



IRAN AND THE SECRET WAR

Iran scares many countries. There is widespread fear of its military might, its expansionistic policy in the region, its will to have a nuclear weapon, the strategic importance of its energetic resources, terrorism.

It scares Israel that sees its very existence at stake with the advent of the Iranian nuclear. It scares the US for reasons of geo-strategic hegemony in the region, for the destabilizing effects of Shiite theocracy on Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria, for the control of the oil routes, for the terrorism that it fuels.

It scares Saudi Arabia for the hegemony in the region and for the accentuated confrontation between Shiites and Sunnis.

It scares all the emirates and sultanates of the Gulf that are afraid of its military might and its expansionistic policy.

It surely worries Turkey that sees Teheran as a dangerously contagious destabilizer and for the possible repercussions on the Kurdish problem.

All of these fears are translated into a series of initiatives on the part of these nations that try to damage the Iranian leadership and its nuclear dream. There have been repeated checks by the International Agency for Atomic Energy, there have been reiterated sanctions against Iran. They have been boycotted and are the target of growing threats on the part of Israel and the USA, yet without any notable results.

But the war of threats and psychological pressure now has given way to another kind of non-conventional war, a secret spy war. The protagonists: CIA, Israeli MOSSAD, and the Iranian VEVAK (Verazat Ettela'at va Amniat Keshvar). It is a war with many murdered victims and with others who have vanished or have been recruited by the opposing side, with attacks against infrastructures, clandestine operations, terroristic acts and finally, the cyber-war.

The war between spies

In 2002 – seemingly at the hands of Israelis through Kurdish expats, an engineer and rocket scientist called Ali Mohamoudi Mimand was killed by an explosion in the military complex of Shahid Hemat, south of Teheran.

In 2007 this secret and non-conventional war becomes systematic:

- On January 15, 2007: Ardeshir Hosseinpour, engineer, responsible for the Center of Nuclear Technology at the Isfahan plant, dies due to carbon monoxide exhalations in his home. His death is considered to be “caused” by others.
- In November 2007: an explosion in an Iranian missile base south of Teheran kills several people.

The killings were followed by a time of relative quiet until June 2009 when Shaharam Amiri, a nuclear scientist, vanishes during a pilgrimage to the Mecca (he will resurface in the USA on July 13, 2010). He will declare publicly that he was kidnapped and tortured by the CIA and will ask the Pakistani embassy – that mediates for Iranian diplomats in Washington – help in going home. He will be authorized to return to his country on July 15, 2010).

Yet in the year 2010 the escalation of clandestine operations begins anew, causing further victims and destruction:

- January 12, 2010: Massoud Ali Mohammadi, physician, expert of elementary particles, who teaches at the University Shanati Sharif in Teheran, is killed by the explosion of a bomb placed on a motorcycle parked next to his car.
- November 29, 2010: Madjed Shariari, engineer and teacher of nuclear engineering at the University of Teheran, is killed by a magnet bomb placed on his car by a passing motorcycle. His wife is also wounded. On the same day, and in similar circumstances, Fereidoun Abbassi Davani, nuclear engineer, and his wife are wounded. After escaping the hit, Abbassi will be designated on February 12, 2011 director of the Organization for Atomic Energy of Iran.
- June 2011: an airplane carrying Russian technicians and Iranian scientists headed for the Busheir plant crashes to the ground.
- July 2011: Darious Rezaeineja, nuclear scientist, is shot and killed in Teheran by a killer on a motorcycle while he is waiting for his son to come out of school.
- September 2011: an attempt on the life of the Saudi ambassador in Washington is discovered and thwarted. An Iranian is arrested for the attempted murder.
- November 2011: a plan to kill US diplomats and/or to destroy US structures piloted by Iranian agents in Azerbaijan is discovered and stopped. The plan was retaliation for the killing of Iranian scientists.
- November 12, 2011: an explosion at the base of Amir Al Momenin, near the village of Bidganeh, kills about 20 soldiers. The base was a deposit of explosives for the Guards of the Revolution. One of the victims of the explosion is Hassan Teherani Moghaddam, top expert of the Iranian missile program.
- November 2011: Ahmed Rezai, son of Mohsen Rezai - head of the Pasdaran and influential politician - dies in mysterious circumstances while staying in a hotel in Dubai.
- November 28, 2011: an explosion damages the uranium conversion plant of Isfahan.
- December 12, 2011: another explosion in Yazd damages a steel factory involved in the nuclear program and controlled by the Guards of the Revolution.
- January 11, 2012: Mostafa Ahmadi Roshan, nuclear engineer and university professor, vice-director of the plant in Natanz, is killed by two individuals on a motorcycle that attach a magnet bomb on his car's door.
- January 2012: two Iranians are arrested in Baku, Azerbaijan. They had 16 packs of explosives and 150 thousand dollars each. They will confess that they were recruited to kill the Israeli ambassador (Rabi and businessman) in retaliation for the death of Roshan.

