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Q&A about ISIS

Is it possible to defeat the ISIS?

Given the amount of forces on the ground, there is no doubt that a military defeat is inevitable. The recent setbacks suffered by Daesh confirm that. The Islamic state has survived exploiting the growing dissent between those who fight against it. Alongside its militants, what has to be defeated is the radical ideology that inspires the movement, the sectarian violence against the Shia and the appeal the terrorist group has on masses of marginalized youths across the Middle East and the rest of the muslim world.

How many men does the ISIS have?

There are only estimates available. According to some figures, there are about 15/20.000 combatants scattered across Syria and Iraq, 12 thousand of them are either Syrian or Iraqi. Previous estimates stated that Abu Bakr al Baghdadi could count on 35 thousand men. These figures don't account for those who support the movement without fighting for it. Generally, supporters are on a 7 to 1 ratio with combatants. This means that there are about 200 thousand people that work for or support Daesh. And they will increase or decrease depending on what happens to the caliphate. The ISIS can rely on Sunni support in both Syria and Iraq, count on former baathist elements and exploit the Arabs-Kurds divide.

Which kind of weapons does the ISIS have?

Especially during the initial phases of the conflict when it confiscated weapons belonging to both the Syrian and Iraqi armies, the ISIS has obtained both US and Russian-made weapon systems. Daesh has built on this arsenal acquiring additional equipment via smuggling or thanks to the supplies given by a series of friendly states. The ISIS employs heavy artillery, tanks, anti-tank missiles, rocket launchers, armored vehicles. Despite their claims, they don't operate an air force. But they do use drones and chemical weapons.

Who is fighting against the ISIS?

A total of 62 countries is currently fighting against Daesh. There are about 5 thousand US troops in Iraq acting as advisors and providing aerial cover to the Iraqi army. Several other nations are also part of the coalition bombing ISIS territory. There is the Iraqi army with its 200 thousand men, although a mere 40 thousand are actually fighting, the Kurdish Peshmerga with 80 thousand units, 10 thousand Iraqi and Iranian Shia volunteers (known as Hashd al Shaabi or People Mobilization Forces), Iranian Pasdarans (2 thousand men), Christian and Yazidi militias and a grouping of Sunni Iraqi tribes under the banner of Suhat al Iraqi.

In Syria, there are 5/7.000 Russians with 350 tanks, helicopters and 50 fighter jets. There is the Syrian army, with its 80 thousand men, of which 25 thousand from the elite Republican Guards, and there are paramilitary forces, including the feared Shabiha, that can count on 20 to 40 thousand units according to some estimates. Finally, the Hezbollah have deployed around 5 thousand men.

Is the ISIS currently gaining or losing ground?

Recent data shows that the ISIS has lost about 40% of the territory under its control in Syria and 50% of it in Iraq. Daesh still has a grip on two major cities: Mosul in Iraq and Raqqa in Syria. Until then, al Baghdadi's movement will not be defeated.

Who are the other factions hostile to the ISIS or the Syrian government currently fighting in Syria?

A number of different rebel groups are fighting against Bashar al Assad and, often, against one another. Jabhat al Nusra was affiliated to al Qaeda until its recent rebranding in Jabhat Fatah al Sham. It has a force of 10 thousand men and has often clashed with the ISIS. There is then the Free Syrian Army, fostered by the US and other neighboring countries, that fights both Daesh and the government in Damascus with its alleged 45 thousand troops. Fighting against the ISIS, but not necessarily against Bashar al Assad's troops, is the YPG, a grouping of Syrian Kurds.

What could lead to a defeat of the ISIS?

The ISIS needs supply routes to survive and obtain food, weapons, volunteers. Until recently Turkey was supplying such a route. Lately some of the border towns have been taken over by forces hostile both to Ankara and to al Baghdadi and this is creating a lot of problems for the caliphate. Once all supply routes have been cut off, the Islamic militias will have to start to cope on its own. Turkey seems to have decided to stop aiding the Islamic State and this is one of the reasons why the country has been struck by a series of terrorist attacks over the past few months.

