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THE REASONS FOR A US AIR STRIKE IN LIBYA

The US air strike against Sirte was triggered by motivations that reach well beyond the mere military aspects of the operation.

The ISIS, barricaded in a neighborhood in Sirte, didn't represent an imminent threat as they did a few months earlier, when the international community frantically sought a way out of the Libyan crisis.

Since the beginning of military operations carried out by the Misurata militias belonging to Prime Minister Serraj – a figure produced by a long and painful internationally-sponsored process of national reconciliation – the military fortunes of the ISIS in Sirte had been on steep downslope. Many Jihadists had already fled south while the remaining lot, roughly 5 to 7 hundred men, were encircled and were already unable to condition the already-precarious social and military situation in Libya.

Nonetheless, as in all urban fights – a non-conventional form of warfare – those defending (in this case the ISIS) benefit from the urban context and can cause numerous casualties among those attacking.

In the Libyan case, the Islamic militants proved to have a solid military formation. They fought at the risk of their own life and that of others (in this case, the local population). They used unscrupulous defensive methods (there is an intense use of explosive booby-traps), a frequent recourse to suicide bombers and the refused to take prisoners. This caused numerous losses among the Misurata fighters and a stall in re-capturing the city.

Could the above circumstances justify a US air strike that constitutes a waiver of the policy of limited involvement by the US in the events of the Middle East?

Although this isn't the first time that US airplanes strike the ISIS bases in Libya (the February strike in Sabratha was carried out without consulting anyone), this time around the military strike has different motivations.

The first and most important motivation is political. Since Fayeaz al Serraj settled in Tripoli in March he has been trying – with scarce success - to create a popular consensus around his role as the Prime Minister of a government of national reconciliation. Some members of the Islamic government in Tripoli (the “non-legitimate” government, since it lacks international recognition) have opposed him. Even within the Tobruk government and parliament (the one that was considered “legit” until the arrival of Serraj) there is a staunch opposition against this new government of national reconciliation.

In order to be credible, a government should control finances, public order and the armed forces, while Serraj's government come short on all three.

Some progress has been made on the financial side. The government has some control of the central Libyan bank and oil production (which is the primary form of revenue for Libya) has been partially reactivated.

Following a merger between the many branches of the National Oil Company, Serraj was forced to accept the presence of Ibrahim Jadhran's militia (the so-called Petroleum Facility Guards (PFG)) in and around the installations. Jadhran is a questionable character, both for his Islamic past and for his attempt to sell the oil extracted from structures which he was supposed to protect for his own gain. Although Serraj lacks some decisional power, Jadhran's "presumed" 25.000 men (the militia is paid by the government, but it is reasonable to believe that they may be smaller in numbers; possibly 12.000 plus another 3.000 when the ranks are full) constitute a steady support for his wavering government. Jadhran is a sworn enemy of General Khalifa Haftar, who is trying to hinder the Serraj government and who doesn't want to relinquish his command over the "national army" (that same army which was considered "legit" before the coming of Serraj).

Haftar neither wants to accept alternative duties (there was a plan to create regional commands; Haftar would have kept command over his contingent in Cyrenaica) nor does he accept the idea that his former commander of tank units, Madhi Al Barghouti, could exercise the role of Minister of Defense.

Haftar's hostility on the military level and Tobruk's on the political level have determined in Serraj the need to accredit his role through a military victory on the ground against the ISIS in Sirte.

However, after an initially successful attack, the Misurata militias were stopped by the ISIS and suffered heavy losses, making Serraj's campaign a failure.

The losses suffered by the Misurata militia weakened the already-limited military structure which today acts on behalf of the Prime Minister's interests.

The agreement underwritten by the parts under the auspices of the UN said that Libya should install a government of national reconciliation which could request international military support if needed.

Seen that the prerequisite of installing a true government of national reconciliation is more of a virtual requirement, Serraj has requested and obtained (in a consensual decision with the US) the American military support.

