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THE ENEMY WITHIN: ISLAMIC TERRORISM IN EUROPE

The attractiveness of the ISIS is in the subliminal and messianic message that invites the Muslims to fight and kill in the name of Allah. An appeal that finds an audience in those people who are led to believe they are an instrument of the will of their God and that, at the same time, live a life lacking any real opportunities. For those living in Arab or Muslim countries, the frustration and the resentment are directed towards those corrupt and authoritarian regimes that don't guarantee any social justice or freedom. For those, however, that inhabit different social contexts, as is the case in Europe, generally the motivation for animosity is marginalization, a sense of isolation resulting from belonging to a religious minority that is viewed by many with suspicion. The ISIS fights its battle for the survival of the caliphate in the Muslim lands with the first group of sympathizers, while the latter are employed to strike with terrorist attacks in the lands of the infidels.

Abu Bakr al Baghdadi knows that the suicide bomber who kills civilians in a club, in a crowd or in a metro serves a specific function that goes well beyond the mere "military" action. An attack in Europe scares the population, gives them a sense of insecurity and, at the same time, magnifies the "force" of the ISIS, its ability to strike out of its Middle Eastern geographical center, accredits the movement with an international role and dimension.

Candidates to martyrdom

The manpower to conduct these types of terrorist attacks is not difficult to find, especially in Europe, where there are more than 20 million Muslim citizens. They are mainly part of an immigrant population that moved to Europe in search of better living conditions and is therefore placed on the lower end of the social ladder, with usually low educational levels. Apart from the immigration flows, there are European Muslims; in Albania over 80% of the people are Islamic, in Bosnia-Herzegovina the Muslims represent 40% of the population, and then there is the Sandzak region in Serbia.

The countries of origin and the impact of Islamic immigrants varies from country to country. Muslims in France are mainly of North African origin, they represent about 10% of the population (6 million), in Spain they are little more than 2% and mainly Moroccans, in the UK there are over 2.5 million Muslims (4%), the same goes for Germany (over 3.5 million and mostly Kurds and Turks), in Belgium they are more than 6% of the population, 5% in the Netherlands and about 4% in Denmark, Austria and Switzerland. Among the Scandinavian countries, Sweden has the highest incidence, with about 6% of Muslims. These official figures don't take into account the illegal portion of Muslim immigrants; they are generally much more employable in terrorist acts. This is the case of Italy, whose official figure reports a 2% of Islamic presence, a number that doubles if you consider illegal immigration in a country that is the first point of access for migrants coming from Africa.

Until now, the influx of illegal immigrants coming from Libya on boats has not been used for the transit of terrorists. There are, however, a few cases of people that have come via the route in the Balkans. In other words, the Islamic terrorist is not likely to risk sinking in the Mediterranean in order to carry out its subversive plans. There are several reasons for this, but, basically, the ISIS has such financial resources and a widespread network of accomplices in Europe that it has no need to risk its life in the trip to reach its targets. It's much better to immolate oneself on the target than in the process of getting there.

This picture of the phenomenon could soon change if the military luck of the caliphate turns for the worst in Syria and Iraq. In this case, with the exception of the leaders of the group who would not have the possibility to enter or return to Europe and would possibly reposition themselves in other crisis zones, a mass of escapees that have flown below the radar of the various national security services could exploit this window and take along with them the rancor of a failed military experience, the religious acrimony fueled by a conflict with strong sectarian connotations, and the technical expertise to conduct a well-planned terrorist act.

Recent lessons

A number of individuals that have managed to get to and from the caliphate have been responsible for the hitherto terrorist acts conducted in Europe. They were able to infiltrate the mass of refugees sparked by the war in Syria. Thanks to often relaxed border controls, the terrorists from the ISIS used passports printed using machinery that once belonged to Syrian authorities. Fake ID cards are difficult to verify in the absence of a counterpart.

