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## **TREASON PRECEDES THE FALL OF THE ISIS**

When the leaders of an armed or revolutionary group are systematically killed it is generally due to the presence of spies within that group that relay information to its enemies.

When this happens, it is usually due to the fact that the military fortunes of the group in question are turning for the worse and causing the defection of its followers. The wavering followers stop supporting the losers and try to gain the consensus of the opposition through treason. After all, espionage has always been fueled by treason. This is exactly what is happening to the Caliph's army, which is now on the defensive in both Syria and Iraq. The closure of the Turkish escape route leaves them without a way out and faced with the inescapable militarily defeated.

When the utopia of a Caliphate crumbles on Islamic turf, its militiamen embrace more prosaic ways in order to survive. The idea that martyrdom is the only way out is not always met with enthusiasm. Currently, there are a number of signs that anticipate the Islamic State's military undoing.

### **The signs**

The first sign is visible in the propaganda apparatus of the ISIS. An apparatus that has always been the diamond point of the Caliphate. It divulged admonitions and threats, the exaltation of its victories, helped in the recruitment, proselytism and in the diffusion of a vision of a pure and invincible Islam.

The propagandist support to the exaltation of the Caliphate has been drastically reduced of late. This is not solely due to the physical elimination of its supervisor Mohammed Adnani (and of his second-in-charge, Wail Adil Hassan Salman al Fayad – the person responsible for the diffusion of the ISIS' videos and its "minister of information") but also to the general conditions in which the Caliphate is now forced to operate. The substance of the ISIS' messages has changed; its messages are now mainly centered on the theological aspects of the struggle. When reality does not fuel hope, there is a tendency to find refuge in the utopia that should be. There is a new focus on the duties of the combatant rather than on those of the good Muslim under the aegis of the Caliph. Even the diffusion of Al Baghdadi's last message – a rare event – in which he invites the Islamic soldiers to fight for martyrdom, is in fact proof of a crumbling Islamic State.

Another sign of their undoing is the news of two attempts by the population of Mosul to topple the ISIS, both drowned in blood. This had never occurred in the past, when the ISIS

was all-powerful and when it had full control over its territories. People find the courage to contrast the brutality of the Islamic State because they perceive its weakness. These attempts were not led by underground opposers coming out in the open, but rather by individuals who were until recently partially sympathetic or complacent with the ISIS, who now need to show their dissent in order to gain merits in view of the arrival of the Iraqi army in Mosul. The uprisings were not popular revolts but rather attempts dictated by opportunism. In a chiefly Sunni city like Mosul, which is openly hostile to the Shiites in Baghdad, where the defunct Saddam Hussein is still popular, the main interest is that of looking supportive of the government in Baghdad. This is due to the risk, which is actually quite high, of going from the persecutions of the Caliph's men to those of the Iraqi army (or rather those of the Shiite militias that fight alongside the army, which have already shown their brutality upon conquering other nearby Sunni cities.)

There are also other signs coming from within the Islamic extremist circle. The ISIS had risen in juxtaposition and competition with Al Qaida. It is a circumstance that caused a division both on the Syrian and Iraqi battlefields, where a militarily powerful organization such as Jabhat al Nusra (which recently changed its name in "Jabhat Fatah Al Sham" in order to distinguish itself from Al Zawahiri's group) clashed with Al Baghdadi's militias. The main differences arose on theological grounds (to achieve the Caliphate not by fighting, as the ISIS did, but through the religious conviction of Muslims), on the main objective of the armed fight (Al Qaida's internationalism was aimed at non-believers while the ISIS' unchained a sectarian fight against Shiites) and on the way power is to be administered (Al Qaida has always tried to avoid the killing of Muslims, mass executions and has never speculated on the media hype around such circumstances). Now that the ISIS is collapsing, Al Qaida has announced the creation of an Islamic emirate in north-western Syria. It's as if the two have traded sides. Not exactly a sign of solidarity; rather one of religious profiteering.

Another symptom of a collapsing regime are the cases of desertion among the ranks of the ISIS, which were, of course, drowned in blood. Desertion is in fact the supreme contradiction for an Islamic combatant who endorses Caliph Al Baghdadi's project while knowing full well that it is a divine plan where the only two options are victory or martyrdom. The brutality of the ISIS in the administration of its territories make it unlikely that defeated combatants will be spared or rehabilitated. This is an option only for those that have been involved marginally in such brutality and that can therefore hide from the avenging hand of the Iraqi security forces.