A victory over the ISIS in Sirte, even if diminished by help of the United States, would nonetheless give Serraj the bare minimum of legitimacy which he couldn't obtain in other ways.

If the air strikes are successful, Serraj and "his" army will defeat Islamic terrorism while Haftar, with the other army, fails to do as much in Benghazi and Derna. Exactly what Serraj needs, especially now that he has to lead an internationally-sponsored national reconciliation to the detriment of other, opposite, aspirations.

Serraj stated repeatedly that the support he requested was limited to the skies and that there were no foreign troops on the ground because he needs to come off as the leader of the Libyan government rather than a pawn in the hands of internationally-led interests. He also needs to safeguard the sense of national pride that is dominant in Libyan society. No foreign ground troops means that there was no interference and no violation of national integrity. Yet when Serraj says that there were no foreign troops, he willingly omits to say that American, French, English and Italian (and maybe even Jordanian) troops are stationed in Libya, albeit with training duties (and demining duties, in the Italian case); they are in Libya as counselors, not as combatants.

The US strike in Libya also follows a local, American, political logic. The Obama administration was always reluctant to get involved militarily in the Middle East. Having inherited a number of difficult situations for US troops in Iraq and Afghanistan from the Bush administration, President Obama tried, during his 8 years in office, to limit further US military involvement in the region. Interventionism is a trait of the Republican Party. Today Obama, while disregarding his former ideas with the air strike in Libya, attempts to support the candidacy of his former Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, who was one of the political instruments of this political-military approach to foreign policy. The coming elections weighed heavily in the decision by Obama, who had previously expressed his regret for the war against Gaddafi in 2011, which was perceived as being an error "instigated" by the French.

On the internal political level, the competition with Russia plays a major role. The US military disengagement from the Middle East was not only criticized at home, but also disappointed several Arab allies of the US. This has left room for Russia to consolidate its influence in the region. Russia now plays a central role in the solution to the Syrian crisis. They are in talks with Israel and support Damascus militarily and are eyed with interest by many Arab countries, including Turkey.

Russia has kept a low profile on the Libyan crisis, giving limited support to General Haftar. A choice that was not publicized because it contradicted the UN resolution in favor of Serraj.

Haftar studied in Russian military schools; he is supported by Egypt and the United Arab Emirates; he profits from discreet French support and is surely an instrument of offense against Islamic extremism.

It is not by hazard that both Russia and Haftar immediately questioned the legitimacy of the US air strike in Libya.

Russia argued that a US military strike should have been previously approved by the UN security council.

Haftar argued that it is an issue of national legitimization: In order to install itself in power, the Serraj government needed to obtain the approval of the only legitimate Libyan parliament, the one in Tobruk. This did not happen (and Haftar was partly responsible), therefore Serraj is an illegitimate Prime Minister.

It is emblematic that the US air strike was criticized even by an individual who is considered very close to Islamic extremism and a sympathizer of the ISIS: Sadek al

Ghariani. A rival of Haftar and Serraj, Ghariani said from Tripoli that the US air strike was “illegitimate” because it targeted Islamic people.

Regardless of the critics, it is unsure whether the US air strike against the ISIS will improve the political-military situation in Libya, one currently marked by instability and social disintegration. It is also unsure whether Serraj will gain politically from the circumstance in the exercise of his governing function or in the intrinsic legitimization of his conduct.

Nonetheless, a government without its own army and at the mercy of various “private” militias will not last long, even when benefiting from the temporary backing of the US military.

In Ghaddafi’s time, a good part of the army was composed of members of the tribes (in Libya, “Kabile”) faithful to the regime. Those very tribes, now marginalized, had no part in the reconstruction of the Libyan Armed Forces, leaving the latter without capable managing personnel. The reconstruction of a new Libyan army must be the fruit of a process of national reconciliation which includes the members of the old regime. This is not happening and that’s why some of Ghaddafi’s former soldiers are fighting alongside the ISIS in Sirte.

In Ghaddafi’s time there was no Ministry of Defense and no central structure of command.