However, the main contributors to the terrorist manpower came from Muslim immigrants, most of them bearing from the second generation, born or residing for years with their families in Europe. The appeal of al-Baghdadi, the influence of his propagandist machine and the emotional impact of the sermons from European extremist imams all fueled the desire for revenge and exploited the social marginalization of the new generations of European Muslims. It is no coincidence that the attacks in France and Belgium were conceived in the suburbs of these capitals, where the sense of exclusion and frustration prevail. And it is perhaps because of the absence of such ghettos that this has not happened in Italy or elsewhere.

The methodology of the ISIS is to convince the individuals that their biological family, unless this is where the first forms of radicalization take place, is less important than the Muslim community at large. The fighter severs all emotional bonds, is convinced that his earthly journey is instrumental to a religious purpose and this inevitably leads to martyrdom. A one-way road with no going back. The ISIS offers a religious justification to its military and social project.

There is also a correlation between the military fortunes of the Islamic State and the growth of international terrorism. Islamic fighters need a boost to their morale when, as is presently happening, they lose their battles on the field and any attack at the heart of the enemy has this intoxicating effect. In the mind of an Islamic fighter who believes he is pursuing a divine design, defeat does not exist. There is only victory with Allah and if this does not happen, there is a short circuit in his religious beliefs. Everything falls apart, the religious utopia, the reasons that justify the martyrdom. And, ultimately, the fighter's disaffection is the ISIS's worst enemy.

The types of threats

The terrorist threats in Europe mainly come from two sources:

- The so-called "lone wolves". Young individuals who generally come from families of immigrants, they are usually part of the second generation of Muslims who, for various reasons, are attracted by the radical ideas of the ISIS and tune their feelings to the caliphate's subliminal messages and to their propaganda spread via social networks or in the mosques by some extremist imams. At the end of a journey of psychological brainwashing, the lone wolf strikes independently. Most of the times he is not instructed by Mohammed Adnani in Raqqa, but acts out of his own individual choice.

- The foreign fighters who have left Europe to fight with al-Baghdadi are the second menace. There are about 5-6,000 Europeans among the 30 thousand that have joined the caliph. If 10/15% have died in combat, according to intelligence estimates around 20-30% of survivors have tried to return to their country of residence. They are definitely the most dangerous and are also an active part of a terrorist plan led and conceived by the ISIS. They are in contact with each other, they know how and where to hit. They also know how to hide. They are the most motivated and are also those who meditate revenge. What is most worrying is that 30% of these individuals, approximately 1,500 men, is not known to enforcement agencies and is therefore well positioned to evade security checks. This figure is the result of poor collaboration between the various European intelligence agencies and the failure of police channels under the coordination of Europol and will soon have consequences on the ground.

Unlike lone wolves, the European foreign fighters don't have common traits that can help police identify them. They have different educational level, can be a convert or come from a Muslim family, be a man or a woman (at least 200 French women have joined the Islamic State), be married or single, with or without children, be well off economically and not necessarily unemployed, with or without a criminal record. It's like looking for a needle in a haystack.

The countries with a large Muslim community that is perhaps not sufficiently integrated are also those who have contributed the most to the transhumance of foreign fighters to the Middle East and are therefore at greater risk of an attack by the returnees. France leads the pack with about 1,500 fighters, followed by Germany and the UK (about 6/700 each), Belgium (450), Sweden (350), Austria, Denmark and the Netherlands (150/200), Spain (100), Italy (80/90), Finland (70) and Ireland (30). To these figures we must add another 900 jihadists that came from the Balkans.

If we calculate the ratio over the entire population, Belgium leaps at the top with about 45 jihadists per million inhabitants. The attacks in Brussels confirm that the poor integration of foreign communities forced to live in ghettos and the flaws of a divided and parceled security system have both contributed to the facility with which the terrorists acted and struck, both at home and in nearby Paris.

The enemies within

According to some recent surveys, at its maximum splendor the ISIS was receiving the support of about 13% of European Muslims; today, following the defeats on the ground, we are around 6%. The data, collected from a young population, shows a direct correlation between victories/defeats and sympathy/disaffection. It's easy to switch from emulation to aversion depending on where the wind blows.

