



www.invisible-dog.com

invisibledog@email.com

ISIS: NEXT STOP SINAI

ISIS has taken foothold mainly in the north of the Sinai peninsula, around El Arish, where they control portions of the coast. It is thus not a coincidence that the recent attack against the Sufi al Rawdah mosque in Bir el Abed, where over 300 people were killed, took place in that area. Sufism is considered a heresy by ISIS affiliates, who feed themselves on the precepts on Wahabism.

Sinai is the new frontier of terrorism. After the downfall of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, the dreams of a caliphate and a refuge for the surviving mujahedin can be found in Egypt. Furthermore, the Sinai can provide a series of advantages for Islamic terrorists:

it's deserted, scarcely inhabited, often mountainous lands can help terrorists hide or move around, with the adequate precautions of course;

the return of a military regime in Cairo, the demise of an Islamist President and the continuous persecution of the Muslim Brothers provide a fertile ground for Islamic terrorism, especially for those believers ready to label as *takfir* any other Muslim who doesn't share their views;

Sinai's proximity to the Gaza Strip and Israel potentially allows ISIS to strike targets and fight in the name of issues widely supported across the Arab world.

The Beduin tribes

Beduin tribes in the Sinai, an estimated 700 thousand people scattered across 60 thousand square kilometers, were not affected by radical Islam until ISIS terrorists came along. But they had widely supported President Mohamed Morsi. The subsequent restoration of a military regime in Cairo and the advent of Abdel Fattah al Sisi have fueled resentment and sympathies for radical Islam.

Traditionally, the Beduin tribes in the Sinai have never been involved in political or religious disputes, as they preferred to focus on their traffics. Their relationship with the authorities in Cairo, and particularly with the military deployed in the peninsula, was based on a tacit cohabitation agreement. As a matter of fact, the beduins in the peninsula do not recognize central authorities, but were allowed to continue their smuggling activities nonetheless. The arrival of the ISIS terrorists has broken this social equilibrium.

The deployment of the military

Egypt has decided to deploy two Divisions in the Sinai: the 2nd Division, that controls the north of the peninsula and the 3rd Division, which occupies the central portion of the

peninsula all the way to the Gulf of Aqaba and the Suez Canal. The border area with Israel is under the control of the Ministry of Interior (see Invisible Dog Issue #24 in December 2013: "[Sinai, no man's land](#)").

The 2nd Division controls a smaller portion of territory, but one which is more densely populated by terrorists. It has been recently reinforced by helicopters, drones, tanks and artillery. The outcome, given the recent attack on the mosque in Bir el Abed, was not satisfactory. The 3rd Division, instead, covers a larger portion of territory that it tries to monitor by setting up check points here and there and that often become the target of attacks. A string of incidents that have caused the death of over 2 thousand soldiers. Military convoys in the Sinai can only move with a heavy escort.

Despite the deployment of over 30 thousand men, it is a fact that the Egyptians were not able to neutralize some one thousand, or even two thousand (although estimates are not reliable) terrorists.

The support of the Beduins

Nor ISIS, nor the Egyptian military can win this war of attrition without the support of the local Beduin tribes that are, in fact, the only ones that control this territory. There are three main federations of tribes that live in the peninsula: the Suwarka along the coast around El Arish and up to the Gaza Strip, the Tarabin in the central-northern part and the Tiyaha in the center-south.

According to information from Israeli intelligence, there have been contacts and negotiations between ISIS leaders and the Tiyaha tribal chiefs to grant them access to the south of Sinai for their terrorist activities. Their initial target would have been the Egyptian military and, in the foreseeable future, the maritime traffic between Aqaba and the Suez Canal. According to some analysts, the terrorist attack in Bir el Abed targeted the Suwarka tribes, accused of collaborating with the Egyptian security forces.

The paramilitary militias

The Egyptian army is relying on the collaboration of a series of armed local militias known for their brutality. They carry out the dirty work and the summary execution of alleged terrorists. They also target the local population, which doesn't help the cause of the cooperation between the Beduins and the Egyptian army. But rather fuels the resentment against military authorities.

