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## UNCONTROLLABLE AFGHANISTAN

Unfortunately, history seldom teaches us anything. Sometimes this is due to ignorance, because we don't know history, and sometimes to presumption, because we underestimate history's teachings.

Such is the case with Afghanistan, a strategically and geographically important territory; the crossing point for traffics and commerce in the Indo-European area; in its long story, Afghanistan has always been the object of foreign invasions. Notwithstanding, no army has ever managed to control this country's population. On the contrary: the recurring need to defend oneself from invaders has instilled in the Afghan population a sense of belonging, a refusal of foreign domination and the need to embrace its archaic social structure before any foreign influence. Afghans are fighters and in their long history they have even dominated nearby territories. Gengis Khan and his Mongols, Tamerlane; they both occupied Afghanistan without ever dominating it. The English fought and lost three wars in Afghanistan, which gained its independence from Britain in 1919.

### **The war with Russia**

Then, in September 1979, the Soviets disregarded both history and the pride of Afghan people by trying to invade the country and place a puppet of theirs at the helm. 10 years later, in February 1989, after innumerable defeats and losses, the Soviet Union decided to abandon the country.

But was this enough to suggest that Afghanistan be left alone?

Apparently not. After 9/11 the US decided to invade the country. Yet another war without winners in a country which nobody controls. It is now 2017 and the US troops are still facing the same problems that the Brits and Russians had to face. Nobody controls Afghanistan, even when there is a strong NATO and US presence on the ground. President Bush invaded Afghanistan, President Obama decided to withdraw but then, with the risk of the country going back into Taliban hands, he was forced to stay. Now Trump's turn: the new President decided to send another 8500 US soldiers in Afghanistan. Will it be enough to create stability in the country? To prevent the Talibans from taking power again? To end the crawling civil war?

### **The situation on the ground**

Considering the country's history and the situation on the ground, it probably won't be enough. During the past few years, the Taliban have regained control over much of the country. The Afghan army, armed and trained by the US, shows a scarce operative capacity. Sometimes they are even in cahoots with the Taliban, who pay good money for weapons and gas. On top of that, when the Afghan army puts up a fight, it suffers countless losses: 6000 in the year 2016 alone.

## **What is Afghanistan**

Afghanistan was the country where Osama bin Laden had operated on behalf of the US against the Soviets. Al Qaida was born from the same US-trained group of Afghan rebels before spreading in the Islamic world. In Afghanistan, the US administration gave a group of rebels Stinger missiles to shoot down Soviet helicopters; now those missiles are shooting down American helicopters. In Afghanistan, nothing sticks except for the war against the next invader.

Its tribal community is not represented by the central government. Power resides within the different ethnic groups. Afghanistan is dominated by the lords of war and their traffics – including opium. External interference is not appreciated and the warlords are the interlocutors for any potential accord. This is a characteristic of the Afghans that the US and Russians both failed to grasp. Only the Pakistani, through their Intelligence Service (IS), are able to manipulate local rivalries and play the ethnic groups against each other (especially in favor of the Pashtun). They even manage to get along with the Taliban. All of this will not be changed by 8500 additional soldiers or by the US airplanes that bomb Taliban bases daily.

This is in part due to the fact that a technological army is nearly useless against the Taliban. And so are the power relationships. The Taliban's war is not nationalistic (especially due to their ethnic divisions) but religious in nature. That is why the war in Afghanistan fueled all of the radical Islamic armed groups worldwide. We are, of course, speaking of the Sunni Muslims, as the fight against the Shiite Hazara who live near the border with Iran shows. The Hazara used to be near Al Qaida, now they are ideologically with the ISIS.

Al Baghdadi's militias are numerous in some parts of the country (Nangarhar, Zabul). They publicize their group through portable radio stations; they exalt the Sharia and try to recruit young Afghans. And their approach is often successful because the Afghans are poor, illiterate and sub-cultured.

## **Afghanistan's resources**

The Soviets – now Russians – that had been ousted by the Afghans and their US support are now coming back to Afghanistan, not to conquer it militarily, but just to do business. In

a country where legal and illegal are a matter of opinion and where corruption is rampant, there is room for business.

Afghanistan has immense mining resources: cobalt, lithium, copper, iron. All of these have never been exploited due to the country's instability. The exploitation of such resources would require infrastructural investments but the economic risk is too high.