That the situation in Mosul and in the other territories controlled by the ISIS is deteriorating rapidly is confirmed indirectly by some exceptions made in the previously strict observance of the sharia: women are not forced to wear a hijab anymore (for fear that they may conceal weapons or explosives under the shroud), the Islamic fighters now tend to shave their beard (which was previously prohibited, since the beard was an element of recognition and faith in the Caliphate). The fact that the fighter's families are moving out of Mosul to find refuge in Raqqa is an ulterior sign of a collapsing regime. Also, the attempt to burn oil – as they are doing in Mosul – to produce smoke and hide from enemy aircraft –

means that there is less fuel to escape and that the bombardments are indeed crippling the ISIS.

Another sign of the crumbling reign is the imposition, in the territories controlled by the ISIS, of a laughable Caliphate currency and the contextual requisition of the local currency. It means that the Islamic fighters are preparing to escape and need money to do it. At the same time, it is a way to impoverish the local population which cannot escape because they cannot buy anyone's collaboration to do so.

### **The systematic elimination of the ISIS management**

Just like with the most-wanted Iraqi deck of cards, which was progressively diminished as members of the Baath management were killed and captured, the same is happening with the individuals that have administered power alongside the Caliph. The same circumstance that certified the fall of the Baathist regime is now true of the Islamic State.

Saddam Hussein's military chiefs were systematically eliminated, thus creating a void in the chain of command. A climate of insecurity among the management of the Baath party was created and Saddam Hussein, like Al Baghdadi today, was progressively isolated. The result will be the same: Al Baghdadi's management will be left with two options: to escape (and be killed) or to die in so-called martyrdom.

The elimination of the management of the ISIS has been greatly accelerated of late. Besides the above-mentioned Adnani and Al Fayad, other, important, heads of the ISIS have recently met their demise: Abdel Rahmne al Qadouli ("minister of finance"), Abu Al Hija (Commander of the Aleppo front), Omar Al Shishani ("minister of defense").

In the past weeks, at least 13 important 'cards' of the Caliph's deck have been killed in the area in or near Mosul.

There are still a number of ISIS cards to be captured or killed, but the most important, the so-called ace of spades (Saddam Hussein back then) is Ibrahim Awad Ibrahim Ali Al Badri al Samarraï, also called "Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi". Once he is killed or captured, the entire Islamic State will dissolve like a bad dream.

### **What will happen after the defeat of the ISIS**

The military defeat of the ISIS – it is important to remember – will not put an end to Islamic terrorism, it will only cause its relocation to another area of the world, because the social context that generates terrorism is left unchanged, especially in Muslim countries and in the areas of Africa where poverty is endemic. But the utopia of a religious war that conquers territory and subjugates the enemy is, alas, over. This was the main attractiveness of the Caliphate compared to other Islamic terrorist struggles. Al Baghdadi's "merit" is especially this: to have moved beyond the stumbling block, to have challenged the impossible and provided a dream for his "people".

Now the Islamic combatants are faced with the harsh reality of a war that they are losing. They hoped/believed that Allah would have guaranteed a victory on the battlefield but it did

not happen. They are now confronted with the fact that, since the divine support did not arrive, perhaps the cause they had embraced was not the right one. And the roads left for them to tread are not many. The ISIS combatant is the victim of a system that was willingly brutal, not only to ensure power but also to burn the bridges behind its adepts' backs. Now they are left with few alternatives – save martyrdom – and they need to continue the battle elsewhere. After their defeat in the Daqib (which, in the religious interpretation of the Hadith, was the final battle against the miscreants), the Islamic extremists will seek another Daqib elsewhere. Fate dealt its fatal, ironic, twist: The long awaited Daqib was won by the Turkman Sunni militias on the past 16<sup>th</sup> of October in a battle where the steadfast defense by Al Baghdadi's militias that the sacredness of the battlefield would have deserved was nowhere to be found.