- January 20, 2012: Mohammad Esmail Kosari, physics professor at the University Shanati Sahrif in Teheran, who is also a deputy in parliament and a member of the Commission for National Security, is killed by a magnet bomb placed on his car.
- February 2012: two simultaneous attacks are carried out against Israeli diplomatic personnel in New Delhi and Tbilisi. The technique is similar to the one used against Iranian scientists: a bomb placed under the car. In India the bomb is found on time. In Georgia the wife of the Israeli military attache' is wounded. These attempts are probably a retaliation for the death of Kosari.
- March 2012: the Iranian supreme court pardons Amir Mirza Hekmati, who was sentenced to death. Hekmati has dual Iranian-US citizenship and is accused (and has confessed) of being a spy.

Behind this series of events there aren't just the main actors (CIA, MOSSAD, VEVAK) but also other “surrogate” organizations: the Kurds and Maryan Rajawi's Mujahedin el Khalq, whom operate from Iraqi bases (on one side), and the Lebanese Hezbollah and the Iranian forces of Al Quds located abroad (on the opposing front).

Then there are the opposers, the expats and evidently – in order to carry out attacks in Iran – a network of informers and agents that provide information or carry out the attacks.

Also, on the US side, because of common strategic interests, there are the Saudis and the traditional British allies while Teheran can count on the Shiites of the Gulf area, the Syrians and, occasionally, on terroristic side-organizations tied to Al Qaeda.

As we have seen, this war is carried out in nations other than Iran where the activities of information services are mainly centered: Dubai (an emirate with a strong presence of Shiites and a neuralgic center for middle-eastern traffic), Georgia and Azerbaijan (where there is a concentration of Mossad operatives), Thailand (another neuralgic center for euro-asian espionage).

The cyber war

In June 2010 this subterranean war assumes a more technological dimension: a virus called “Stuxnet” infects and blocks the computer system of the Natanz plant where gas centrifuges are busy enriching uranium. The virus had been spotted a few months earlier but had been subsequently modified to become more efficient.

Stuxnet infects the system through the use of a USB device (thus somebody – knowing or unknowingly – physically placed it there), it then bypasses the defenses of the Microsoft Windows OS (where it finds vulnerabilities) and it then strikes against Siemens software and hardware (which are industrial products in wide use in Iran's enrichment processes).

When the virus enters the system it tries to crack all of the applications and looks for the ones that use Siemens software. If there aren't any, it remain inert but leaves a mark on all apparatuses. It is thus provided with a “programmable logic controller”. If, on the other hand, it finds what its looking for, it first checks the software and hardware functional conditions, then injects its destructive code in the systems control, thus modifying the functionality of the machine or apparatus. This operation is carried out while eluding the machine's security controls by feeding

them with false information. In is in this respect that Stuxnet is a revolutionary product: it looks for a defined target, carries out its sabotage, then hides its presence until the damage is done. Silent, invisible, devastating.

The sabotage carried out by Stuxnet has incapacitated approximately 1000 out of the 5000 centrifuges in the Natanz plant and caused – according to US estimates – a delay of 18-24 months to the Iranian uranium enrichment program. 5 other Iranian nuclear structures (including Busheir) would have been struck by Stuxnet.

The virus would have been conceived by a joint US-Israeli team. There is a previous US cyber-war project called “Olympic Games” that had been authorized by George W. Bush and has been inherited by Barack Obama, but it has not yielded satisfactory results. It is the collaboration with the Israelis that would have given the project a push forward. Stuxnet is, according to experts, a virus with enormous destructive potential and of much more powerful than anything out there to date. According to experts, in order to write the code, the US-Israel partnership would have put to work at least 30 technicians for a time lasting at least 6 months.

For the Israeli side, work on the project would have been carried out by unit “8200”, made up of computer, cryptanalysis and mathematics experts, together with a new structure of the Defense ministry named the “National Cyber Defense Authority”.

Yet Stuxnet is not the only malware out there. There is another virus that has been recently infiltrated in the Iranian computer networks to carry out tasks of espionage. It is a virus called “Flame” that unlike Stuxnet, doesn't have the ability to sabotage a system, but is rather aimed at collecting data from the infected computer and transmitting it to the controller/hacker.

This software would have been used to infect the networks of Iranian government and private corporations. Although they never avowed to it, Flame would also be a product of the Israeli-US collaboration in cyber warfare. According to analysts, Israel would have the ability of blocking internet nodes used by the Iranian military network.

This cyber warfare sees a malware (Stuxnet) coupled with a spyware (Flame), one to sabotage and the other for surveillance and information gathering.

The activities in ELINT (Electronic Intelligence) and SIGINT (Signals Intelligence).

ELINT and SIGINT are the two aspects of non-conventional warfare that are used to pry, though the use of technologies and instruments, information from one's counterpart. The war is already being fought, silently, by the various players. It is a war based on wiretappings, electronic jamming and observations from the heavens through the use of drones and satellites.