The brutality of the Islamic State is now matched by these paramilitary militias that bring yet more bloodshed to this conflict. The state of emergency decreed in 2014 that grants security forces the freedom to abuse also helps the militias cover up their crimes. What the Egyptian military lacks is proper intelligence. And this cannot be achieved without the support of the local tribes.

Terrorism on the rise

The recent influx of fighters fleeing from Iraq and Syria has swelled the ranks of local terrorism. The new arrivals have a significant military expertise that the locals did not have. This means terrorism in the Sinai is both qualitatively and quantitatively better. This was evident in the attack against the al Rawdah mosque, which was carried out in full military fashion. The group that until 2011 went under the name of Ansar Beit al Maqdis (Partisans of Jerusalem), pledged its allegiance to the caliphate in 2014 and changed its name to Velayat Sinai (Sinai Province). It is now a full member of the Islamic State.

An Al Qaeda affiliate also operates in the Sinai. Jamaat al Jund Islam (Group of the Soldiers of Islam) resurfaced in October 2017 declaring a war on ISIS, accused of *kharijism*, or of killing other fellow Muslims. The divide between the two groups is on who should be fought; while the Islamic State kills all non-believers, the *takfir*, regardless of whether they are Sunni or Shia, Al Qaeda focuses on the infidels, the *kafir*.

Jund al Islam gained the spotlight in September 2013 for an attack against the Egyptian military in Rafah. Al Qaeda's leader in Egypt is Hisham Ashmawi, aka Abu Omar al Muhajir, who can count on groups such as Ansar al Islam and Morabitoun in urban centers. Instead, the head of ISIS in the Sinai is Mohammed al Isawi, also known by his nom de guerre Abu Osama al Masri, who was a host of Egyptian jails until his escape during the insurrection in 2011. He became the chief in 2016 of the Egyptian branch of the Islamic State after the previous leader of the group, Abu Dua'l al Ansari, was killed during an Egyptian air strike.

A risky future

Terrorism in the Sinai is strongly influenced both by events in the Middle East and by internal Egyptian affairs. It is thus not a coincidence that terrorist attacks have taken place elsewhere across the country. Hence, the fight waged by the authorities in Cairo against the terrorists in the Sinai is a war for the survival of the regime. Urban centers are witnessing the soldering between Al Qaeda and the most radical factions within the Muslim Brotherhood that following the downfall of Morsi and the systematic persecution of their brothers have decided to take up arms. They have one common denominator: the legitimacy of a battle in the name of a religious goal. The Muslim Brotherhood was a political and mainly legal movement that has been forced to resort to terrorism to survive. And if they come together with ISIS and Al Qaeda, Egypt will see its stability in great peril.

SAUDI INTELLIGENCE AGENCIES

In all Arab countries, intelligence agencies play a key role. Their importance is directly proportional to the type of regime they watch over: the more ruthless or authoritarian the dictatorship, the larger their contribution to its stability and, of course, the greater and more brutal their power. Since authoritarian regimes are widespread in the Middle East, it is worth evaluating how efficient intelligence agencies are both domestically and internationally.

In Saudi Arabia the primary intelligence agency of the kingdom is General Intelligence Presidency (GIP), also known as al Mukhabarat al 'Ammah al Mamlakah al Arabiyah Saudiyah. This is a crucial institution for the survival of the Saudi monarchy. When King Salman came to power in 2015, among the first measures he took was the removal of the head of the agency, Prince Khaled bin Bandar, whom he replaced with someone he deemed more trustworthy: retired General Khaled bin Ali bin Abdullah al Humaidan, who was the deputy of investigations (*madahith*) at the Ministry of Interior.