Today the Libyan military is comprised of two main “armies”, one in Tripoli and one in Benghazi which compete and are hostile with each other. In addition to these there are a number of militias that answer to tribal, private or criminal aims.

The reconstruction of a Libyan Army is a process that needs time, but there are currently more armed individuals in the country than one would need to build a new army. Ghaddafi had never really empowered the Libyan army because he didn’t trust it. He and the others that helped him in his 1969 coup came from its ranks and Ghaddafi feared that the advent of another military coup could dethrone him in turn.

In 2012 there was a timid attempt to demilitarize and dismantle various militias with the possibility of re-integrating their members (not the militias themselves) within the national army. The attempt failed. It is difficult to think that Serraj could succeed in such a task without specific international assistance. And if this is true, the US air strike is just the beginning of a growing military intrusiveness/presence in Libya, perhaps in a different shape and form.

THE ISIS AND BANGLADESH

Through its misfits and propaganda, the ISIS has fueled Islamic terrorism not only in the Middle East, Africa and Europe, but also in Asia. To date, 42 Islamic terrorist groups across the world have pledged their allegiance to the self-proclaimed caliph Abu Bakr al Baghdadi. An oath that does not imply a real, direct cooperation between the various terrorist entities, but rather serves the purpose of providing the ISIS with a global dimension and platform.

In Asia there is a so-called "Province of the Islamic State" in the Caucasus, Islamic terrorist groups proliferate in Malaysia and Indonesia, Abu Sayyaf's group is active in the southern Philippines, as is the Jamaa't al Ahrar in Pakistan, while the contagion has spread to the Xinjiang in China and throughout the Uyghur community fighting for independence from Beijing. Furthermore, Islamist groups have been spotted in Brunei, Singapore, Thailand, Myanmar and Cambodia. In other words, there is hardly any muslim community across the Asian continent that has not found al Baghdadi's message to be attractive.

It was hence statistically unthinkable that a country with a large majority of muslims such as Bangladesh, where religious extremism against christians and hindus has thrived in the past, would be immune from Islamic terrorism. The only difference, that is until the mass killing at a restaurant in Dhaka on July 1, is that local authorities have denied the presence of any terrorist group and blamed prior assassinations on the political opposition, thus providing the legitimacy to go after them. In other words, the government has used terrorism for domestic political goals.

After a series of religiously motivated attacks, on June 7 local authorities carried out a series of mass arrests. Around 11.300 people were put in jail, but only a small portion of them, about 170, was actually accused or suspected of being a member of Islamic terrorist groups. Also in this instance, the purpose of the sweep was not to eradicate extremism, but rather to weed out Islamic political parties. One of the targets was former prime minister Khaleda Zia, accused of sedition and brought to court in March.

The repeated denials by PM Sheykh Hasina Wahed have, time after time, clashed against the evidence. Since 2015 over 30 terrorist attacks have been carried out in Bangladesh and most of them have been claimed by the ISIS (21 of them) and the others by Al Qaeda. Over 50 people have been killed. They were progressive academicians, human rights activists, militants for gay rights, people accused of being atheists, newspapers deemed blasphemous, expat workers. In most cases individual assassinations were carried out in a low-intensity form of terrorism.

In the light of this detail, Hasina and other officials have always blamed the attacks on local groups and never on trans-national terrorism in spite of the fact that recently 26 Bangladeshi citizens accused of Islamic terrorism were extradited from Singapore, thus proving that the local network had links abroad. Denying the evidence has inevitably led to the massacre in Dhaka, claimed by the ISIS's propaganda machine. Possibly the only truthful statement by Bangladeshi authorities is that the attack was not coordinated from Raqqa, but was the outcome of the infatuation al Baghdadi's message has had on local

wealthy kids in what has become a common phenomena of self-radicalization. As we've seen in France, Belgium or Turkey, it is irrelevant whether an attack that has been planned and carried out locally was actually ordered from abroad.