## **MIDDLE EAST: FRIENDS AND FOES**

In the Middle East's quagmire it is hard to distinguish friends from foes. With ever evolving crisis, there are several contrasting interests at stake. As priorities change, so do the roles in a tragedy that has once common denominator: a civilian population who often can't even tell who is to blame for its suffering. Politics based on traditional alliances are gone. The volatility of the situations asks for contingent choices. There is no defined set of friends or foes in the Middle East anymore, each and everyone can switch to one or the other according to circumstances.

### **Russia**

Russia has stepped in with its troops to support the regime in Damascus since September 2015. Moscow's air strikes target the rebels fighting against Bashar al Assad. From time to time they also hit ISIS. By intervening in Syria, Russia is protecting its geo-strategic interests, the naval base in Tartous, and is positioning itself as the main broker for the future of the Middle East. The issue of whether Assad should stay or go is irrelevant and is one that will be dealt with at the end of the civil war. The point is, whoever will take over will have to be appreciated by the Russians.

Russia is also sending out a message to the other countries in the region: "We are a reliable country, we don't pull back to defend our friends. Unlike the US, whose foreign policy has created a void and sense of instability to its traditional Arab allies".

The only thorn is the relationship with Ankara. The bilateral ties reached their lowest point after the downing of a Russian fighter jet by the Turks on November 24, 2015. After Russian sanctions, Erdogan offered his excuses to Putin in August. After all, the Turks are at odds with Washington and closer ties with Moscow are their only alternative.

Lastly, in its fight against the ISIS, Russia is allied to the same countries trying to oust Assad.

### **United States**

The US support the so-called Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), an Arab and Syrian-Kurdish coalition that fights the ISIS. It does so on Syrian soil and by providing aerial support to the rebels. Despite targeting the ISIS, the US tend to avoid striking the Syrian army. In order to avoid mistakes, the Russians and Americans have set up a coordination center in Amman. Lately the Kurds from the YPG, the de-facto leaders of the SDF, have clashed with Assad's troops in Hasaka. This could mean Russia and the US could come to a face off.

Another recent event is the direct Turkish intervention in Syria. Officially to support the so-called Syrian Free Army (SFA), a grouping of secular and islamist groups (Ahrar al Sham), the Turks have stepped in to stop the expansion of the Kurds in the areas surrounding Jarablous. The US support could lead to a clash with the other US supported group: the SDF. The American elite troops that were on the ground with the SFA have been asked to leave. The US initiative is a goodwill gesture towards the Turks after the strains in their

bilateral relationship over the past few years. Joe Biden's visit to Ankara on August 24 is part of this conciliatory process. And there are signals of recent clashes between Turkish troops and the YPG.

On the Iraqi front, the US supports the government in Baghdad and the Kurdish Peshmerga in their struggle against the ISIS. They do so with supplies of weapons, training and aerial bombardments. The war on terrorism puts the US in the uncomfortable position of sharing the same battlefield and goals with Iran and Russia.

## **Israel**

Israel also strikes in Syria from time to time, but it does so to hit the Hezbollah fighting alongside Assad. The Israelis and the Russians have also struck a deal to prevent direct confrontations. Israel is only marginally interested in the outcome of the conflicts in the region, but is more interested in exploiting the rampant instability. The first side effect is a total lack of attention towards the Palestinian issue. This allows for an expansion of the settlements in the Occupied Territories without the need of any negotiation or talk on the future of the Palestinian people.

There are also a series of indirect benefits: Russian troops in Syria have pushed a rapprochement with Moscow. The same is happening with the Saudis, as both countries face the growing Iranian threat.

## **Turkey**

Turkish planes are hitting both the ISIS and the areas controlled by the YPG in Syria. Its troops have crossed the border into Syria and are also present in Iraq, despite Baghdad's protests. Turkey fears the outcome of the wars in Syria and Iraq for two main reasons: one is the advance of Iran and of the shia. Secondly, they fear a Kurdish autonomous entity along the Syrian border, a circumstance that could fuel further Kurdish unrest at home. The "Euphrates" military operation, which marks the first time Turkish fighter jets have moved into Syrian airspace since the downing of the Russian Mig, aims to limit Kurdish influence across the river. The YPG, the armed branch of the PYD, is labelled a terrorist group by the Turks and is branded as an affiliate of the outlawed PKK, whose bases are on the Kandil mountains in Iraq. Although Ankara often targets the Iraqi PKK bases, they are still in good terms with the Kurdistan region in Iraq.