### **The new Russian policy**

After being militarily defeated in Afghanistan in the 80's, the Russians don't really care who they do business with, as long as the country remains relatively stable. Russian policy in Afghanistan has undergone a profound mutation since 2012. Up until that year Russia was fighting the Taliban alongside the international community. They guaranteed the international forces the transit of airplanes and the transportation of men and logistic supplies. Then came the clashes with NATO in other theaters (ie Syria, Ukraine) and the awareness that the war in Afghanistan is slowly being won by the Taliban. All of these elements made Putin change his mind: today even the Taliban are considered to be a privileged interlocutor by Russia.

Russia has a direct interest in Afghanistan because the country is located along its southern borders and could raise issues of internal security. Unlike the US, which attacked Afghanistan to destroy Al Qaida and are now staying for geo-strategic reasons.

What really worries Moscow is the presence of the ISIS and the diffusion of radical Islam. Roughly 10 million Russians are Islamic. On top of that, Afghanistan borders Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, all of them former Soviet republics that remained allies of Russia after winning their independence (Uzbekistan, 80% Muslim, Turkmenistan, 94% Muslim, Tajikistan, 98% Muslim). In other words, the risk of an epidemic among the Muslim community is pretty high.

Especially in Tajikistan, which is beginning to feel the effects of radical Islam. At least 1200 young Tajik joined the ranks of the ISIS. The Party for Islamic Rebirth, a local political party, is believed to be colluded with Islamic radicalism and, despite the government's initiatives to fight the trend, results are scarce. Russia has therefore reinforced their military presence in the country.

And Uzbekistan runs the same risk. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, a precursor of Islamic terrorism in the country, has later joined the ISIS and built bases both in Afghanistan and Tajikistan. There was also an "Uzbek brigade" among the ranks of the Caliph.

Turkmenistan is still unscathed by Islamic terrorism, since a desert covers roughly 90% of its surface, but there is a strong ISIS presence near its southern border with Afghanistan.

Apart from security issues with Islamic terrorism, Russia has other interests in Afghanistan. Firstly, there is the geo-strategic interest: Afghanistan is central to the continent: there are huge economic and commercial interests at stake.

## **Russia's interests**

In virtue of these interests, Russia has convened a Conference on Afghanistan that was attended by all of the main bordering countries (Pakistan, China, Iran and, of course, Afghanistan).

While the US are reiterating the military option Russia is trying to find a solution to stop the civil war by using diplomacy. Their goal is stability, even with the approval of the Taliban, because that is the only way to continue fighting the ISIS while finding a new economic and political balance.

The way of diplomacy is supported by Iran and China. In other words Russia is trying to exercise its influence. As in the Middle Eastern scenario, even here Russia has a central role as an international broker. And, of course, if they find a solution, it will be in their favor.

## **The Americans**

On the other hand, the US military option seems inadequate. Like his predecessor, President Trump is probably not happy to increase the number of men in Afghanistan, but its payback time for the military lobby that supported his election.

The US are not in Afghanistan to win a war. The social conditions and the kind of war they have been fighting in Afghanistan for the past 16 years does not allow it. They flex their muscle to hide their weakness. Dropping the super-bomb (Massive Ordnance Air Blast – also called the Mother Of All Bombs) on the ISIS militia in Nangarhar in April seemed triggered by frustration. 10 tons of explosive to kill 34 terrorists.

## THE UIGHUR AND CINA

The ISIS is now an international brand that can be spent anywhere a Muslim community is discriminated and persecuted. This is the case also for the Uighurs in China. The predominantly Islamic minority, speaking a Turkic language, is concentrated in the Chinese autonomous region of Xinjiang, where they represent about 45% of the population. Over the years, their peculiar identity has fueled calls for independence which the Chinese have harshly repressed. In 2009, ethnic clashes between the Uighurs and the Han, the dominant ethnic group in China, resulted in over 200 deaths and 1.800 people being wounded. Since then, the Chinese have stepped up the restrictions and tried to curb the influence of the Uighurs in their region.

Just like in Tibet, authorities in Beijing resorted to demographics, transferring Hans in the lands once inhabited by the Uighurs. If the Han represented a mere 6% of the population in 1949, they are now over 55%. Although there is no recent census – the Chinese are not willing to disclose the data – the Uighurs are 9 million people in a country of over 1.4 billion inhabitants. Does this mean they should not be viewed as a considerable threat to the Chinese social order? Probably, had Beijing integrated this minority and respected its cultural identity. But this did not happen.

And this is where Abu Bakr al Baghdadi stepped in, offering his support to the persecuted muslim minority. The Xinjiang region sits at the crossroads with other predominantly former USSR muslim countries, such as Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kirghizistan and not far from Afghanistan. These are all areas where radical Islam and ISIS are already present. The Chinese approach only fuels Uighurs' radicalism and pushes them towards extremist views.