What is more worrying is that in the UK 27% of Muslim respondents approved the massacres at the Bataclan in Paris, 16% of French Muslims sympathize with the caliph, while as many as 72% of Dutch Muslims are supportive of the ISIS. Among European Muslims the same is true for martyrdom: 35% of Muslims approve of it in the UK, 42% in France and 22% in Germany.

One wonders where all this support for a movement which has become associated with cruelty and senseless massacres comes from. Let's try to attempt some answers: Islam is humiliated in the West, Muslims live in a society that does not comply with their culture, they are hence in a struggle against the infidels.

Be it endogenous or exogenous, is there a way to eliminate this religiously motivated terrorism? There is no chance the risk can be reduced to zero, especially when an attack is conceived and conducted by a "lone wolf". What about attacks organized and conducted by individuals bound organically to the ISIS? In theory, if the preventive actions of the Security Services are effective, it would be possible to avoid or oppose such attacks. A document recently discovered in the hands of some jihadists provides a clue to how well organized the movement led by al-Baghdadi is: terrorist cells are separated so that if one falls, the entire structure still stands; they use middle men/intermediaries for their communications; an emir is placed at the top of each cell; he works with a deputy, a group dedicated to logistics, one to the reconnaissance of the targets, and one that eventually carries out the attack. The central command of the ISIS is the one that plans the strategy and defines the goals. An extremely well planned structure that conceals its existence to better strike the enemy.

JUSTICE IN THE TIME OF THE ISIS

For the Islamic State it all boils down to the Sharia: the rules and social behaviors, economy, justice and the war. Whoever does not recognize the Sharia is automatically labelled as an infidel. The interpretation of the Islamic law imposed by the caliphate is extremely restrictive and is not put into the context of the evolution of a modern society. The original words put on paper by prophet Mohamed are used and possibly see an even stricter application of their wording. This circumstance is fueled by the fanaticism of the followers of the ISIS, as well as being instrumental to the spread of the terror necessary to control a territory that, despite being geographically smaller after the recent military defeats, is still larger than what the caliphate can actually afford. Clearly this comes at a price, especially when justice has to be served. There is no room for tolerance, pity or pardon. Mistakes are punished, often with life.

The criminal code promulgated by the ISIS in December 2014 in Aleppo, at a time when Abu Bakr al Baghdadi was on the rise, lists a series of “koranic punishments”, or *hudud* in Arabic. They are associated to a number of “clarifications” that specify what offenders are to expect. The first crime to be mentioned is blasphemy against Islam, the prophet or Allah. The punishment is death. The code underlines how not even a late repentance will save the offender's life. The same goes for apostasy, which is also punished with death.

In case of adultery, applied to only the female counterpart of the crime, the punishment is stoning to death. Instead, if an unmarried man and a woman are caught having sex, the penalty are 100 lashes. This might seem as a form of clemency, but rest assured that one hundred lashes can almost kill a woman, while they might offer a man a chance to survive. An alternative penalty is also offered: exile. In order for a person to be convicted, at least four witnesses of the act are necessary.

One could infer that the above mentioned crime be somewhat egalitarian. However, man can find plenty of sexual satisfaction under the rule of the Islamic State through the rape of the enemy's women, or in the officially sanctioned trade of (sex) slaves. Obviously, the opposite does not apply to women living under the ISIS.

Sodomy and homosexuality are also punished with the death penalty for both participants. Videos released by the ISIS show gay men being thrown off a building after being kissed, a gesture that allegedly purifies their soul before the final act. Despite homophobia being widespread in the muslim and Arab world, the caliphate takes the “crime” to another level. There is no room for diversity, only death. A recent example of this approach is the attack against a gay club in Orlando, Florida, by Omar Mateen. Although it is unclear what pushed the US citizen of Pakistani origin to kill 49 people, the ISIS immediately claimed responsibility for his actions.

Verbal abuse and drinking alcohol are considered minor offenses and are punished with 80 lashes. Overall, no crime is retributed with less than 80 lashes and no more than 100. Going below that would signal some clemency, while anything beyond would simply lead to death. As far as theft is concerned, the hand is cut off, just like in other Arabic countries. Although it is not specified in the code, in case of a repeat offender a leg is severed and then the other hand. However it would be complicated to continue stealing after such a series of amputations.