Khaled bin Bandar is a Lieutenant General who took part against in the war against Saddam Hussein in Iraq in 1991 and against the Houthis in Yemen in 2009. After being removed from the GIP he was named an advisor to King Salman. With the appointment of al Humaidan, for the first time the Saudi king has chosen to assign a great responsibility to an individual outside the Royal Court.

The tasks and structure of the agency

The agency is tasked, like many others across the globe, with national security. So mainly with espionage, counter-espionage and analysis. It provides the ruler with information and strategic evaluations. It is, foremost, the most accredited advisor to the king. It being the most important intelligence agency in the country, the GIP coordinates and plans the activities of other agencies, such as the ones at the Ministry of Defense and Aviation, the National Guard and the Ministry of Interior. It also presides over the bilateral relationship with foreign intelligence agencies.

The Director of the GIP is supported by a deputy. The current one is Ahmad Hassan Mohammad Asiri, who is also the former controversial spokesman of the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen. An Inspector General for protocol, an office for External Relations and an Office for the Presidency complete the staff at the summit of the organization.

At a lower level there are a series of branches under the command of a number of assistants to the Director: Department for Financial and Administrative Affairs, Department for Communications and Tapping, a Technical Department, a Training and Planning Department, an Operations Department in charge of coordinating domestic stations and the ones abroad, an Analysis Department that is sub-divided on the basis of different themes: political, terrorism etc. Not all branches are located in Riyadh, but also in Jeddah and Taif.

Overall, the GIP is well staffed, well organized and relies heavily on IT.

The Saudi intelligence community

The Saudi intelligence community – i.e. all those structures tasked with watching over national security – report to the king. Not just the GIP, but also the National Guard, the Ministries of Defense and Aviation, Interior and Foreign Affairs. The ruler presides over these organisms as the Commander in chief.

The National Guard, basically the army, can count on 250 thousand men including its reserve. From 2010 until 2015, it was led by Prince Miteb bin Abdullah, son of the previous ruler and who was part of the recent anti-corruption sweep. Miteb was replaced by Prince Khalid bin Ayyaf al Muqrin. The National Guard is of crucial importance in Saudi Arabia as it provides the link with the tribal militias that protect the House of Saud. It is both a tool for war and social cohesion. The command of the National Guard was recently turned into a ministry of its own, independent from the Ministry of Defense.

The Ministry of Defense and Aviation is ruled by Mohammed bin Salman, the current crown prince and strongman of the kingdom. The Ministry has its Informations and Security department which reports to the Chief of Staffs. It is tasked with policing and military intelligence.

The Ministry of Interior was led by former crown prince, Mohammed bin Nayef. He was removed from the ministry to be replaced by a man loyal to the new king, and good friend of the new crown prince, Prince Abdulaziz bin Saud. The Ministry has its own domestic intelligence agency in charge of the fight against terrorism.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs acts as the go-between Saudi and foreign intelligence agencies and provides analysis and evaluations on regional affairs. Now more than ever, given the number of crisis in the Middle East, this ministry is playing a crucial advisory role for Saudi national security.

The chiefs of these institutions were part of the National Security Council that king Salman has dissolved in 2015 and transformed into a Council of Political and Security Affairs. The move was part of the wider power struggle. By dissolving the National Security Council, the ruler got rid of Prince Bandar bin Sultan, the former ambassador to the US and Secretary General of the Council for over a decade.

The President of the new Council is the Minister of Defense and thus the all powerful crown prince and son of the king, Mohammed bin Salman. He has replaced the former crown prince, Mohammed bin Nayef, who presided over the old National Security Council. In conclusion, the move was just a pretext to concentrate more power in the hands of the young Mohammed bin Salman.

After all, the latest purges carried out by the Saudi king have ridden the security agencies of all those individuals that could pose a threat to the rise of the ambitious heir to the throne. This underlines how crucial these intelligence or security positions are to the kingdom. Those targeted by the purge also include Prince Muqrin bin Abdulaziz, who gave up competing for his position as crown prince despite being the late ruler's smaller brother, but who was still perceived as a menace because he ran the GIP from 2005 until 2012.