Overall, Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East is contradictory. They are at odds with Egypt since the ousting of president Mohamed Morsi, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, and the restoration of a military regime. There have been serious disagreements with Russia, whose plane was taken down after crossing Turkish military airspace for less than one minute. Those ties have now been mended since the attempted coup in July and Recep Tayyip Erdogan's visit to Vladimir Putin in August. Ankara is now open to Assad staying in power solely because they know that any deal will require Russian consent. It is in this renewed context that the head of the Turkish secret services, the MIT, Hakan Fidan, visited Damascus recently.

The same can't be said of the US. After initially denying the use of the Incirlik airbase to bomb ISIS, the airstrip is now available to the coalition. The frictions with Washington have continued after the coup attempt on July 15, mainly because the alleged mastermind of the operation – at least according to the Turks – is the self-exiled Turkish cleric Fethullah Gulen. He lives in the US and local authorities have asked Turkey to provide evidence before any extradition request is granted.

Turkey wanted to undermine the Syrian regime by aiding ISIS, and this is why the terrorist group was granted a free pass and a logistical rear base on Turkish soil. When the “partnership” was closed, under US pressure and because of the newfound friendship with Moscow, Turkey became the target of attacks by the militants led by Abu Bakr al Baghdadi.

In the infighting between shia and sunni, Turkey is cultivating a privileged relationship with Saudi Arabia, with the aim of playing a key role in middle-eastern affairs. At the same time, Ankara and Teheran are getting along pretty well and Ergodan's future visit in Iran could seal an improvement in bilateral ties. The same can't be said of Turkey's relationship with Europe. The denial to join the EU and the criticism that has followed the post-coup crackdown is drifting the Turks further away from Europe.

### **Saudi Arabia**

The Saudis are bombing ISIS and supporting the radical islamic rebels that are fighting Assad. The Saudis fear Iran more than ISIS. It is a struggle for the religious leadership of the sunnis over the shia. The Iranian support to the Syrian alawite regime has pushed the Saudis to support those forces opposed to it.

As far as Iraq is concerned, the Saudi dilemma is more complex. There is a shia government in Baghdad which is supported by both the US and Iran in its fight against ISIS. These circumstances “force” the Saudis to be on the same side as the Iranians in the struggle against terrorism. But, nonetheless, this is definitely not a priority for Riyadh. Actually, the accusations of a Saudi covert support to ISIS are also one of the reasons for Saudi Arabia's intervention in Yemen. Once again, zaidi shia rebels supported by Iran are fought by government-backed Saudi forces.

### **Syrian Kurds**

The Syrian Kurds, the YPG militias linked to the PYD, are fighting the ISIS and have so far avoided to clash with Bashar al Assad's troops. Only lately in Hasaka has the Syrian army targeted YPG positions. It is still unclear whether they will open the northern front against the Kurds.

The Syrian Kurds seek greater autonomy, whether with or without Assad. Although the relationship with Iraqi Kurds is not good, this doesn't mean the Kurdish community doesn't share a common agenda for autonomy or independence. Syrian Kurds have thus far benefited from US support and hope their performance on the field will grant them a continued backing once they sit at the negotiating table. They are fighting ISIS and have established Rojava. But the US is the same partner that is now backing the Turkish

invasion of liberated territories. Will Washington accept a partitioning of Syria? It is very unlikely.

### **Iraqi Kurds**

Their ground troops are fighting ISIS independently from the Iraqi army. Iraqi Kurds want to stress that they are independent from Baghdad, as has been the case ever since the toppling of Saddam Hussein. They are trained and armed by the US, Italians and a number of Western governments. Once ISIS is defeated, the issue of the governance of areas once populated by Kurds will surface again. Iraqi Kurds want Kirkuk and its rich oil fields. While the relationship with Ankara is good, the same can't be said of the Syrian YPG.

### **Iran**

Following the deal on its nuclear program, Iran, together with Russia, is one of the main actors on the stage in the Middle East. Iranians have their boots on the ground in Syria and Iraq, either with their regular army or the so-called paramilitary shia units made up of "volunteers". Their deployment against the ISIS in Iraq and in support of Assad in Syria is part of a strategy to affirm their dominance over the region. A circumstance that clashes with similar Saudi aims. The shia vs sunni divide is just a smoke screen.