A country like Bangladesh, listed among the so-called "developing countries", has a troubled history. Born out of the secession between muslims and hindus, it has always been highly unstable. Since its foundation in 1971, it has witnessed 19 coups and two former presidents were slain. Located in a geographically strategic position, it has high poverty and illiteracy rates. With a population of over 160 million, 89% of whom are muslims, it has embraced Islam as the state religion. High unemployment rates, lack of infrastructures and recurrent epidemics complete the ideal setting for the spread of terrorism. The weakness of the local security apparatus has facilitated the task for terrorists. And this has happened despite the fact that traditional Bengalese Islam is moderate and not inspired by fundamentalism or Salafism.

Yet, a series of anti-terrorism and anti-money laundering laws had to be passed in 2012 to ban five local extremist groups: Jamat ul Mujaheddin Bangladesh (JMB), Harakat ul Jihad, Shahadat al Hikma, Jagrata Muslim Janata and Hizb ut Tahrir. However, there are also other terrorist groups in the country, such as Ansar al Islam Bangladesh and Ansarullah Bangla Team linked to Al Qaeda and the Jund al Taweedwal Khalifah that, just like the JMB, is associated with the ISIS. All of these groups have developed recruitment, indoctrination and subversive activities. And they have also used the propaganda techniques developed in Raqqa to exploit the internet, twitter, blogs and social networks.

Bangladesh has also seen the overlapping of people involved both in terrorism and ordinary criminal activities and illegal traffics. A portion of the financing for these formations comes from illegal sources: counterfeit currency, donations – or rather extortions – in the rural areas, illegal money transfers, illicit financing from foreign Ngos. And since most of these activities are across the border, this is one of the factors that has helped local terrorist groups become international. The JMB, for one, has seen in the past an influx of veterans that had fought in Afghanistan. The ties with foreign entities include radical Wahabi Ngos from Saudi Arabia, Qatar (Qatar Charitable Society) and Kuwait (Kuwait Joint Relief Committee). Among the 11 Ngos that have been put under the spotlight by local authorities is the Islamic Relief; based in the UK, it has branches across the globe and strong financial backing; it has often been associated with radical Islam.

As already mentioned, Bangladesh occupies an important geographic position for the ISIS. Located between hindu India and buddhist Myanmar, it is the ideal springboard to spread Islamic extremism to neighboring countries. The plight of the Rohingya in Burma can be exploited, as they already have contacts with the Jamat ul Mujaheddin Bangladesh. As far as India is concerned, tensions can be fueled in the muslim states of Assam, Kashmir and Uttar Pradesh. The potentially strategic role of Bangladesh has led the ISIS to designate its own emir for the country. His name is Sheykh Abu Ibrahim al Hanif, nom de guerre of Tamim Chowdhury, a Canadian of Bengali descent. The latter could have played a key role in the attack in Dhaka. After landing in Bangladesh three years ago, he rose to a prominent role within the JMB and then linked up with the ISIS. In a recent interview, Hanif claims

that his terrorist activity targets both Bangladesh and India. His statements are in line with those of Ayman al Zawahiri from Al Qaeda that claims that three Indians are part of the “Zionist-crusaders war on Islam”, and thus a legitimate target.

In the background is the struggle for hegemony between Al Qaeda and the ISIS. Osama bin Laden’s group has been based in the mountain region between Afghanistan and Pakistan for over a decade. Al Baghdadi’s presence in the area jeopardizes the monopoly of his competitor. Several terrorist groups, as in Indonesia, have split along those lines. Furthermore, there are about one thousand Asians fighting with the Islamic State, 1,800 according to intelligence sources. A combat unit called “Malay Archipelagos Unit” has been formed in Syria and Malay and Indonesians fill its ranks. Some of them have now returned home from the Middle East and represent the advance guard of Islamic terrorism in the continent. They basically replace the veterans that had once fought under the banner of Al Qaeda in Afghanistan. According to the Minister of Defense of Singapore, the ISIS has seen its sympathizers increase in Asia over the past three years. The shift to the Islamic State has led Zawahiri to announce the birth of Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) in 2014, in an area that comprises India, Myanmar and, of course, Bangladesh.

