliated with the ISIS and that they had attempted to travel to Syria. Alas, there is still no equation that can explain the correlation between the growing terrorist attacks in Israel and the decisions or intentions of the ISIS.

The two attacks are currently considered to be isolated incidents but they nonetheless rang a bell. There is currently no overlapping of the Palestinian claims with the claims of the ISIS, but the Caliph's organization is still appealing, especially to young Muslims. It is a threat that Israel must not underestimate, seen as there are roughly 1,7 million Arabs in Israel, making up about 20,7% of the country's entire population.

LIBYA: NO SOLUTION WITHOUT HAFTAR

General Khalifa Haftar has a key role in the troubled post-Gaddafi history of Libya. There will be no future political settlement without his consent. One could object whether it is fair to grant a single individual with such a power, however in present day Libya political influence is directly proportional to military strength. And Haftar has the most.

The general has never hidden his ambition, he wants to become Libya's next leader. Given his past role in the coup that brought Muammar Gaddafi to power in 1969, we can't rule out an undemocratic rise. He is favored by a military approach to Libyan affairs, the fragmentation of his country, the presence of armed groups and militias, the threat posed by the ISIS and, until now, the lack of a central authority capable of ruling over the country.

Although strongly opposed to an international peace mission under the UN because it would put an end to the influence of his army, Haftar still meets a number of criteria that happen to please the West: he is against militant islamism, he is a US citizen and is a man of order. In a country lacking a democratic culture, a strong man in command could be seen as the solution to reunite the country. And he could accomplish this by following in the footsteps of his predecessor.

The options on the table

Khalifa Haftar is faced with a couple of options to take over power:

- the first one is to defeat the ISIS and the other Islamic militias roaming around the country, as the ones in Derna, and embody the man of destiny, the one and only capable of restoring order and unity to Libya. To defeat the Islamic State in Sirte – which also happens to be the same area where his tribe come from – would mean extending his influence beyond the Cyrenaica. In other words, the so-called National Army would become the legitimate army of a reunited Libya. Those who oppose him, as the militias in Misrata for instance, would either be defeated or would have to succumb;
- in case there was no space for a reconciliation with the rest of the country and, specifically, with the groups in Tripolitania, the second option would be to consolidate his grip over the Cyrenaica and to push for a federal asset of Libya. Seen as an alternative by several international observers, this option is already being put into practice. Benghazi has recently tried to hire a Russian company to print 7 billion dinars – until recently the local currency was printed by a British firm – and attempted to sell oil on its own to the Distya Ameya tanker despite the March 2016 UN Resolution. Benghazi has established its own “independent” branch of the Libyan Central Bank and of the NOC (National Oil Company).

Khalifa Haftar would probably prefer the first option, although he is well aware that a negotiated solution will still depend on his military successes. One way or the other, his final objective remains the top post in government.

The general and his friends

Haftar can rely on the international support of Egypt – that neighbors Cyrenaica and can thus easily channel its aid to its Libyan ally – Saudi Arabia and the Emirates – that provide both finances and weapons – and, although not openly, of France.

Paris's role is quite ambiguous. If, on one side, it supports the UN's role, on the other it goes by Haftar's wishes. France has economic interests in Egypt – as the recent deals signed by president François Hollande for the sale of the Rafale air fighters show – and probably thinks that if Haftar were actually to become president, Paris could claim a privileged relationship with Libya and its oil. The fact that the French are playing on two tables is confirmed by the presence of their Special Forces in the Benina airport. And, more recently, by the flight over Libyan airspace of one of their aerial refueling planes that carried out its mission – probably to refuel Egyptian Rafales – and then flew back to France.

By supporting Khalifa Haftar, Egypt also secures its western border from Islamic terrorism and can thus concentrate its fight in the Sinai peninsula. Furthermore, Libya is a huge country with enormous resources, but is scarcely populated. Ever since the Gaddafi era, around two million Egyptians found employment in Libya. Instead, the hostility against the Muslim Brothers, based in Misrata and Tripoli, is what pushes the Saudis and the Emirates to support Haftar. The relationship between Abdel Fattah al Sisi and the Saudi King Salman is another factor. The latter funds Egyptian forces fighting in Yemen.

The landing in Benghazi of a Saudi ship filled with military supplies right before Haftar began his offensive against the ISIS shows how far this international support goes. He intends to reap the benefits of his military successes during the talks. Yet, the operation targeting Sirte and Tripolitania is met with suspicion in Tripoli. Some have speculated that Khalifa Haftar wants to defeat the ISIS and take over the oilfields in the area. This would imply a clash with another powerful force: the Petroleum Facilities Guards led by Ibrahim Jadhran and that control the extraction plants. There is a personal animosity between Haftar and Jadhran that dates back to when the general was a Gaddafi loyalist and the latter a member of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group.

Apart from the Libyan branch of the Islamic State, Haftar continues to fight Islamic terrorism in all its forms. His “Karama”, dignity, operation targeted the militias in Benghazi and Derna, where he managed to oust the Shura Council that had been capable of kicking al Baghdadi's men out of town.