Israel is evaluating with the use of the drone “Heron” the possibility of transporting instruments for electronic jamming. Every air attack – if this is the presumable form that an eventual attack on Iranian nuclear structures would assume – is preceded by jamming activity (interferences and disturbances) that block communications, telephones, the internet and electric power. It is a technique that the US forces have used during the initial attacks against Iraq both in 1991 and in 2003. By the use of this technique, the command, control, and air defense system of a country are disabled, thus preventing a reaction. ELINT activity also includes the blinding of radars and in

some cases the employment of electronic simulations (making your enemy's radar portray a situation that does not reflect reality).

Looking at Teheran, the Iranians are attempting to adopt the same kind of espionage and some electronic counter-measures. A pilotless airplane called Ardebil (“the swallow”) was built in 1993. It was meant for reconnaissance missions but was later transformed into various “advanced” configurations. It first became “A3” and then “A-T”, then, finally, in 2010, it became “Karrar” (“the bomber”), with a range of over 1000 km.

The US are currently employing in the Iranian skies an invisible kind of drone, the RQ-170. This drone would have, among other tasks, that of finding and mapping – through the use of special instruments and sensors – the tunnels where Iranian nuclear activity is carried out.

The wiretapping sector is vital in knowing what your opponent is doing. Everything that is transmitted in the air (cell phones, radio bridges, radio and satellite communications) is the object of interest. It is a systematic activity that every countries' information services carry out. With Iran becoming a prime information objective, this activity has surely been incremented. It is probably through the use of such means that nuclear sites, their activity and the movements of nuclear scientists have been monitored.

To complete the wiretapping activity, as far as encrypted communications go (those that contain the more sensible information), there is the need to decrypt messages. It is in the penetration of an encrypted system that the values of the opponents at hand are measured. The side that knows more about the other wins... or at least doesn't lose.

Psychological warfare

This kind of warfare is fought with threats, counter-threats, official statements of politicians and militaries, interviews and warnings by all the parties involved. It is a war of the nerves, usually aimed at conditioning the behavior of one's opponent.

Iran plays this part of the war with a particular levantine cunning, both with regards to the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) and to the other international contenders: it promises willingness, then denies and backtracks, it alternates threats with an a promise of dialogue, it is sometimes rigid, sometimes yielding, it negotiates then suddenly leaves the table.

Iran knows that time is a formidable ally and that its acting different parts in the same comedy disconcerts and disorients its adversaries. It is a dangerous game that has worked this far.

It is what the Israelis call “azimut”, which means ambiguity. It is the same concept that is called “taqiya” in the Arab world, meaning dissimulation. It is a typical behavior of Shiite culture, where the denial of certain facts or realities (it was historically used to renounce one's faith to escape persecutions) is allowed when one's survival is at stake.

The signs of the coming war

The secret war between Iran and its opponents (espionage, cyber warfare, psychological warfare)

can sometimes be a substitute for other more conventional kinds of war, yet sometimes it can be preparatory for an all out war.

Steering clear of political convenience talk that can influence the development of events, it cannot be excluded that what happened in June 1981 at the Osiraq reactor (Iraq) and in September 2007 at the Al Qibar reactor (Syria) might happen again. Israel (with the direct or indirect collaboration of other countries) could conceive a similar surgical operation against Iranian nuclear sites.

The difference is in the difficulty of reaching one's target, because the Iranian sites are many and in most cases are well protected in subterranean bases. To bomb an underground facility one needs bunker busters. Yet one can only drop the bunker buster once they have flown over a number of foreign nations to reach the target. This means aerial refueling and problems in keeping the surprise effect. And there is the problem of an eventual retaliation. Thus finding a way so that Iran, after being struck, would give up retaliation against Israel or other countries by means of its missiles. A way to prevent Iran from blocking the oil traffic in the strait of Hormuz is also needed.

By examining all of these necessities we can evaluate whether a military operation could be successful.

In short:

- During the past weeks Israeli PM Netanyahu has cancelled early elections that were scheduled for September and has formed a new government of national unity with the “Kadima” party of Shaul Mofaz. The new alliance moves the balance of Israeli policy towards interventionist positions. Mofaz is a Jew of Iranian origins, a former member of the special forces. He is considered to be a hawk, and thus favorable, like Netanyahu, to an armed intervention. On March 2, 2012 the US President met Netanyahu in Washington and promised – after the pressing requests by Israel – specific military aid: bunker busters, tanker aircrafts for aerial refueling, identification systems (electronic devices) for their planes so that they do not run the risk of not being recognized and being shot down. Also, the US promised more anti-missile “Iran Dome” batteries. What a coincidence! All of these elements could be invaluable in carrying out a raid and in countering Iranian retaliations.
- Meanwhile, the Saudis have more than doubled their oil reserves by going from 35 million barrels to about 80 million. To stockpile oil reserves when the prices are sky-high is a suicide commercially, but these barrels could have a special use: there is a concrete risk that the Hormuz strait might be blocked if Iran is attacked.
- For months now Israel and Iran have been testing missiles and lately the Israeli air force has carried out a series of trial attacks against ground targets together with other NATO planes in the Decimomannu base in Sardegna, Italy.

Do these signs tell us that the Iranian nuclear sites will soon be destroyed? Some evaluations unfortunately escape a logical answer because apart from the known facts, there are unknown ones – the ones that have been acquired through the secret war. And it is usually on the basis of these that the fate of the world is decided.