From a demographic standpoint, Asia will soon become the continent hosting the majority of Muslims across the world. There are 200 million Muslims in Indonesia, the globe’s largest Islamic country, 180 million each in Pakistan and India and 160 million in Bangladesh. Among the countries fighting Islamic extremism, the only one that seems to have carried out an effective fight is Indonesia, where Al Qaeda started to strike in the 1990s.

In the eyes of both the ISIS and Al Qaeda, Bangladesh is the breeding ground for a future expansion in the region. The choice of the local government to deny the evidence has jeopardized the fight against terrorism. We hope that the recent attack in attack, that left 20 people dead, including 9 Italians, could bring upon a change in the struggle against Islamic terrorism. The iron fist was used against the JMB in the past, its leaders jailed and convicted to capital punishment. However, domestic political goals are still influencing how security officials respond to the terrorist threat.

In May the leader of a radical Islamic party, the Bangladesh Jamat Islami, Motiur Nizami was sentenced to death for the genocide committed during the war of independence in 1971. Besides from sparking the rage of extremist movements across the country, this execution has hit the only political party that aimed to create an Islamic state through a democratic process. There is reason to believe this will push other members of the party, and especially its youth and student wing Islami Chadra Shibir, to go underground.

BREXIT AND SECURITY

International public opinion has debated on the political consequences of the Brexit and its impact on the European dream, its economic and financial effects given the importance of London's Stock exchange, while the repercussions on European security have been neglected. Overall and not taking into account potential future deals, the UK's exit from the European Union will slow down the cooperation in both the policing and the intelligence sectors. Until now, London had negotiated its membership to the EU, picking and choosing what it deemed convenient and what not. For one, the UK had refused the free circulation of people and not joined the Schengen System.

The agreement, which had come into force among the Benelux countries in 1985 and was then extended to most European nations in 1990, contemplates an automatic exchange of information on the people circulating within European borders. The control is necessary to grant the freedom of movement and prevent criminals and terrorists from exploiting it. With the exception of the UK and Ireland, there are presently 26 European countries that are part of the system. Even nations that are not part of the EU, such as Norway, Switzerland, Liechtenstein and Iceland, are also part of Schengen. One of the main benefits of the agreement is that it allows for a sharing of information among police forces and postulates, among other things, the possibility of chasing criminals or terrorists across borders. Until now, and despite them not being part of it, European police forces kept on informing the British ones on their findings. That moral obligation is no more. The controls of the Schengen System extended to the borders of the European Union and now the UK has suddenly become one of those bordering countries.

Furthermore, following the wave of terrorist attacks and after five years of negotiations that have clashed on national privacy laws, the European Parliament has approved the Passenger Name Record (PNR) in April. Every passenger that flies within Europe or from Europe to a third country will be marked and this information shared among all member countries. If it is still discretionary to record passenger movements within the EU, it is mandatory to keep the records for those leaving the Union. All of these informations will be transmitted by airliners to a so-called Passenger Information Unit, whose database will be shared. Names, last names, payments modes, addresses and contacts. Each piece of data will be stored for five years and, if need be, be passed on to police or security services. The Brexit has cut the UK out from this latest development in European security.

Europol, the European police agency, will also cease to act in favor of London. The paradox is that a British, Rob Wainwright, a former MI-5 official and one of the staunchest opponents of the Brexit, has been leading the agency since 2009. He might have had his personal reasons, but he underlined a series of technical issues that will affect UK security. Wainwright spoke about a database shared by all European police forces and that, in the near future, will hamper British access to this vital flow of information. He also mentioned a staff of around one thousand officers whose task is to cooperate in the repression and prevention of criminal activities. They deal with around 2.500 cases each year and exchange hundreds of informations on a daily basis.