Over one hundred Uighur volunteers joined ISIS and were placed in combat units alongside fellow fighters from the region. Regardless of what will be of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, there is now a synergy between radical Islamic groups operating in the area and those in Xinjiang. For instance, Uighurs are being hosted in areas controlled by the Talibans in Afghanistan.

Unfortunately it was China's behavior that favored the association between the Uighur struggle and the Islamic State. In March 2017, a propaganda video from ISIS threatened Beijing for its oppression of the Islamic minority. An Uighur separatist group, the Turkestan Islamic Party, seems to have joined Al Qaeda. With both terrorist conglomerates willing to support the cause, it is likely they will join forces. Both al Baghdadi and al Zawahiri have cited China as one of their "enemies".

The external support to the Uighurs is only part of the problem for Beijing. There are 22 million Muslims in China and radical groups could infect other parts of the country. At the same time, Xinjiang is rich in oil and uranium. The exploitation of natural resources requires social peace, currently lacking in the area. The region is also crucial for trade flows from north to south Asia and from east to west.

In order to assess the potential threat posed by the Uighurs one should not forget the diaspora abroad, present in several muslim countries and especially in Turkey. It was the diaspora that financed the separatist groups in the past.

### **Chinese repression**

No freedom of speech, religion or movement. The Uighurs cannot obtain a passport and go abroad, let alone travel in groups in China without being exposed to continuous harassment or risk being imprisoned.

China forbids Ramadan celebrations and other Islamic festivals and opposes fasting during the holy month. Only people older than 60 are allowed to go to pilgrimage to the Mecca along with Chinese security officials that monitor their every move and after a lengthy indoctrination. Furthermore, studying the Koran and Arabic is forbidden, Islamic names are not allowed and women cannot wear veils or dress in black (the color is considered to be “subversive”) or wear tunics that fall below their knees. And if men cannot grow a beard, children are barred from mosques and women have to undergo restrictions on the number of children they can have.

The Chinese go as far as freezing the assets of potential dissidents and do not allow more than one knife per household. Urumqi, Xinjiang’s capital, is under constant surveillance and tip offs on fellow citizens are encouraged. Indiscriminate arrests are common, as are claims about torture. After all, any sign of religious affiliation is considered subversive.

### **Beijing’s mistakes**

China’s policy of denying the identity of the Uighurs and the repression that followed has created the fertile breeding ground for terrorism. The Chinese started treating the Uighurs as terrorists at a time when there were none, pushing many to indeed walk down that path. Marginalized and oppressed by authorities, the Uighurs have embraced a separatist agenda without necessarily resorting to terrorism.

However, Chinese propaganda in the West has spread the equation that all Uighurs are potential terrorists. While this has had an effect on international support, it has also led to 22 Uighurs being incarcerated in Guantanamo for years and to the black listing of four Uighur groups by the US. Washington granted the Chinese wishes to obtain their support for the war in Afghanistan.

Beijing is now exercising pressure on muslim-majority countries in Asia and especially on Turkey to prevent the Uighurs from obtaining support from abroad. This could mean that the fight against the Chinese government could take place elsewhere. While security can be granted at home, the ISIS and Al Qaeda could strike against Chinese interests elsewhere. During a recent meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Council, Chinese president Xi Jinping has quoted three “evils” to fight: separatism, terrorism and extremism. They all fit the Uighurs.

## **ON THE PREVENTION OF TERRORISM AND THE BARCELONA ATTACK**

It was inevitable that, following the collapse of the caliphate in Syria and Iraq, the Islamic State would have fueled terrorism elsewhere. The episodes in Barcelona and Catalonia are not the first and will not be the last. The exodus of militants from war zones, their infallible ideological and religious approach to martyrdom, viewed as the only possible outcome, were all too predictable.

The Islamic State wants the dream of a caliphate to survive its demise. A terrorist attack embodies the ongoing struggle against an imaginary enemy. The fight takes a different form, but its motivations don't. It is impossible to create a caliphate on Earth? Well then, the entire planet will become the target to strike, kill, remind the world of our existence and spread fear.

### **The ideology**

The Islamic State's strength never relied on its masses of combatants, but in the subliminal message it conveyed. It was never the strength of its weapons, but rather of its propaganda. This is what still convinces and charms so many youngsters. It is thus not that relevant to discover whether the terrorists in Barcelona were lone wolves or part of a bigger plot, if they had just returned from a conflict zone or were infatuated by radical islamism because of their marginalized life in a European ghetto.

The religious ideology that nurtures ISIS terrorism has to fall or be sterilized for us to win the battle. This is a long process that will inevitably have to involve that Muslim world that was its breeding ground. A long time means more attacks and more deaths. The Italian plan to collaborate with muslim groups to monitor and train the preachers in the mosques is a move in the right direction.