THE JOURNEY OF AN ILLEGAL IMMIGRANT (PART 1)

During the past years Italy has signed a series of agreements on illegal immigration with Khadafi's Libya. From the year 2000, in particular, such agreements have yielded alternating results. Efficient measures have been adopted only after the bilateral treaty of partnership of August 30, 2008. The first rejection of an illegal passenger ship took place on May 6, 2009. The beginning of joint patrolling along Libyan coasts began on May 25, 2009. Before and during these events there has been considerable spending on the Italian side but to no avail.

On the Libyan side the problem of illegal immigration has been mostly an occasion to haggle – if not downright blackmail – over political and financial favors not only from Italy but from the rest of Europe as well. The general approach to the problem – at least on the Italian side, since the Libyan counter-part doesn't seem to have a specific cultural sensibility regarding immigration – has often neglected the “social” side of the issue, pushing for operative measures without taking a look at the evident ongoing humanitarian emergency at hand.

In other words, Italians have been busy contrasting the phenomenon on the field without understanding its essence, motives and thus without being able to create the circumstances that could have circumscribed it.

To understand all of this we must begin by finding out what pushes an individual to leave their home and family, to spend their savings, risk their lives in the desert and at sea, to face the unforeseen, to suffer isolation, exploitation, to undergo humiliation, to move across hostile countries, in a journey that has no sure duration for a dream that often turns to tragedy.

Let's take, for instance, the journey of an Eritrean illegal immigrant traveling to Italy and to Europe at the time of Khadafi's regime:

- The first contact is in Asmara (Eritrea) with the agents of the transnational criminal organizations that operate in the sector of illegal immigration. Our traveler will have to cross the border with Sudan secretly to avoid the regime's retaliation against his family. It will cost him from 5 to 6 hundred dollars;
- The organization moves the immigrant along regions that are not controlled by the police, mostly on camelback and at night;
- The border is crossed in the area near Kassala (Sudan) and the first stop of the immigrant will be in the local refugee camps (in Sawa). It is a relatively short stop, as the camps are infested by spies from Eritrea and one could be spotted (once again, the immigrant's family at home is in danger):
- The immigrant will then try to move to other camps (Wadi Sharifa) and then move to Khartoum (Sudan) where he can contact the telephone numbers that had been provided by the organization in Asmara. The contacts are other agents that will help him enter Libya. Generally, even if it is a transnational organization, the agents are all Eritrean like the immigrant. The journey from Kassala to Khartoum is usually by bus. The cost for reaching Libya from Sudan is approximately 7 or 8 hundred dollars. If the immigrant has the money he will spend little time in Khartoum, otherwise he will have to find a job in the black market to pay for the trip. Usually the immigrant will contact international organizations such as the UNHCR to try to obtain the status of refugee. It is needed to have access to aid but most importantly it prevents the

immigrant from being kicked out of the country. Actually, it is to avoid paying the police so that they don't kick him out of the country. The immigrant will trash the refugee status before entering Libya to avoid being identified;

- Once the immigrant has paid the 7-8 hundred dollars, the organization will prepare the trip towards Libya. The immigrant will be traveling with other individuals of other nationalities that he does not know;
- To move from Khartoum to the Libyan border the immigrant will have to ride on overcrowded off-road vehicles that carry men, women and children. One vehicle can carry as many as 30 individuals. Sometimes, instead of driving straight into Libya, the vehicles travel to Egypt and enter Libya from the Egyptian desert. The vehicles will drop off the immigrants at the border and then drive back to Khartoum. The immigrants will be loaded onto other off-road vehicles owned by the Libyan side of the criminal organization. The immigrants are then taken to the oasis of Kufrah. Once there, if the immigrant's money is finished, he will have to improvise. He will go into an “operative” undercover status to avoid being intercepted by the Libyan police and arrested while he makes his way to Tripoli. If he has another 3-4 hundred dollars handy, he can contact the agents of the organization that will give him a ride to the Libyan capital. He is hidden inside trucks carrying foodstuffs and taken towards the coastline. Often the ride ends on the coast in Ajdabiya, where the immigrant is told that he is in Tripoli. If this happens, the rest of the trip to Tripoli will be at his own risk and peril;
- When the immigrant reaches Tripoli he already knows who to contact. There are two or three places in the outskirts of town where the Eritrean tend to gather. The phone number (that has been provided while in Khartoum) is that of another Eritrean belonging to the criminal organization. He will organize – once he has been paid, of course – the boarding of a ship to Italy;
- In order to hide the immigrant, the agent will ask for a further 200/250 dollars. After cashing in, he will transfer the immigrant in a secure place where he will spend a time period generally no longer than 15 days;
- If there is still some money left, the agent will begin organizing the immigrant's trip to Italy. Depending on the present circumstances (whether the regime wants to strike out against the illegal traffic of immigrants or not), on the kind of vessel (more or less safe), on the difference between offer and demand, on the urgency of the transfer, the cost of the trip will vary from 1800/2000 dollars to 3000/3500 dollars. The success of the transfer is not guaranteed, the security on the vessel is not guaranteed, nor is the amount of immigrants present on it. Those that pay the money do so without any guarantee. Guarantees are taken by the members of the organization: they take the money, gather the immigrants in isolated farms, take their cell phones to avoid being intercepted. The immigrant is now totally in the dark about the details of the trip. Then, one night, without notice, they are taken to the beach and on a speedboat. The departure is guaranteed, the arrival isn't.