A divisive figure

Khalifa Haftar does not meet the criteria needed in this chaotic phase of Libyan affairs. He is a divisive figure; you are either his friend, or his foe. The militias in Tripoli and Misrata are wary of his past alongside Gaddafi. The general became an opponent of the regime after the troops he led in Chad were defeated and later abandoned by the regime. It was a choice dictated by circumstances. Another element that is met with suspicion by the Islamists is his proximity to the CIA, who recruited Haftar to try to topple Gaddafi and is probably still in good terms with him. Finally, Khalifa Haftar played no role in Gaddafi's demise, but only resurfaced in 2011 after the dictator had already been disposed of.

The tribal element also plays a role in whether you are pro or against Haftar. His tribe, the Firjan, comes from Sirte, where Gaddafi's Qadadfa also comes from. This enhances the support he may obtain from the former regime's loyalists, who see a chance of taking back some of their long lost prestige.

The man of destiny

Until establishing a unified Libyan government was attempted, the country was ruled by three entities: the one in Tobruk (the sole internationally recognized and one which is controlled by Haftar), the one in Tripoli (linked to a number of Islamic factions) and the alleged national unity government led by Fayed al Sarraj.

Until now, all of Khalifa Haftar's military adventures were sanctioned by the government in Tobruk and were thus legitimate. As Sarraj tried to establish his power, Haftar refused to relinquish the command of his troops to a Minister of Defense appointed by the new Prime Minister despite Mahdi al Barghouti being a former mechanized infantry brigade commander in Benghazi. At least in theory, any action taken by Haftar from now on will be illegal. That is when and if the Tobruk government decides to recognize Sarraj's role. Russia recently underlined this formal detail as they hope to find an ally in Khalifa Haftar after he participated in a series of military courses in Moscow.

Such diplomatic trivial objections don't worry our man, nor can the current state of chaos pose any limits. Not even the countries that support the UN have stigmatized the general's actions. The same indulgence was not used with the president of the parliament in Tobruk or the prime minister in Tripoli. This shows that the international community is aware of Haftar's role. The Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Paolo Gentiloni, has stated that Khalifa Haftar "must" have a role in the future of Libya.

Chances are Haftar will continue in the pursuit of his objectives. He will use the troops under his command to discourage his opponents, will depict himself as a hero in the fight against terrorism (and already is one in Benghazi), will crush the Islamists and anyone opposing him and, from time to time, will reach a compromise with the international community. One way or the other, he will rise to power. He even turned down a recent proposal to establish a unified command for the fight against the ISIS. And, just like his mentor turned foe Gaddafi, Haftar is using the Italian colonial past to fuel nationalism. He recently named his operation against the Islamic State "Al Qurdabiya 2", the place of a battle against the Italians.

After all, Khalifa Haftar is not in a hurry. He knows that the bigger the chaos, the more important his role will become. The bigger the threat from the ISIS, the larger his influence at the negotiating table. Since PM Sarraj was appointed on the 30th of March 2016 and moved to the Abu Sittah base in Tripoli nothing has changed. Despite the efforts of international diplomacy, no steps forward have been taken. Libya still has three governments and various independent militias. Reuniting the country appears a distant, unreachable objective. And if the political talk will not produce any tangible results, the man of force will take over. And this is exactly what Khalifa Haftar is waiting for.

BOKO HARAM AND AFRICAN TERRORISM

Abu Bakr Shekau is a terrorist with nine lives. Although he has been declared dead on several occasions, he regularly resurfaces on the African Islamic terrorism stage. His last appearance, or recital, was in March 2016. Shekau looked ill and, unlike his past statements, he invited his movement to surrender and seek a peace deal. However, there are a number of doubts over these claims. Was it really him? Why did he post his video on YouTube and not on the ISIS's Twitter accounts? Why is he suddenly so willing to negotiate? Did someone replace him? Is the movement split between those who want peace and those who don't?

A lot of questions, and still no answers. Surely enough, since general Muhammadu Buhari became the new president of Nigeria, the former coup leader and fellow muslim like Shekau has decided to upscale the fight against Boko Haram. At the same time, within the framework of the operation "Safe Corridor", he has offered a form of amnesty, rehabilitation and reeducation to those terrorists ready to repent. Buhari has also emphatically stated that Shekau's group is "technically defeated". Given the Nigerian president's prophecy of getting rid of Boko Haram by the end of 2015, we should all agree over what "technically" exactly means. At the same time, we should look back at what the cost has been: 6-7.000 people killed – some estimates claim they could be 20 thousand – two and a half million refugees or IDPs, thousands of churches and schools destroyed, hundreds of forcefully enrolled child soldiers.

Furthermore, Shekau's group was not confined to Nigeria anymore, but had stretched its reach to neighboring Chad, Cameroon and Niger. This implies we should also check whether Boko Haram has been "technically defeated" in these countries as well. Also because another Nigerian terrorist group, Ansaru, an Al Qaeda affiliated competitor of Boko Haram, has just been decapitated as its leader, Khalid Al Barnawi, alias Abu Usmatul al Ansari, was recently captured.