Will a military defeat of the ISIS put an end to Islamic terrorism?

Not at all. Once the dream of a caliphate collapses, the volunteers that have survived and are on the run will seek justice or revenge elsewhere. It is very likely they will try to relocate in some of the hotspots in the Middle East (Libya, Yemen, Sinai) or Africa. Terrorism spreads thanks to instability and despair. Furthermore, Islamic terrorism is here to stay. It's been around for decades, since Osama bin Laden founded al Qaeda in Afghanistan in the late 80s. The movement was taken over by Musab al Zarqawi in Iraq in 2003 and al Baghdadi just continued on the same path and created Daesh. Islamic forms of terrorism will thrive in any Arabic or muslim country affected by social injustice, poverty, discrimination, systematic violations of human rights. And sadly this is the case for most of Arab and/or muslim countries across the globe. Finally, Islamic fighters from non-muslim countries will also try to return home. The latest string of attacks in Europe proves the risk they pose.

Which religious movement has inspired the ideology of the ISIS?

Saudi Wahabism and its radical preachings have definitely been a source of inspiration. It's not a coincidence Osama bin Laden was a Saudi, nor that several NGOs accused of supporting al Baghdadi come from Saudi Arabia. The Saudi kingdom discreetly supported the ISIS in its fight against Iranian influence in the region and for its role in fueling the Sunni-Shia divide.

Once the caliphate is over, will everything return the way it was before in Iraq and Syria?

No. There are a series of issues which will have to be dwelt with. The split between Sunni and Shia will have to be addressed. Syria, whether with Assad in power or not, will probably move towards a federal State recognizing the roles of Alawites, Sunnis and Kurds. Whether this will turn into a peaceful coexistence is a matter of debate. If we look at neighboring Iraq, where the Sunni-Shia civil war has been ongoing for over a decade, there is hardly any hope for peace in the future. The Kurdish issue will also have to be addressed. The YPG is now in control of portions of northern Syria and could push for greater autonomy or independence. The same has happened in northern Iraq, with a de-facto Kurdish entity. These pseudo-Kurdish States encompass those Kurds fighting in Turkey and Iran. Their struggle could lead to further instability in the area.

What about the effects of the conflict in Syria and Iraq?

In Syria about 12% of the population has either perished in the conflict – half a million people have died – or wounded (two million). Over 3 million Syrians have fled in neighboring countries, while 7 million are internally displaced. The country has been ravaged by five long years of civil war. Iraq has been at war with itself for the past 13 years. 250 thousand people have died, of which 16 thousand last year alone, while 3.2 million have left the country. And there is no end in sight for both conflicts regardless of what happens to the ISIS.

YEMEN, A FORGOTTEN CONFLICT

Over ten thousand victims, 32 thousand wounded, three million IDPs and an impressive series of systematic human rights violations. Yemen is presently a country split in three parts, each ruled by a different entity: the Houthi rebels supported by ousted president Ali Abdullah Saleh, a so-called “legitimate” president in exile, Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, and AQIP, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. Caught in the middle, the civilian population is suffering under the blows of the warring parties.

The Saudis bomb civilian targets (refugee camps, hospitals and schools included) and employ cluster bombs (banned under international treaties) indiscriminately. They also adopt a perverse tactic: they bomb a target, wait for rescue teams to reach the location, and then bomb again. The Houthi rebellion isn't any better: they use human shields and forcibly recruit child soldiers, that represent an estimated 30% of the fighters on the ground. A similar behaviour can be found in the loyalist troops of president Hadi.

A homeless population, forced to flee from one combat zone to the next, without any health support as hospitals have become a primary targets. Over 14 million people have no access to drinking water and are at risk of famine because of the international embargo on Yemen and of the Saudi bombing of transport infrastructures and roads. The civilians are basically caught in a trap: the Saudi desert to the north and an international naval blockade to the south.