This was the journey of an illegal Eritrean immigrant up to the beginning of civil war in Libya. Things have changed slightly since, Libya has begun cooperating with Italy and part of the traffic shifted to Egypt. The war has interrupted – or maybe just suspended – this exodus from Asmara to Tripoli. The criminal organizations are still operating in the region and have begun operating on different routes.

The more functional route – until the Israelis will build a wall on Sinai's border with Egypt, from Gaza to Eilat – is the one that takes them through the Sinai peninsula into Israel. In 2010 about

13500 illegal immigrants (not all of them Eritrean) have crossed the border into Israel from Egypt, causing a social emergency. The year 2011, after the fall of Mubarak and the consequent institutional disorder in Egypt, was even worse. If this route were to be closed, others would open up. The next option could be to enter Greece (although Athens is quite rough with illegal immigrants) and then move successively to Italy or the Balkans into Europe.

The Eritrean's exodus towards Europe is determined by economic and political reasons alike, seen the persecutions carried out by Afeworki's regime. But the Eritrean situation is similar to that of many other countries in Africa. Thus the business of illegal immigration is a florid trade. These criminal organizations operate in every country involved in the trade – departure, transit and arrival countries – and are usually conniving with the local institutions in order to operate undisturbed. We are speaking of corrupt officials in the Sudanese and Egyptian police, in the Eritrean border patrol, among the Libyan police and army. These officials are part of a network that includes the groups that operate along the borders dealing in drugs, smuggling, and in the traffic of human beings. In the same network there are the Tuareg of Niger and Mali that move across the desert and the criminal groups that collect money for transit in these remote regions. Each of these groups has reaped benefits from the traffic of illegal immigrants. There is only one victim in this scheme: the immigrant.

In the description of the journey undertaken by the Eritrean illegal immigrant we see, from the very beginning, the presence of the criminal organizations. Yet in many cases, especially for economic reasons, an immigrant may want to face this biblical exodus alone and call the organization only for the last part of the trip, be it by sea or land.

This is generally the case with Somalis that tend to enter Sudan through Eritrea (via Djibouti), from Ethiopia or – when they are already stationed in refugee camps (the biggest of which are the Dadaab and Kakuma camps) – from Kenya. Their journey, in this case, is among the longest and most difficult. Sometimes they are gathered in Dhobley (Somalia), they cross the border, move through the refugee camps of Ifo and Garissa, then stop in the Somali neighborhoods in Nairobi, Kenya. They then travel to Lokichogio, and from there they reach the capital of south Sudan, Juba. One must cross the entire south part of the country (plagued with civil war until recently), cross Darfur and reach Khartoum (the Sudanese capital is a neuralgic center for the traffic of Eritrean, Ethiopian and Somali illegal immigrants). Otherwise they may try to cross Chad and then Niger and try to make their way to Libya. Others yet choose to move from Nairobi, Kenya into Uganda and pass through Malaba or Busia, arrive in Kampala and then try to reach Khartoum from there. Once in Khartoum, the immigrant will get in touch with the local criminal organization that can get him to Libya. The agents will always be of the same nationality as the immigrant.

Then there are those from Nigeria, Niger, Ghana, Burkina Faso, Mali and from other countries of the Sahel-Saharan region. They each follow different routes to reach the coasts of the Mediterranean sea. They do not have enough money to pay the organization so they make their way alone to Mali then Niger.

This exodus follows the cycle of seasons: one can cross the desert from October to March (when the temperature is acceptable), cross the sea between April and September (for the same reasons). Unfortunately, despite these precautions, the Libyan desert and the Mediterranean sea have become the grave of many. We lack statistics regarding these silent deaths but it is widely accepted that out

of 100 illegal immigrants that leave on this journey about 10-20% make it to their destination. Another 5-10% dies along the way. The rest either give up or settles in one of the transit countries and lives a life that is worse than the one they were escaping. Not only poverty, but also discrimination, exploitation, extortions and humiliations. The trip's timeline is conditioned by the resources that the immigrant can gather along the way by working in the black market. It can last years. An immigrant that leaves his country doesn't think about the risks of crossing the desert or the sea. He knows only what he is leaving behind, and that is enough to exorcise that which will come.

The immigrants that do not have the resources to pay the so-called “facilitators” (mostly those coming from sub-Saharan countries) are at the mercy of any injustice: continuous mistreatments, thefts, rapes and forms of slavery.