Are there any other ways to fight islamic terrorism? Until its ideology is defeated, prevention and repression are the only means to contain the phenomenon.

### **Prevention**

Prevention requires a certain degree of international collaboration in the fight against islamic terrorism. Exogenous transnational phenomena need transnational collaboration. This is what probably lacked in Barcelona. Spain and Morocco – where the terrorists are from – are not in good terms. The two countries are at odds over the Spanish support to the Saharawi and the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla. This has probably had an impact on the collaboration between intelligence agencies. The independence push by Catalonia could have also partially sterilized the collaboration between Madrid's and Barcelona's security forces. The cross fire of accusations that followed the attack is an indirect confirmation.

Prevention is only possible if a series of steps are taken: control over the territory and of mosques, control over communications, wiretaps, control over internet traffic and chats, files on people potentially at risk, monitoring of their collusions, monitoring of conversions and indoctrination in jail. These filters, known as "hubs", are necessary because it is

virtually impossible to control everything and everyone, but we need to identify where we can spot the clues of a terrorist attack in the making.

There are about 2 million muslims living in Spain, only 41% of them have Spanish citizenship. Another 40% – and this is where the collaboration between intelligence agencies is crucial – is of Moroccan descent. Total control is thus impossible.

Clues is what prevention is all about. The access to a radical website, extremist comments on Facebook, the purchase of fertilizers or other chemicals needed to produce explosive, the unlikely purchase of a disproportionate number of gas tanks, the monitoring of the call centers used by islamic migrants, the rental of a van, trips abroad by subjects at risk.

## **Repression**

Repression is the final outcome of a successful prevention process, where clues have become evidence and control turns into action. Sometimes security forces resort to repression when it is too late. This happens when prevention fails. To kill or apprehend a terrorist after an attack is only useful to identify the network and the workings of a cell. However, it is still a failure of the prevention process.

## **The use of statistical data**

The use of data on the latest attacks can be partly useful in identifying the stereotypical radicalized islamic terrorist. It could seem as a frighteningly empirical method to spot potential martyrs, but, if put to good use, it can actually help select people on their way of turning into a terrorist. The limit of this method is the political and economic geography of the countries targeted by the attacks. The UK, France or the Scandinavian countries produce different social motivations for terrorism. In other words, they involve people statistically very different.

Nonetheless, several reports have tried to find the common traits of a potential terrorist: 27 years old on average (but he could also be a minor), male (97%), legal resident in a European country (14/15%), strikes in the country he lives in (73%), is a convert (17%), had a brush with the law (60%, while one out of two has spent time in prison) and has limited military experience (18/20%). Overall, only 8% of attackers acted on behalf of the Islamic State, 26% of them had no contact with ISIS, while the rest had only limited indirect links with either Daesh or other radical islamic armed factions.

It is worth keeping in mind that among the 30 thousand or so islamic fighters that have fought alongside the ISIS, one every five came from Europe. Given that the combatants' death rate is roughly 30%, this means that about 4 thousand foreign fighters could return to their countries of origin and inspire the homemade terrorists willing to sacrifice their lives in the name of Allah. Until now the phenomenon is statistically of little significance.

After all, a military background is not that necessary in this asymmetric warfare. A bomb can be built following instructions found on the net and the dream of becoming a martyr (70% of attackers die in the process) obfuscates any reason to avoid personal risk. You don't have to be a soldier to drive a car or a truck on a crowd.

## **The targets**

Terrorists aim to inflict the largest number of victims possible; symbolic targets have given way to large crowded spots. Cities help being anonymous and complicate the process of identifying individuals and controlling them. On average a terrorist attack kills 8 people and wounds another 30.

The question is whether such a large experience, knowledge, collaboration between intelligence agencies, preventive and/or repressive activities, data and reports is sufficient to avoid future terrorist attacks. The answer is no. Terrorism can strike anywhere and anyone and is virtually impossible to prevent. It strikes against random people and not symbols. The more the better, as publicity is directly proportional to the number of victims.

87% of terrorist were already known to security forces before an attack. This means prevention has virtually failed us. Wrong risk factor analysis have prevented from blocking the threats posed by these individuals. Nowadays, an anti-terrorism expert has to be both a psychologist, a sociologist, an anthropologist and be knowledgeable about islamic theology. Only if you truly know the enemy you're facing, the way he thinks, his weaknesses and strengths, what he wants and how he wants it, the frustration that stimulates him or the social marginalization he lives in, only then can your enemy be fought and defeated.