The relationship with the United States

The purges and the removals have involved all centers of influence and power in Saudi Arabia. These include those personalities who had a privileged relationship with the US. This is the case of Prince Bandar bin Sultan, former ambassador to Washington between 1983 and 2005. When King Salman came to power, one of the first measures he took in 2015 was to remove Prince Saud bin Feisal, who had been in charge of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for over 30 years.

Saudi Arabia is well known for its strong security and political ties with the United States: the cooperation between intelligence agencies is very strong, Washington is the main supplier of weapons and technology, the stability and defense of the kingdom is directly or indirectly guaranteed by the US. This is why also the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is part of the larger Saudi intelligence community. And by removing those who can count on a privileged relationship with Washington, the Saudi king is yet again paving the way for the rise of his crown prince.

COMPARTMENTALIZATION IN THE SECRET SERVICES. THE ITALIAN CASE

Intelligence activity is regulated by rules that are applied to all Secret Services in similar ways. These generally unwritten rules are applied both internally, to the Service's institutional activities and to the relations between one Intelligence agency and the next.

Compartmentalization

Internally, the paramount rule is compartmentalization. Information is shared on a need-to-know basis and not everyone is allowed to know everything. The less an information is circulated within an Intelligence agency, the lesser the risk that the same information land on ears that shouldn't know about it. Reserved data can guarantee the success of an operation. This is due to the fact that an Intelligence agency carries out several different activities: some operative and others logistic. If it is generally accepted that subjects who do not partake in operative tasks have no need to access sensible information, the same principle is not true within the structures that carry out the operative activity itself.

There are technical activities like ELINT (Electronical Intelligence), SIGINT (Signal Intelligence), IMINT (Imagery Intelligence), and other, more operative ones such as HUMINT (Human Intelligence). So when should an operative structure be kept in the dark? It is a question that frequently arises within Intelligence agencies, and the rules that apply are not so clear. There is common sense; there are internal structures that are tasked with circulating information, like the situation rooms; but there are no set rules. In the end, compartmentalization, when self-referential, can cause operative damage to the other structures that could benefit from the information that was withheld.

And is there a rule on what should be shared: news or information? A piece of news is just rough data that needs to be elaborated and verified in order to become information. Is it better to use unreliable news to see if they fit in with other data or is it preferable to wait until such news has been verified?

There are pros and cons for both yes and no answers. If research is based on a piece of unreliable news, there is a risk of wasting time and of misleading other research that concurs on the same operative target. But if the news ends up being true, it is sometimes possible to save time, a crucial element in many Intelligence activities. After all, acquiring information, because of its incontrovertibly truthful nature, requires more time.

But there is also another problem with the source of the news, especially if these are produced by Humint activity. This is due to the fact that research abroad and on the national territory is carried out by distinct Intelligence structures. When speaking of sources, the principle of secrecy is sacred even within the Intelligence agencies themselves.

It is not rare to see the simultaneous presence of several agencies – with their own operative instruments and contacts – each working to obtain the same data.

The Italian case

If compartmentalization is an issue within an Intelligence agency, the problem is further pronounced in a nation like Italy, which has two Intelligence agencies with identical goals as far as national security is concerned, but with distinct projections on the ground: The AISE (Agency for Information and External Security) abroad and the AISI (Agency for Information and Internal Security) at home. (law 124, August 3, 2007)

Apart from the evanescent geographical division – as if the operative and informative activity of the two agencies didn't overlap – the main problem is the osmosis and transmission of data between two agencies that compete with each other.

The history of the Italian system and past political choices generated two distinct Intelligence agencies (actually three, if we count the military RIS, Information and Security Department, military). The reason for this dualism was to separate competences and create competition between the agencies, thus making them less dangerous for democracy. Divide and conquer. If these were the premises, one cannot complain if the efficiency of the agencies is limited.