Abu Bakr Shekau's life story goes well beyond the vicissitudes of Boko Haram and is representative of a widespread social unease that envelops all African countries and that bursts into violence in a country like Nigeria, where contradictions are more evident. And if the word end has actually been put on Boko Haram, the motivations that spark these forms of rebellion haven't disappeared. Sooner or later, another movement will replace them. As is often the case, in the search for legitimacy for its armed struggle, the Boko Haram terrorists used religion. The choice itself was simple, as the group was formed in one of the predominantly muslim states of Nigeria, Borno, and because in Africa's most populated country the population is equally split between christian and muslims.

Abu Bakr Shekau exploited a widespread social discontent that was waiting to erupt. Born in the Yobe state, at the border with Niger, he moved to Maiduguri, the capital city of Borno, to study theology. It was there that he met with Mohammed Yosuf who, in 2002, founded Boko Haram. When the latter was killed in 2009, Shekau took over. The rest is a recent history of massacres and violence. It is probably this "technicality" that left Boko Haram with no popular support despite them fighting under the flag of Islam and in the name of an impoverished people.

The franchising of terror

This is probably one of the reasons that pushed Shekau to seek an international spotlight and claim allegiance to Al Qaeda first and then, in March 2015, to the ISIS. Apart from the symbolic value of an affiliation on paper – which, as in any franchising, grants the visibility and the prestige deriving from the most popular brand of the moment – the only common ground between Boko Haram and the Islamic State is their widespread use of mass killings, beheadings and mass graves. There wasn't and there isn't any shared theology between the two movements. Furthermore, the battle grounds are different, Africa is no Middle East and vice-versa. African Islam is less dogmatic and not attracted by the idea of a caliphate. Boko Haram never aimed to establish their own state. The foundation of a caliphate – which was actually erected in the north of Nigeria in the 1800s by Usman dan Fodio – is not something Nigerians look forward to.

Furthermore, if Abu Bakr al Baghdadi can be considered a leader that participates in world affairs, capable of exploiting propaganda and technology to spread his word, to structure a newborn State, to promote international terrorism and of providing a religious justification for everything he does, Abu Bakr Shekau is nowhere close to that. He fights a local battle, only speaks African dialects and Arabic and, ultimately, is only capable of killing regardless of whether his victims are christian or muslim. Boko Haram is not waging a holy war and does not look up verses of the Koran to trade slaves or to rape them. This has put Shekau at the top of the most wanted list issued by the US Department of State with a bounty of 7 million dollars.

The danger posed by Boko Haram, or rather “Jamaat al Ahl al Sunna l'idea Da'wa wal Jihad”, or “The Group of the people of the Sunna, the call and the jihad” as they are actually called, is to all effects a consequence of their lack of religious limits. The absence of any ideology in the pursuit of terrorism allows for any type of action. There is no need for justifications. And this is common to all forms of terrorism in Africa. Hence, in a not so distant future and if need be, there would be no objections to seeing other terrorist groups in the region form alliances or collaborations.

Mr. Marlboro

Both sharing a passion for killing, stealing and raping, Shekau and his acolytes would have no issues in teaming up with Mokhtar Benmokhtar, whose Morabitoun movement lords over the sub-Saharan belt and is associated with Al Qaeda in the Maghreb (AQIM). Algerian born, he was also declared dead more than once and then resuscitated. When it comes to business, whether it's AQIM or ISIS makes no difference to Mokhtar Benmokhtar. This is why he has been part of so many terrorist groups: AQIM, Taweed, MUJAO, Mulathameen, Mouwakoune bi dima and the aforementioned Morabitoun.

Known as the “elusive”, or “one-eyed” (he lost an eye in Afghanistan), but foremost as “Mr. Marlboro” for his cigarette smuggling, Benmokhtar does not disdain other sources of income. Religion is just a pretext for his traffics. Unlike Shekau, Mokhtar Benmokhtar has expanded his business from Algeria to Mali, from Libya to Niger. His is a commercial type of terrorism. His capture is worth 3.3 million dollars.

Overall, African terrorism, even when it has a religious undertone, or a tribal one, and is fueled by social discontent, keeps on lacking a wider strategic scope. It is and remains a mix of criminal activities and illegal traffics. It does not pursue long term objectives, but rather tries to survive day by day.

In the name of God

Despite the fear of a connection between African Islamic terrorism and the ISIS has even been discussed at the UN Security Council, such a link has not been established yet. There have been talks of Boko Haram fighters trying to join the Islamic State in Libya, possibly exploiting the influx of migrants trying to cross over to Europe. This is very unlikely since Shekau's group has been put on the defensive, needs to fight back to survive and cannot stretch its thin resources elsewhere.

As has emerged during a recent summit in Abuja that saw the participation of several countries in the region, plus France and the UK, the movement still represents a menace to the stability and peace in the area. However, Bemokhtar appears a bigger threat given his presence in several countries and his recent call to support the "brothers" in Egypt. In this case, a connection between Islamic African extremists and the ones in the Middle East looks more likely, although it would be under the flag of Al Qaeda and not of the ISIS.