They come from the route Tahoua-Agades, they move along desert areas infested by bandits and smugglers, trying to reach the Libyan border. They cross it near the border post of Tohum (aut Tumi) if coming from Niger. They will cross between the oasis of Djanet and Tin Alkounse if coming from Algeria. From here they continue towards the oasis of Ghat and then continue towards Sebhain, in the direction of the coast (this route is avoided by the organizations because it is infested by criminal groups affiliated to Al Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb). Others yet try to use the organizations routes (Kufrah, al Qatrum if Libya; Jebel Awainat if Egypt);

Yet from Agades they can also opt for an alternative route – also quite risky for the presence of bandits – that takes them to Nouadhibou, on the coasts of Mauritania to then try to reach the Canaries. As a last alternative there is also the route that takes them from Mauritania to Morocco's forest of Bel Yunes (to then try to enter Ceuta illegally) or that of Mariwari (to try to enter the enclave of Melilla). For those that have more money there is a further possibility: to be embarked on ferries or fisher boats that travel across the Mediterranean to Spain.

Lastly, we have the immigrants from northern Africa: Tunisians, Algerians and Egyptians (we are leaving out the Moroccans that tend to enter Europe directly from their country to Spain and the Libyans that, due to a higher level of wealth, tend to bring others to Europe and not themselves).

Algerians sometimes try to organize trips across the sea departing from the coast of Annaba. In this case they will not try to reach Lampedusa but rather the Italian island of Sardegna. When the traffic was flourishing, they preferred to enter Libya first. For Tunisians and Egyptians, the Libyan route has always been prevalent. The Tunisians enter Libya from Ras al Jadir following the routes of the smugglers. Egyptians do the same from Umm Saad. Unlike the sub-Saharan populations, these north Africans arrive in Tripoli easily, facilitated by the common Arab roots, by more permissive regional regulations, and by a reverential fear that the Libyan authorities have always had for neighboring countries, especially when these are bigger and more armed than Libya itself. The latest statistics, before the downfall of Khadafi, said that there were about 2 million illegal immigrants present in the country (over a total of 6 million locals). Almost one million are Egyptians. Yet even the north Africans who wished to travel to Europe were forced to pay a “facilitator”. The big difference between them and the sub-Saharan immigrants is mostly in the treatment received in jail if arrested.

At the time of Khadafi there were 25 structures that served as detention and identification centers

for illegal immigrants. The best known were: Misurata, Zawiya, Janzur, Kufrah, Sabratha, Ganfuda, Al Fellah, Ajdabiya, Khoms, Jawazat, Garabulli, Zleitan, Zuwarah, Sorman, Hun, Twisha, Benkheshir, Gurji and Bani Walid. All of them were guarded by police. All (except for Misurata) were without health structures. Some of them were very big (Misurata and Kufrah had about 800/1000 detainees), others were smaller and more similar to police stations or military camps. The Twisha center served as a departure point for forced repatriation via airplane. Misurata was mostly for the Eritreans. Generally all of the structures were overcrowded, in 2009 the estimated number of illegal immigrants in the centers was of 18-20 thousand.

Usually the men were separated from the women and the children were kept in the cells with their mothers. There was no regulation on the duration of their stay. There was no judge or sentence. The police would arrest and release at will. One could get out if he/she paid a prison guard or a policeman (in such case the detainee was immediately substituted with a new prisoner who would assume his identity). The immigrant could also be "lent" to Libyan buyers so that he/she could be employed for illegal labour.

Abuses, mistreatments, rapes and beatings were daily occurrences, especially in the centers far from Tripoli and thus completely out of the international spotlight. No officer from any international organization (among those that had limited access to the centers such as UNHCR, OIM, CIR, International Organization for Peace and Development) could report abuses without being expelled from the country on the following day.

There was thus a total lack of controls and a conniving silence even at the international level. In theory the centers were supposed to serve the purpose of identifying the nationality of the detainee and to organize his trip home. In reality the expulsions from the country took place, especially when the overcrowding became unbearable, upon a unilateral decision by Libya and not according to bilateral treaties between states. The modality of expulsion also differed from one nationality to the next:

- chartered flights for those from Ghana, Nigeria and Morocco;
- forced expulsion through the common borders for Algerians, Tunisians and Egyptians (some of the Egyptians would die of dehydration because they would be left inside crowded containers under the scorching sun;
- Somalis and Eritreans would be assembled in Kufrah and then used for local black labour (they are citizens of countries that do not accept repatriation). In the case of Eritreans some repatriations were attempted and caused revolts inside prison houses and international protests;
- those from countries in the Sahel (Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso) were forcibly taken to the desert and threatened with retaliation if they were to come back;

This same fate has been indiscriminately applied to those illegal immigrants – that the Italian authorities refused to identify – that beginning in May 2009 were intercepted at sea and sent back to Libya.

Yet there are those that manage to make money even from the forced repatriation of immigrants. A Somali ambassador in Tripoli who was designated at the time of Abdullahi Yusuf would - together with the prison officials - negotiate the ransom for his fellow Somalis. They would receive money from the immigrants' families in Somalia and in return free the prisoner (the tariff: 800/1000

dollars).