In the meantime, the poorest country in the Middle East is on the verge of collapsing: almost half of all businesses have shut down, the GDP has fallen 35-40% since the outbreak of the war. However, international public opinion does not pay any attention to the unfolding humanitarian catastrophe, its attention grabbed by other crisis in the region: the civil war in Syria, the fight against the ISIS, the Kurdish struggle, the US-Russia competition.

who's responsible

The conflict in Yemen has been fueled by a number of actors. The main one is Saudi Arabia. The kingdom started the conflict to hamper the growing Iranian influence in the country after Teheran sided with the Houthi rebellion. The struggle for regional dominance isn't the only motivation that pushed the Saudis to intervene. The new king Salman and especially the ruler's son, Mohammed, that aspires to become the heir apparent to the throne, have pushed their country in the spotlight through an aggressive foreign policy. However, since Saudi Arabia's direct intervention in the conflict in March 2015, the military success Riyadh was yearning for has not materialized. In fact, the Saudis have launched a war on Yemen a month after the Houthi rebels and president Hadi had signed a peace agreement. The deal called for the withdrawal of the Houthis from parts of Sana'a and the formation of a government of national unity.

The US, UK and France are all supportive of the Saudi military initiative. British and American officers station in the military command centers that choose the targets to bomb. While the French are flooding both the Saudis and the UAE with their weapons. The US support is the price to pay for the “betrayal” of the traditional Saudi ally in favor of a deal on Iran's nuclear programme. The anglo-american influence has not prevented the war from going astray. They simply looked the other way when international NGOs condemned the systematic human rights violations. The fresh British Secretary of State, Boris Johnson, has done even better than American mutism: he denied that abuses ever took place. The Saudi's lack of familiarity with the concept of human rights completed the bleak picture.

Negotiations without a solution

There have been a series of talks to put an end to the conflict. The latest round was held in Kuwait and failed miserably in August after three months of futile discussions. Immediately after their collapse the bombings resumed. During the latest visit by the US Secretary of State, John Kerry, in Riyadh a new proposal emerged: cessation of hostilities, withdrawal of the Houthis from the Yemeni capital, which they conquered in September 2014, and the handing over of all their artillery and weapons. In other words: you must surrender. This is not a proposition, it's a joke.

With the support of once president Saleh, the Houthis have set up a "Supreme political council" to rule the country; on the other end, the "legitimate" president Hadi, whose government is in exile, claims that he can rule the country thanks to the abundant oil revenues. None of the parties seems ready for or willing to compromise. The rebels are using the Parliament, whose mandate expired in 2009, to seek legitimacy, whilst Hadi is struggling to make his way back to the capital with Saudi military muscle. In the meantime, the AQAP terrorists are exploiting the civil war to strengthen and to exercise their control over some areas in Yemen, and especially in Hadhramaut on the border with Oman.

The conflict in Yemen has also taken its toll on Saudi finances. The growing budget deficit and the collapse of oil prices has led to a 20% cut to the salaries of Saudi public employees. On the opposite front, the Yemenis are used to living in poverty and know how to manage their subsistence economy and supply themselves on the black market. In fact, the Houthis are even financing their war through the levies they are imposing on the population. Oil exports, which used to represent roughly 50% of the country's State income, have now been blocked. While billions of dollars will be necessary to rebuild a country torn apart by the conflict. That is, when a peace deal is signed.

Yet, there seems to be no end in sight for this conflict. Military operations have stalled. The Saudi army and its over 100 thousand troops benefit from US logistical support and are assisted by units coming from several other countries: a thousand Egyptians, 800/900 Sudanese, a thousand from Qatar, a brigade provided by the UAE, plus a couple of thousand Colombian mercenaries, an artillery battalion from Kuwait, 300 from Bahrein and 2.100 soldiers from Senegal. These figures don't account for the Yemeni army soldiers loyal to Hadi. And these are just the troops on the ground, to which we have to add around 100 Saudi fighter jets, plus airplanes from other nations (Jordan, Egypt, UAE, Bahrein, Morocco, Sudan, Kuwait and Qatar). This massive display of force has not been capable of defeating about 100 thousand Houthi rebels and the remnants of troops loyal to former president Saleh. What is even worse: the conflict has now spilled over into Saudi Arabia with the sporadic raids by the Ansar Allah militias and the launch of missiles.