Spying in favor of the infidels – although this could also be easily extended to those doing it in favor of countries sharing the same religion – clearly leads to capital punishment. This is one of the rare cases in which the death penalty is common to all wartime penal codes, in any country in the world. And the ISIS is an organization at war.

The document issued by the Islamic States also details what happens in case of crimes against property or people. In case of a robbery that also results in a homicide the penalty is crucifixion. This is one of the few times the code actually specifies how someone should be killed. In most of the other cases a certain degree of creativity is allowed. This freedom is probably dictated by the need to adapt the punishments and have them serve the purpose of “educating” the population. The bigger the level of cruelty, the larger the deterrent effect is an equation that is always at the top of the concerns of the prosecutors from the ISIS.

In case of manslaughter the capital punishment is again required, although there is no need to crucify the culprit. Theft during a robbery requires the amputation of both the right hand and the left leg, as in the case of recidivists. If an act of banditry does not affect property, but only scares people, one is punished with exile. This is possibly the only instance in which some form of leniency is contemplated. This is because the criminal code issued by the ISIS does not include any jail time for offenders, but solely corporal or capital punishments. This is probably why a robber/bandit has his life spared.

In order to justify the convictions, koranic verses are associated to the penalties inflicted to strengthen their religious justification. A meticulous citation is sought even when, as in the case of stoning to death for women, there is some controversy over the interpretation of the verses. The entire justice system is under the control of the Sharia Council, that oversees the application of the Islamic law in the lands ruled by the caliphate. A Commission for the Sharia and a number of muftis work under the supervision of the council. However, there is also a strong interdependence with the Military Council, that runs the media outlets and issued the *hudud* on the propaganda sites managed by the ISIS, and the Council for Security. In other words, religious rulings affect all social, economic, military and propaganda activities of the caliphate. This is pretty obvious in the case of an entity aiming to become an Islamic state and that wants to enforce a divine form of justice.

If, taken in its entirety, the criminal code of the ISIS may appear cruel or intolerant, one should not forget that a similar approach is used in other countries enforcing Islamic law. The most blatant example is in Saudi Arabia, where capital punishments, including beheadings, are widespread. The Saudis apply a strict version of the Sharia law in the name of radical wahabi Islam. 78 executions in 2013, 90 in 2014, 158 in 2015, and in almost half of the cases they involved foreigners. Iran performed even better. In 2015, 966 people were put to death.

JORDAN, A COUNTRY ON THE FRONT LINE

In the beginning of March, for the very first time, Jordan was faced with the aggression of a terrorist cell belonging to the ISIS on its own territory. The cell did not come from Syria, they were assembled in Jordan and comprised of Jordanian nationals, with at least one of the terrorists fresh from the Syrian mess. The terrorists, roughly twenty in number, well armed and ready for martyrdom, unleashed a battle that lasted many hours. In the end, seven of them were killed and another thirteen were captured. The battleground was the city of Irbid, a town located less than 15 km away from the Syrian border which, in the past five years, has seen its population double thanks to the arrival of Syrian refugees.

Further attacks were carried out in June: one against a structure belonging to the Security services inside a Palestinian camp in the north of the country and another against a checkpoint near the Syrian border. The latter attack originated inside a refugee camp in Syria. The recurrence of such events is not surprising. Jordan is in the front line in the war against the ISIS and participates actively in the bombing of Syria. There is an operative center in Amman that coordinates the international forces against the Islamic State and US special forces are also present in the country.

What does surprise is the fact that, despite the security measures adopted, the reputation of the Jordanian Security Services and a sealed border, there could still be such a grand scale attack, which postulates the existence of an indigenous terrorist organization that has ramifications of broad dimensions. The last such attack took place in November 2005, when a group of suicide bombers attacked three hotels causing roughly 60 dead. Back then the group responsible for the bombings was headed by Abu Musab al Zarqawi, a Jordanian national and the precursor of Abu Bakr al Baghdadi in Iraq; the franchising was branded Al Qaeda.