One could object that there is indeed a third structure that coordinates the first two, called the DIS (Department of Security Information), tasked with amalgamating, controlling and directing the activity of both Intelligence agencies. But again, it would be another misunderstanding: In reality, the coordination carried out by the DIS is very limited. Both the AISE and the AISI tend to be self-referential due to compartmentalization and to the aforementioned competition between the two agencies, an aspect which is favored by the Italian law.

The duties of the DIS include tasks that are also delegated to the two Intelligence agencies (training, health, logistics, finance, recruiting), thus creating further duplicates. Operatively speaking, each of the agencies independent from the others. But on a higher level, compartmentalization happens within the agencies, between agencies and in the cooperation between agencies and the rest of the State.

Relationship between Intelligence agencies and the Judicial system

There are striking contradictions in the agencies' relationships with the Judicial system. An Intelligence agency gathers news; they verify the reliability thereof, turning the news into information; they then pass the information on to the judicial system, which is tasked with enacting security measures, if needed. Yet the judicial system cannot move swiftly, because the information passed on by the agencies (who don't reveal their sources) has no real value in court; it is nothing more than an investigative cue.

In other words, if a judge chooses to enact measures on the basis of information obtained from Intelligence agencies, he/she can only do so on the basis of his/her own follow-up investigation. The above mechanism, although aimed at guaranteeing individual rights in judicial proceedings, hinders the collaboration between agencies and the judicial system and increases compartmentalization between the two.

Furthermore, when an Intelligence agency gathers information that may be judicially relevant, the Director of that agency has the authority and discretion to decide whether it is

appropriate to share the information with the judicial. In other words, he/she decides whether to follow up judicially on the information or whether to keep the information secret.

In practice, when information from the agencies lands on the desk of a judge, that information has already been evaluated in terms of reliability and appropriateness by the Director of the Intelligence agency involved.

Attributions and collateral damages

The approval in 2007 of law 124, which regulates the duties of the agencies on a territorial basis, created further conflicts, also caused by compartmentalization. In the previous law (n. 801, 1997), counterespionage duties were assigned to the SISMI (now AISE) and not to the SISDE (now AISI). But with law 124, the agencies were forced to apply the new regulations, which included a transfer of operative assignments from one agency to the other. Up until the year 2007, it was the SISMI – and its internal structures – that had operative control over foreign diplomatic missions in Italy. It was a grievous task, seen that diplomatic missions in Rome are doubled by the corresponding missions with the Holy See, the Vatican (which does not allow for a diplomatic post to have dual obligations).

The SISMI team that carried out this activity in the past had grown experienced over the years. They had trustworthy sources, contacts, had carried out checks, wiretapping activity and other activities, sometimes borderline illegal including, on occasion, the violation of a diplomatic post. The transfer of jurisdiction, which was compulsory with the new legislation, made this wealth of information useless. The official version, of course, was that the passing of the torch occurred amid an air of courteous cooperation between national structures, but the truth was much different. The individuals that worked on the limit of 'legality' generally dislike spilling the beans on past operations, even to their colleagues.

Of course, compartmentalization is a defensive rule that ensures secrecy. When disregarded, it can jeopardize that which is the primary element of every Intelligence structure. However, when applied without discernment, it becomes a crack in the information structure and compromises the efficiency of the structure itself. As with all rules, this one too needs to be regulated, although there exist no regulatory criteria except for those that arise during each single application of the rule itself.

There are, however, antidotes, which are represented by the legal safeguards that can be applied to defend secrets of State. The fear that an information were leaked or that it could be used instrumentally against the leaker itself could be exorcised by the legal safeguards guaranteed to any national Intelligence agency. Unfortunately, the activity of an Intelligence agency, especially an Italian one, must confront itself with the prejudice of the public opinion which perceives its opaque workings as machinations, violations of one's privacy and widespread illegality. The collective consciousness does not do justice to the dangerousness of a job that's ancient as the world itself. The work of intelligence may be dirty work, but it is not necessary carried out by people that break the law.