The Nigerian consul would be paid to certify the nationality of Nigerians (certification without which the immigrant would be expelled) according to his own price list. (It must be noted that illegal immigrants, in order to avoid being expelled, tend to be without identification documents and to lie on their nationality and data. Sometimes they speak in languages that are unknown to those interrogating them).

In some cases, abuses against illegal immigrants were perpetrated by the same criminal organizations that were paid for providing the trip. The immigrants would be taken to the beach and suddenly the police would show up. This meant double pay for the criminal organization that didn't even need to provide a vessel for the trip.

Those that were used in hard manual labor would not be paid by their Libyan employer and were threatened with arrest. In Libya there is an entire parallel economy that has developed from this form of labor.

(end of part 1 – continues in the next issue)

AFGHANISTAN and the Spring offensive

The simultaneous attacks against military and civilian infrastructures lead by the Talebans on Kabul and nearby provinces on April 15th have raised serious questions on the complexity of the Afghan scenario and on its future developments:

- The Talebans, opposition movement to the government of President Ahmed Karzai, want the defeat of the Afghan security forces and of their NATO allies, while waiting for their withdrawal;
- The Karzai regime has blamed ISAF's information apparatus for its inefficiency;
- following these events, Australia has begun evaluating the possibility of anticipating the withdrawal of its contingent, currently expected for 2014: a decision that could potentially have a significant psychological impact on the other members of the ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) mission;
- international deadlines could also have an impact: the NATO summit in Chicago (May 20-21); the U.S. presidential elections in November. Moreover, several observers of the Afghan scenario talk about “Summer Offensives” (as opposed to the ones in the Spring), meaning that the Talebans will continue their actions for the months to come.

The Spring offensive

The Talibans, a movement with a tribal base (the different Pashtun clans) born in the 90s after the ousting of the Soviet occupiers and that installed a fundamentalist regime in Kabul lead by Mullah Omar between 1996 and 2001, have organized their operative bases in the bordering tribal areas of Pakistan. It is from here that they launch their terrorist attacks on Afghan territory. They are organized along networks: the most relevant are those of Mullah Omar, Gulbudin Hekmatiar, Ismail Khan and Abdul Aki.

The spiritual leader of the Talebans (literally koranic students) is Mullah Omar Ahmed, born in Nodeh (near Kandahar) in 1959. Founder and emir of the “Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan”, from the 27th of September 1996 till the 13th of November 2001, was based koranic law (Sharia) and on its precepts: burqa and no school for women, long beards for men; in synthesis, the elimination of any apparently Western influence, severe punishments for transgressors, including stoning and public executions.

Following the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan in 2001 to put an end to the Emirate, the Mullah Omar has gone underground (with the United States having put on his head a 10 million dollars reward for information and 25 million dollars for his capture). News about the death or capture of the Mullah Omar are recurrent and soon denied!

On January 28th Washington has began direct talks with “moderate” Talebans in Doha, Qatar: negotiations are centered on Taliban prisoners held in Guantanamo and on the possible opening of a Taliban political office in Doha.

On April 15th the Talebans took governmental forces by surprise with simultaneous attacks, well organized over the preceding days: three against the capital (Parliament, the neighborhood where the embassies of Germany, United Kingdom and Japan are based, NATO bases – the ISAF HQ and the airport) and three in the nearby provinces of Nangahar (the Jalalabad airport), Lowgar (U.S.

base of Pul-e-Alam) and Paktia (Gardez police training center).

All above mentioned provinces border with Western Pakistan and its tribal areas, known as **FATA** (Federally Administered Tribal Areas), and is particular with Northern Waziristan and the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP). These are all areas outside Islamabad's government control due to their impenetrability and perviousness. Furthermore, they don't benefit from any governmental subsidy because they are considered “linked to terrorism”.

As already stated, the Afghan Talebans use the FATA as a base to launch their offensives against Afghan governmental and ISAF coalition forces; the FATA is also used by Pakistan opposition movement TTP (Terik-el Taliban in Pakistan) to attack the Pakistan government. This is the “double front” of the FATA. In our specific case, the FATA was the base for preliminary reconnaissance and for the stocking of the arms used in the attacks.

The attacks proved the coordination of the Taliban operative groups, who occupied dominant positions over the various objectives (the highest floors of the “Kabul Star” hotel in the Embassy neighborhood and of another hotel in construction near the Parliament-Embassy of Russia); the use of shadid (suicide bombers), that exploded near the enemy defense and along the perimeter of the various objectives, was also relevant.

Following hours of clashes for the occupation of posts and the counteraction of enemy defense, the attack on the targets (that lasted about 17 hours according to media reports) has recorded the killing of 36 Talebans, 11 Afghan armed forces and 5 civilians.

As had already happened in the past, the retreat (only two Talebans were captured) and the return to normality of the areas under attack were well coordinated

Some remarks

The Taliban offensives at the beginning of Spring are an expected ritual, after the hazardous conditions of operations during the Afghan winter; they are also carried out to reaffirm their presence on the Afghan theatre and are a tool to raise the stakes during negotiations, as happening in Doha.