Iran and Russia are de-facto allies, although some difference remain. The fact that Russian fighter were initially allowed and then denied access to Iranian bases may not be just a coincidence.

### **Egypt**

The restoration of a military regime and the ousting of an islamist president has created some problems to general Abdel Fattah al Sisi. However, the rise of the terrorist threat has pushed the international community to close an eye. After all, Egypt is facing terrorists in the Sinai peninsula and neighbors a country in turmoil such as Libya.

The conflict in the Sinai is carried out with Israeli support. The synergy has left the Gaza Strip isolated and the Palestinians find themselves with no supply routes remaining. Israel has gone as far as claiming Hamas is supportive of the terrorists in the Sinai. On the Libyan front instead, the Egyptians are directly aiding general Khalifa Haftar.

On a wider scale, Egypt is an ally of Saudi Arabia. It provides troops for the conflict in Yemen and receives financial support in exchange. Although domestic issues might restrain Egypt from fulfilling its role as a regional leader, sooner or later its demographics and culture will take them back where they belong.

## THE ROLE OF THE TRIBES IN THE IRAQ WAR

In the Middle East, as in Africa, ethnic or tribal factors play a key role in politics and society. Middle-eastern countries, as opposed to African ones, also have to deal with religious differences. All of the above have to be taken into account when evaluating the scenarios unfolding in a specific country. Iraq is no different. More so when dealing with areas or cities that have been retaken from ISIS. The issue is: Which troops can I deploy in order not to frighten or hurt the susceptibilities of the locals? And this has nothing to do with the religious infighting between sunnis or shia, nor the ethnic-cultural divide between Arabs and Kurds. More often than not tribes represent the expression of social consensus. Saddam Hussein was well aware of the fact and exploited rivalries and dispensed brutalities in order to benefit from the tribal fabric of his country. In fact, Saddam had established an Office for Tribal Affairs that worked under the presidency for this specific purpose.

### The characteristics of the tribes

There are several tribes in Iraq. Some of them are a confederation of tribes, while others are more similar to a clan. The tribes are basically classified on the basis of how many members they have: at the top is the "Kabila" (generally the biggest tribe), followed by the "Ashirah" (big tribe), the "Fakhd" (clan), the "Fundah" (a portion of a clan), "Khams" (which means "five" and stands for the number of generations the tribe has lived through) and finally the "Hammulah" (a conglomerate of families) and the "Baith" (meaning "home" and refers to a single family).

Starting off from their founder, the families evolve along patriarchal lines, gain in strength through weddings, especially among cousins. The members of these tribes not only share the same blood, but also a series of common values: loyalty, sense of belonging, honor. It is worth noting that the biggest tribes have both sunni and shia members.

The tribal leader rises to become a *sheykh*, a title granting him both political and religious leverage over his community. One becomes a *sheykh* based on hereditary lineage, but also through talent, charisma, social status, financial wealth or influence. Sometimes the power of a *sheykh* is shared with a religious leader. The *sheykh* is the one negotiating with the State, although any decision within the tribe is the result of negotiations, consultations and mediations. Generally speaking, there is a certain degree of democracy in the decision process. Those who don't abide by it are marginalized by their own tribe.

The elders also play a key role both as advisers to the *sheykhs*, and as go between the families and the leadership. Decisions and obligations for all members of this social group run through this hierarchical system.

### The tribes affiliated to Saddam Hussein's regime

The Iraqi dictator was born into a small clan of the Majid family, which was affiliated to the Abu Nasr tribe. From this starting point, Saddam created a series of alliances with other important tribes in the areas of Mosul, Tikrit, Samarra, Awajh and Anbar. Thanks to this network he took over and managed power. The cadres of the Baath Party, the members of

the security services, the military or the Republican Guard all came from tribes loyal to the regime. And the majority of them came from the triangle between Mosul, Ramadi and Baghdad in the north of Iraq. This was Saddam Hussein's powerhouse and this is where the fate of ISIS will be decided.