We all know that the Houthis are receiving support from Iran and are being trained by Hezbollah. A delegation of rebels has recently visited Baghdad to seek, at least officially, humanitarian support from the Iraqi Shia-dominated government. This initiative can only further fuel the Shia-Sunni sectarian divide that has spread across the Middle East. It's not a coincidence that it was also one of the main causes for the outbreak of the war in Yemen.

The United States are trying, via the UN, to form a government of national unity. The initiative is theoretically supported by both the "legitimate" president and the rebels. However, the disagreement is over the details of the deal. The Houthis will never withdraw from Sana'a nor hand over their weapons without anything in return. They want a federal system, greater territorial autonomy, regardless of who is at the helm in the capital. A regional structure was part of the negotiations that failed in February 2014 and that eventually led to the Houthis taking over Sana'a

in September. Everyone was in favor of a federalist Yemen. The rebels were because it allowed them to maintain the control over the north of the country – and this is basically what they are still demanding – and for similar reasons the idea was also appreciated by the secessionists in the south.

An irreconcilable rift

This seems the only viable exit strategy for Yemen whom, since the reunification in 1990, still bleeds from the wounds of a lengthy North vs South conflict. The war has also highlighted once more the role of the tribes. They are the true power-brokers in Yemen, regardless of who the government is. This is why it doesn't make any sense to talk about "legitimate" or "illegitimate" rulers.

Take Ali Abdullah Saleh, for instance. He ruled North Yemen since 1978 and then unified Yemen until 2012, when he was forced to relinquish power to his deputy, Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi. It is of no importance that Saleh waged a war against the Houthis from 2004 until 2011 with Saudi support. After all, UN Resolution 2216 of April 2015 – sponsored by the Gulf Cooperation Council, Saudi Arabia and with US blessing – claims Hadi is the "legitimate" president of a country that has never stumbled upon democracy. This is why taking the UN Resolution as the basis for any future negotiation will lead nowhere.

Saudi Arabia represents the main obstacle to peace, as it is against any compromise between the Yemenis. Any concession to the Houthis would also mean the enemy would control its southern borders. The Saudis would also lose their face: the war in Yemen has put the military credibility of the kingdom and the ambitions of the king's son, Mohammed bin Salman, at stake. Without a fair deal both parties would end up as losers. The Houthis face similar issues. The conflict has given them far more influence and power than they ever dreamt of. They basically now rule over a third of the country. And they have finally access to the State's finances, or what is left of them.

A solution must be found because, in the long term, no one will benefit from this war. Not the US, who see their ally squander resources in a useless conflict. Not Saudi Arabia, who's actually bleeding 6 billion dollars a month. Not the rebels, who don't have the capability to control such a vast extent of territory. Not the civilian population, whom the UN High Commission for Refugees has labeled as on the verge of a "humanitarian catastrophe".

ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION, SECURITY AND THE SEARCH FOR SOLUTIONS

Immigration is a business where the bargaining chip, the product of the transaction or the client is a human being. It is a business that moves large amounts of money and many interests. There are those who direct the business from an office in Sudan, those who transport, via ground and sea, those who recruit and those who provide a hiding place for the migrants. A business worth roughly 12 billion, according to the IOM (International Organization for Migration) and one that offers employment opportunities in several nations if one is willing to take part in this illegal activity. The immigration business often benefits from the work of the poor who survive by exploiting the misfortunes of other poor in a market that is never in a crisis because it is fueled by totalitarian regimes, wars, endemic poverty, overpowering and abuse. All of these factors render the risks - especially physical ones - that a migrant faces, while traveling to a different part of the world, acceptable after all.

The organizations that operate in this market are transnational, they survive on the volatility of borders and base their operations on police corruption. They have the flexibility that allows them to open and close a human-trafficking route according to their needs.