It is not yet clear whether Irbid's ISIS terrorist cell operated on a specific directive of the Caliphate or if they acted independently under the ideological influence of the Caliph. Notwithstanding, it is a fact that the attack was carried out during a time of weakness of the ISIS in Syria and Iraq. Every time they feel weak, the Caliph's forces exorcise their defeats on the ground with further attacks and threats directed abroad. By so doing they reaffirm the principle that the ISIS ideology has an international value and a messianic goal.

The appeal of the Caliph

That the Caliph's deeds appeal to the Jordanian youth is confirmed by the fact that two sons of Jordanian parliamentarians joined the ranks of the ISIS and died as suicide bombers. Irbid is considered to be a stronghold of the Islamic State, while other areas of the country, such as Zarqa – the second largest city in Jordan- and Mafraq – where an important air force base is located – are more closely tied to al Qaeda. Altogether, Islamic extremism is most attractive for the part of the population of Palestinian origin, which amounts to roughly half of the Jordanian people.

In addition to this, there is the threat represented by roughly 630.000 Syrian refugees residing in Jordan, and – according to the Amman authorities - another 1.3 million that are not registered. This massive presence accounts for 20% of the Jordanian population, among whom there could be flocks of ISIS sympathizers. Also, there is an esteemed 1.500-2.000 Jordanians that support the ISIS, making Jordan the third greatest producer of foreign fighters after Tunisia and Saudi Arabia. The Irbid incident could unveil the attempt by the ISIS to destabilize the Hashemite reign while confirming the existence of dormant terrorist cells belonging to al Baghdadi's organization.

The ISIS has a lot of sympathizers within the many Palestinian refugee camps, even among the youth, who feel the social discontent of a country with an unemployment rate that amounts to 28%. Apart from the foreign fighters, there are an esteemed 2-3.000 Jordanians that are potentially affiliated to the ISIS and another 1.000-1.300 who belong to Jabhat al Nusra, a branch of al Qaeda in Syria, this is especially true of the Salafite populations.

The ideological clash

Security Services in Joran are trying to fight the spread of Islamic extremism, especially on a cultural and theological ground. Nonetheless, the recent release of two theologians like Abu Mohammed al Maqdisi and Abu Qatada, who preach extremism and who have distanced themselves from the initiatives of the ISIS on religious grounds, has not yet produced satisfactory results. Their followers have shrunk in number and other subjects have replaced the two in the fancy of the Jordanian people.

Among these subjects, confined inside a prison cell in Syria, is another important figure, Abu Mohammed al Tahawi, who was repeatedly incarcerated and released last year. Tahawi has a discrete following among the people of Palestinian origin and among Jordanian Salafites. Unlike al Maqdisi, al Tahawi has officially backed the theological dissertations calling for the fighters to wage battle under the flag of the ISIS in Syria. In the past, Tahawi had officially praised the idea of a Jihad against Israel. During his speeches, Tahawi often praised suicide bombers while he underlined the impiousness of a number of Arab regimes and the duty of each and every Muslim to fight alongside their Syrian brothers in the war against the West.

Abu Mohammed al Tahawi, whose real name is Abdul Qadir Shahada, belongs to one of the Salafite movements that operate on a political line different from that of the Muslim Brothers. This part of the Jordanian population totals roughly 7 – 10.000 sympathizers of both the ISIS and Jabhat al Nusra, after a deep identity crisis caused by the clashes between two Syrian factions and by the execution by the ISIS of a number of Jordanian combatants. Just like the other Muslim extremist currents, Tahawi's men have turbulent relationships with government authorities.

Among Tahawi's adepts there is one Omar Mahdi Zeidan, a religious man born in Irbid who has become an important member of the ISIS. One of his brothers, Mahmoud, died in Waziristan, Pakistan, in 2010 after joining al Qaeda. Another sadly well-known individual is Mohammed al Shalabi, who also goes by the name of Abu Sayyaf; he was born in Ma'an,

an economically staggering city in the south of Jordan that is well known for its staunch opposition against the government. In June 2014, in Ma'an, there was a demonstration where a number of individuals paraded while waving ISIS flags. Al Shalabi is, however, known to be a sympathizer of Jabhat al Nusra.