It is only by analyzing the tribes that populate the area, the so-called "Sunni triangle", that one can evaluate the success of the military operations to retake control of Mosul and the rest of Iraq. The area around Mosul is home to Iraq's most important tribe: the Jabbur. They are a confederation of over 50 tribes and can count on over 2 million members. They are the biggest in the country and are present in a number of provinces throughout Iraq. Despite being largely sunni, there are also shia members south of the Iraqi capital.

The Jabbur were very close to Saddam Hussein because of their affiliation to the Abu Nasr. During the two Gulf Wars in 1991 and 2003 its men fought with the regime and held key posts in both the army and the security services. There was a time, in the early 1980s, during which Saddam Hussein, possibly scared by its growing influence, started confiscating lands and persecuting members of the tribe. After a series of coup attempts and deals, the majority of the tribe continued backing the regime. Some of the *sheykhs* that were still opposed to Saddam fled to Damascus.

Another important confederation of tribes (it includes about 200 of them) is the Dulaym. Its members are also in the millions and are spread along the border with Jordan and up to the Euphrates river in the west of the country. As with the Jabbur, its members south of Baghdad are shia. The loyalty of this confederation to Saddam has been fluctuating: in 1991 they were on his side after the uprising that followed the military defeat against the US, but a few years later they were involved in a coup attempt led by a number of Dulaym officers, including a general. When Saddam's revenge struck one of the tribes belonging to the confederation, the Abu Nimr, stood up against the dictator and its rebellion was quashed in blood.

Being such a big confederation, Saddam Hussein found a way to reconcile with most of its members. After their uprising he signed a series of deals with a number of *sheykhs*. Before the 2003 invasion, high ranking Dulaym officers were still part of both the armed forces and security services. This is one of the reasons why a portion of the Dulaym, the loyalist part, sided with Saddam Hussein (and is now, with varying degrees of involvement, supporting ISIS), while another part remained hostile to the regime. Among the latter is the Abu Nimr tribe that has been contributing men to the Suhar al-Iraqi (Iraqi Awakening) militia that should be now involved in the liberation of Mosul.

Another relevant confederation of tribes in the area of Mosul is the Shammar. They can count on 1-1.5 million members grouped in 40 or so tribes. The majority of them are sunni, although shia are also present in the south of Iraq. It is mainly present east of Mosul and along the Syrian border, one of most crucial areas. The Shammar are also present in neighboring countries such as Syria, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. Now defunct Saudi king Abdallah was the son of a Shammar and married one himself. Given their international standing, the Shammar always kept a neutral stance with regard to Saddam. Very few of them were in leading positions during the regime. With the exception of a few clashes with

government forces in the 90s, and despite a failed attempt by Saddam to link the Shammar to his loyalist tribes in Tikrit, this confederation has kept out of the civil war. One of their characteristics is that they are in good terms with the Kurds and especially with Masoud Barzani's Kurdish Democratic Party.

The Ubayd are present instead in Kirkuk, the areas around Tikrit and south of the capital in Wasir. If both the Dulaym, Jabbur and the Shammar can be considered "Kabile", the Ubayd are an "Ashirah", or a big tribe. They have almost always been loyal to Saddam because of their ties to the Abu Nasr tribe.

### **Tribal role in the offensive against the ISIS**

The liberation of Mosul will not succeed without the support of the Sunni tribes that live in the city and the areas around it. Some of them have supported al Baghdadi because of their loyalty to Saddam Hussein and their armed opposition to the shia-led government in Baghdad. Those who didn't support the caliphate were persecuted by the Islamic militias.

When dealing with a confederation of tribes, it is hard to think of a unanimous behavior. Individual *sheykhs* can still decide on their own, regardless of what their tribe deliberates. This is true especially for the Jabbur, Dulaym and Shammar tribes. And each tribe's recent past dictates on which side of the barricade they now stand. Several tribes have gotten closer to the ISIS because of their common agenda against the government in Baghdad. Others have criticized the caliphates' reach in curtailing the power of the *sheykhs*. The only message al Baghdadi can't get across is the sunni-shia divide and fueling an intra-religious civil war.

The new Iraqi prime minister, Haider al Abadi, is more prone to reconciliation with the sunni tribes in the north. Just like in the past with Saddam Hussein, social consensus in Iraq depends on an agreement with the *sheykhs*. Without them the war for Mosul could last for years, not months, and al Baghdadi's men would be able to flee or hide elsewhere.