Europe gone missing

Illegal immigration has become a central problem for Italy – a country located on the front line – and for Europe, which is torn apart by populism and national egotism.

It is an eternal struggle that includes social, economic, ethical problems and fuels more or less justified fears regarding security, terrorism, the loss of one's cultural models, religious juxtaposition, xenophobia and intolerance.

The circumstances above explain Europe's decision to disregard the decision, taken in 2015, to relocate roughly 160 thousand asylum seekers that had arrived in Italy. In the end, only 5000 were accepted by other European nations.

In the past years European countries have built walls, both real and metaphoric. The UK decided to 'Brexit' while waving the danger represented by illegal immigration, Hungary held a referendum about immigration and coming elections in several EU countries will have immigration as their central theme.

Instead of using the founding values of the European Union to find a solution, selfishness and partisan interests prevailed once again.

The effects on Italy

While Europe failed to find a solution, Italy's position worsened. Due to the lack of support from the EU, Italy was forced to face the social, ethical and economic implications of such a mass migration on its own. To make matters worse, the immigrants landing in Italy with the intent to move on to another country (in the past, only about 15% of the immigrants decided to stay in Italy) are now stuck in the peninsula.

Currently, before the advent of winter that slows down the influx of migrants, Italy has already had over 140 thousand new arrivals. But the real figure is must higher, seen that the arrivals in the year 2016 surpass the previous year, 2015, which closed with the record figure of 144 thousand arrivals.

During this year's initial six months, almost 3 thousand migrants were killed while crossing the Mediterranean sea. This figure is also underrated because it is based on the official numbers and does not include the thousands of casualties that nobody will ever know about. It is nonetheless a figure that quantifies the desperation of those facing the trip and the lack of scruples of those who profit from their plight.

The contingent difficulties faced by Italy do not change the fact that the phenomenon of immigration has international implications and can only be solved through an international effort.

Italy, as the country of arrival, and Libya, the country of departure, are currently the principal players in a social drama that involves many other countries.

The agreement with Gaddafi

The agreement signed in August 2008 ("Treaty of friendship, partnership and cooperation") between Italy and Gaddafi's Libya had in a way found a solution to the problem of illegal immigration, although the blackmail-like way in which Gaddafi approached the issue had practically forced Italy to sign the document.

Article 19 of the above-mentioned treaty said that the two parts would intensify cooperation on illegal immigration, that they would promote the construction of a control system along the Libyan borders (including a radar surveillance system, although such system had other goals apart from locating immigrants who crossed the desert). Most importantly, the agreement said that Italy and Libya would have worked jointly on the "definition of initiatives, both bilateral and regional, to prevent the phenomenon of illegal immigration by operating in the countries of origin of the migrants".

In substance, in exchange for a generous Italian financial donation (5 billion dollars, 6 guard ships, training, equipment of various kinds, the radar surveillance system along Libya's southern border), Libya agreed to take back the migrants that landed in Italy.

Italian authorities had solved their problem, although they neglected several, ethical, aspects of the issue: the immigrants who were sent back to Libya was jailed and underwent the same vexations that they were trying to escape from, including abuses, sexual violence and exploitation.

Also, the most important aspect of the agreement was left unfulfilled: neither Italy nor Libya ever attempted to stop immigration in the countries of origin. After all, Libya was but a country of transit.

At the time, Gaddafi had been the president of the African Union. He had obtained from a plethora of African chieftains the title of “king of kings”. In other words, he was still influential in the African panorama.

Notwithstanding, in the end, neither Italy nor Libya made efforts to enact their plans.

After the Arab Spring that swept Middle Eastern and North African countries, the 2011 international effort to oust Gaddafi from power and the consequent social chaos which still lasts in Libya, the 2008 agreement became scrap paper.

Looking for solutions

In November 2015 the European Union signed an agreement with Turkey along the same lines of the Italian-Libyan experience: Europe promised Turkey 3 billion euro in aid and Turkey agreed to take back the migrants who try to travel to Europe from there (Turkey is another country of transit). Once again the political context in which the agreement was underwritten made it a veiled form of blackmail on the part of Turkey, with the aggravating circumstance that, while the immigrants from Libya are economic migrants, those from Turkey are chiefly Syrian refugees escaping from the war.