Lastly, the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), an integrated system for IT security, will come into force on May 25, 2018. The Spring of 2018 will also see the Network & Information Security Directive become operational to tackle threats to European cyber-security. Along the aforementioned GDPR, a European Data Protection Board will be appointed to formulate directives in the specific sector.

Regardless of how long it will take to negotiate its exit from the European Union, it is undoubtable that the UK will be left out from these integrated cooperative entities. Furthermore, these new directives and rules will also apply to all those corporate entities that are not part of the EU. The end result is that London will not be part of the decision-making process, while its companies will be forced to abide by European security norms if they want to do business in the EU. The Brits have succeeded from going from an active to a passive role. In other words, in the future British citizens will have to respect the laws imposed by others, to the detriment of their so-cherished national sovereignty. From now on they will trade with the EU according to European clauses and rules and not British ones. At a time when there are an estimated 5 thousand ISIS militants roaming across Europe, some of them having returned from the battle fields in the Middle East, the self-inflicted harm of Brexit is pretty evident.

Downing Street claims that, regardless of its premature exit from the European Union, its defense will be granted via NATO. While the EU is debating over a unified army, this argument mistakes military security with national security from terrorist and criminal endeavors. Of little or no use is also the pretext that the privileged relationship with US intelligence or the "Big Five Eyes" (i.e. US, UK, Canada, New Zealand and Australia) or the GCHQ listening posts will make up for the exit from the European security system. Brexit has little or no impact on the sharing of intelligence information. The relationship between intelligence services is not dictated by whether the UK is part of the EU or not. Political decisions will affect intelligence sharing only if national interests diverge and it is unlikely for this to be the case. The only potential consequence could be on the projects of a unified European intelligence agency.

Of more importance is how Brexit will affect the fight against Islamic terrorism and the overlapping of police and security services investigations. By hitting the cooperation among police forces, the referendum will have an impact on counter-terrorism activities. Much more so if we consider that nowadays terrorism goes along with criminal activities, drug trafficking, money laundering.

One of the factors that has led to the British voting "Yes" at the referendum was the so-called threat from the free circulation of individuals within the Union. An illogical stance from the start, since the UK was not part of Schengen in the first place and had imposed its own limitations. At the same time, the menace from illegal immigration was evoked according to the equation: less immigrants = more security. The partisans of Brexit have accused Europe of being too lenient with the waves of refugees that have and are entering the continent. Purposely confusing a social issue with a security one, politicians have been fueling racism. Even the current British PM Theresa May has hinted to the fact that the UK could also exit the European Convention for Human Rights.

It is self-evident that no single country can face globalized threats alone. This sort of danger can be dealt with only through cooperation, be it among police forces or intelligence services. And this is now possible thanks to a unified European information system. Given her formal role as Home Secretary, the appointment of Theresa May to replace David Cameron had led to believe that there would be a certain knowledge of security challenges at Number 10. However, doubts arise when May states that Brexit will make the UK more secure from both criminality and terrorism. Several Conservative Party MPs have underlined how dysfunctional European cooperation was, and thus giving it up is hailed as the best solution. We're going from paradox to paradox.

The blatant nationalism and sense of superiority expressed by both incumbent Prime Minister Theresa May and the partisans of Brexit hints to the fact that cooperation in the security sector is detrimental. The growing longing for isolationism goes against the evidence. The recent attacks in Paris and Bruxelles were not carried out by terrorists coming from abroad, but came from local, native and legally residing Islamic communities. The same goes for the UK: since 2001, the people responsible for most of the over 30 attacks that have taken place were either British citizens or legal residents.

At the same time, given its longtime participation in the campaigns in Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq and Libya alongside the US, the country could be targeted by foreign terrorists. Modern day radicals have learned to exploit the contradictions of national security systems, they move from one country to the next, often use aliases or fake documents. This type of international terrorism, targeting whatever will give them the highest media turnout, can only be tackled through long and complicated activities of surveillance and control. And can only be fought through cooperation. This is the one aspect that the partisans of the Brexit and cultists of isolationism have underestimated when they convinced the British to vote "No".