This time, the offensive was preceded by a series of events that have influenced the attitude of the local population, even though in some cases they were manipulated by some tribal chiefs. Events such as:

- the burning of copies of the Koran at the Kabul Airport (U.S. Bagram base);
- the desecration of a deceased Afghan militant (U.S. soldiers urinating on his dead body);
- the Kandahar massacre on March 11th by a U.S. Sergeant (who killed 16 people, including women and children).

The Afghan president Hamid Karzai has taken a stance against ISAF soldiers, inviting them to stay in their outposts – defined as FOB, Forward Advanced Base – and, above all, has decided the stop to the reconciliation talks in Doha. The Talebans proposed the negotiations take place solely between Afghans.

The insurgents have focused their actions against ISAF forces in Eastern Afghanistan; the Western provinces, Herat in particular, were spared because their control is effective and widespread; furthermore, they are distant from potential escape routes.

The Pashtun “Haqqani network” has given a considerable contribution to the Taliban's Spring offensive. They originate from the Afghan province of Paktia, their bases are in Northern Waziristan, in the FATA tribal area. The leader of the Haqqani network is Sirajuddin Haqqani, son of the well known Jalaludin Haqqani, a legendary fighter against the Russian occupiers; Sirajuddin is in good terms with the Pakistani “intelligence” and with the Al Qaeda network of defunct Osama bin Laden.

The Pashtun represent 42% of Afghan population; they are mainly in the Center-South of the country and are divided in sub-groups, or clans, and are well rooted in their areas of origin (Ghilzai, Durrani, Popalzai – the clan of President Karzai – , Haqqani etc.). They are also sometimes at war with each other in struggle for or against the government of Kabul. The Pashtun are traditionally linked to the ancient capital of Afghanistan, Kandahar, rather than Kabul.

The rest of the population is composed of ethnic minorities from neighboring countries: tajiks (27%), hazari (9%), uzbeks (9%), turmens (3%) and other (10% including baluchis from bordering Pakistan).

On the domestic front it is important to consider that the confidence in the Karzai government, accused of being corrupt and of leaving only the crumbs of external aid to the population, has been withering. The Talebans, being opposed to the government in Kabul, have gained the looks of “saviors of the people”: they can rely on economic resources (even though they come from drug trafficking), offer jobs and pay for them. Furthermore, the modernist minority factions within the Talebans have shown some openings on women rights (allow school teaching; allow femal only schools).

On the international front, with the failure of the strategy adopted by the West (importation of democracy regardless of the updating of institutions and, to that effect, of the identification of moderate factions with which to dialogue), the keystone factor could come from Islam through the involvement of nearby countries (an option that Washington has already begun to evaluate), which means Shiite Iran and Sunni Pakistan; yet the option is not free from difficulties:

- Iran cannot act in Afghanistan like it did in Iraq and Syria; and then there is the nuclear program.
- Pakistan is advantaged by the strategy it has carried out so far, that of the “double dealing and double command” with the intervention – depending from case to case – of the “Intelligence services” or of the “army”.

What are the alternatives to the withdrawal of the ISAF mission?

After 11 years of military deployment in Afghanistan on the part of the West and with a considerable number of casualties at an elevated cost (billions of dollars), we must consider attentively the announcement made by the Australian contingent, especially in view of the international agenda: the May NATO meeting in Chicago; the possible resumption of talks for Afghanistan in Qatar; the November presidential elections in the United States (for Obama's

second term).

There are serious doubts on the future results of the ISAF mission: we must remember that after the “twin tower” attack on 9/11 2001, the Afghanistan mandate included a reaction against those that organized 9/11 and against the “oppressive regime” of the country that hosted them, the institution of democracy to avoid similar situations in the future.

At this point in time, Osama Bin Laden has been eliminated, but the advent of democracy in Afghanistan is still a distant objective: we should ask ourselves whether Afghanistan can “fare for itself”, so that the ISAF mission can withdraw.

Despite the acceptable reaction of the Afghan government forces against the April 15 Spring offensive by the Taliban, there is the need to complete - before withdrawing from the country – the training and formation of the ANA (Afghani National Army) and the ordering of the ANP (Afghan National Police): the manning must be increased from the present 300 thousand to 350 thousand, especially by incrementing the police forces from the present 130 thousand men to 180 thousand (Starting 2015 there will be 4,1 billion dollars a year for financing and maintaing and keeping the Afghan security forces operative).

It is also necessary to organize the “exit strategy” with a shared vision and to co-ordinate it within the ISAF so as to avoid dangerous individual initiatives on the part of the participating countries, with negative “domino effect” repercussions, given the common economic difficulties of those nations. the policies of the US contingent should also be considered: withdrawal of 22 thousand soldiers next summer and total withdrawal by the year 2014.

Withdrawing from Afghanistan now could bring us back to a scenario that we have already witnessed in 1989 (withdrawal of the Soviets), with dramatic developments on the inside, close to an all out “civil war for power” between opposing factions; the operative and economic contribution of ISAF must be maintained until the Afghan forces are suitably trained and independently operational. This would avoid afterthoughts and further intervention.