The EU’s approach was wrong once again: they negotiated with the transit country, not the original homeland of the migrants.

But is there a solution to the problem of illegal immigration? As a social phenomenon, it cannot be stopped so long as there exist rich and poor countries and oppressive regimes, but it could be dampened by dealing with the countries of origin. This, of course, is true if the migrants are economic migrants, not political ones.

This is the approach that the Italian government is trying to adopt nowadays. Italy would like to use the EU as their negotiator because they would have more contractual power, but this hasn’t happened this far.

Italy’s main problem is that the migrants arriving in Italy file for international protection and, if they don’t obtain it (60% of the demands are rejected), they cannot be expelled from Italy because their country of origin is not willing to welcome them back. This stalemate can be ended only with negotiations and donations. If Europe had spent the 3 billion euro that they promised Turkey to better relations with the poor nations of sub-Saharan Africa, the effort would have surely had a positive impact on illegal immigration as well.

In the meanwhile, an alternative solution – although partial and not decisive - is still open: a pseudo-negotiation with the Libyan authorities that, being divided into three governments, many militias and an inefficient and corrupt police, have no way of ensuring their part of the deal.

In view of the European weakness, the Italian initiative is justified by the fact that there are no other viable alternatives. Italy has no choice, seen as 90% of the migrants landing on its coastline come from Libya.

The Italian authorities have recently constituted a “joint operations room” with Libya to start a novel cooperation between the two countries. The agreement was sealed with the Government of National Accord led by PM Serraj (this circumstance alone rouses doubts on the eventual subscription of the deal by other parties within Libya).

The deal is also officially aimed at stopping terrorism, but its main purpose is that of curbing immigration.

Libya agreed to patrol and control its southern borders, where the migrants arrive, but it is a well-known fact that the southern region is controlled by the Tuareg (in the area of Sheba), by the Tebu (in the area of Kufra) and by a number of criminal and terrorist factions, not by Serraj and his government. Most importantly, now that the ISIS terrorists have been ousted (or are about to be) from Sirte, many of them have escaped south.

The two countries also agreed to use drones to patrol the Libyan borders, to start various training courses and, obviously, that Libya would receive a conspicuous supply of vehicles and instruments from Italy. This deal is not much different from past deals, with a positive note (the Italian part of the project is participated by the Intelligence Services, the Defense and Interior ministries, while in 2008 the Defense ministry and intelligence services had been excluded from operations) and a negative note (Italy negotiated with a State that is not fully empowered).

In the past, the Libyan State participated in the exploitation of illegal immigration. Nowadays the phenomenon is systematic, seen that the police (who are seldom paid their salaries), Libyans looking to make a living and ISIS terrorists all profit from the business of immigration.

The correlation between terrorism and illegal immigration

We have no evidence that the routes of illegal migrants are used by terrorists to infiltrate Italy. Such evidence did not exist in Gaddafi’s time and it doesn’t exist today. Terrorists want to die martyrs, not on a capsized boat in the middle of the Mediterranean.

Yet illegal immigration, when it is not regulated and supported by adequate welcoming structures, brings with it problems such as social marginalization and frustration; it eases collusion with criminality and terrorism.

In perspective, this kind of immigration is dangerous. It is confirmed by the fact that numerous recent terrorist attacks in European countries have been carried out by Arabs or Muslims that were longtime residents of those countries.

Today, Italy harbors 4 million foreign (legal) residents plus a multitude of illegal aliens – the so-called “invisible” migrants – whose numbers are not known.

Someday, among the latter, there could be psychological room for a new, potential, terrorist. The “foreign fighters” listed by the Interior ministry are not many: 90, enlisted in either the ISIS or Al Nusra, 18 of which are dead. Only 14 have returned to Italy.

Notwithstanding, Islamic extremism can soon find new adepts among the disowned and marginalized migrants.