The Muslim Brothers and their party, the Islamic Action Front, exerted a strong influence in the Jordanian political and social grounds where they operated – at least until today – within a legal context. Their religious extremism fueled the growth of Salafite movements which refuse any and all kinds of political homogenization and political party structure. The Brotherhood doesn't hold elections but rather co-opts their adepts in the Council of the Shura, the top part of their hierarchy, according to a theological meritocracy. Recently the central offices of the confraternity in Amman and a branch office in Jerash were closed with the pretext that, in the light of the new 2014 law on political parties, their license has not been renewed. This initiative by the Jordanian government is coupled with the recognition last year of a dissident branch of the movement and with an attempt to divide the 'legal' Islamic front.

A country in the front line

Among the Arab countries in the region, Jordan is the most exposed to the fight against the ISIS since one of its pilots, Muath al Kasasbeh, was captured and burned alive in January of 2015. The Syrian rebels who fight the regime in Damascus are trained in Jordan and are given logistic support and weapons once they are back in Syria. The training camps are administered by US troops and functionaries of the CIA. However, the transfer of weapons to the Syrian rebels has created a covert and lucrative commerce in which some of the Security apparatus personnel is involved.

On the intelligence front, the activity of the Jordanian information services (General Intelligence Department) on Syrian ground is extremely developed. Currently the Salafite militants of al Nusra and of the ISIS are allegedly 80 km away from the Jordanian border, but most of them would be hiding in the refugee camps scattered on the Syrian side of the border with Jordan, as the recent terrorist attack seems to suggest. To face this incumbent threat, Amman has recently regained the control of the passage of Al Waleed, near the border with Syria, by fighting the Salafite militias with two special forces battalions, one comprised of southern Syrian tribes trained in Jordan and the other comprised of Jordanian troops.

Currently Jordan is envisaging the possibility for their special forces to carry out covert operations against the ISIS in Syrian territory. The circumstance was already the subject of a warning by the Damascus regime, which rejected the possibility, tagging the initiative as inopportune, unsolicited and potentially damaging for the sovereignty of the country. This initiative has tarnished the relationship between Amman and the Saudi authorities whom, although "officially" at war against the ISIS, see the Jordanian interference as an indirect support to the regime of Bashar al Assad. Unlike the Saudis, the Jordanians are well aware of who is more dangerous between Assad and al Baghdadi, this despite the five billion dollars that they received from Saudi Arabia since the beginning of the civil war in Syria.

From father to son

Just like Hussein's father, king Abdallah too was trained militarily at the British Sandhurst academy. His father was an airplane pilot and he is an enthusiast of the special forces; this explains – at least in part – the attitude to use such forces, even in distant theaters. The Jordanian special forces are allegedly active in Libya alongside the British SAS (Special Air Service).

Regarding the Syrian theater, the Jordanians are convinced that the war against the ISIS is not a conventional or traditional fight, but rather a counter-insurrectionist one; that's why they use their special forces against them.

Politically speaking, Jordan has always been pro-Western, a circumstance that won the Hashemite reign the support and protection of the United States, from whom they receive funds of roughly one billion dollars each year. Lately, the US disengagement in the region has hindered the role of Jordan which has turned around to reinforce their ties with the UK and which has kept contacts and non-publicized relations with Israel.

During recent visits to Washington DC, including talks with the members of the US Congress in January 2016, king Abdallah expressed veiled critiques, perplexities and frustration against his US partners. Abdallah knows that the solution to the Syrian civil war is presently in the hands of the Russians and that this circumstance could damage Jordanian interests, seen that they are on good terms with the Syrian opposition. Militarily speaking, Jordan is worried that they will be one of the routes through which the defeated ISIS militants will retreat once the Syrian loyalist troops and the Kurds of the YPG have succeeded in sealing the border with Turkey.

On the internal level, instead, Abdallah amended the constitution and took back some of the prerogatives that he had conceded during the Arab spring in order to avoid civil unrest. He is again a king with more power, especially in terms of military designations and in the field of security, in order to protect the Hashemite monarchy one more time.