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THE SYRIAN SOLUTION DEPENDS ON AFRIN

Inevitably, with the military defeat of the ISIS, there arise contradictions of a situation where interests, aims and strategies were so far kept under the rug of the common fight against Islamic terror.

Now that the common enemy is defeated, each of the players is trying to have his way. Some alliances that were instrumental to the military objective are now coming to an end; allies become enemies and vice-versa.

The talks held in Astana, Sochi, Vienna and Geneva (under the formal umbrella of the UN), were carried out with the Russian blessing and aimed at keeping Assad's regime alive and at legitimizing the role and influence of Moscow in the Middle Eastern scenario. These goals could well be within Russia's reach if they can find a negotiated solution to the Syrian problem. The greatest peril now is that the end of one war will lead to another war.

But Russia's ambitions are not the worse of problems, seen that they have already obtained, in terms of prestige, what they were aiming for when they decided to side with Syria. And the greatest problem is also not represented by the Iranian claims: they fought alongside Assad, sent volunteer militias to Iraq, and now they can cash in on the strategic/military situation that saw them flex their muscles vehemently in the fight against nearby Sunni monarchies. Iran's next problem will be the military confrontation between them, the Hezbollah and Israel in one of the many proxy wars of the Middle East.

Turkey

The bigger problem is Turkey because, amid its mutating approach to the Middle Eastern issues, it first tried to hinder Assad's regime, then to support it; it looked the other way on the logistical support that the ISIS had while transiting through Turkey, then began to fight the terrorist group; it exacerbated relationships with Sunni Gulf countries in favor of Qatar; it went on a head-on collision with Egypt when its Muslim Brother president was ousted by a military coup; it had a sour stretch with the US but kept its position in NATO to this day; it shot down a Russian plane claiming a border violation, then got reconciled with Moscow; it instrumentally used the Jerusalem question to rise to the defense of Muslim rights. On the whole, Turkey is an uncomfortable and often unreliable party in the Middle Eastern debate.

Within the incoherent Turkish position there hides the Kurdish issue: Turkey initially tried to strike a deal with the PKK through their leader, long time detainee Ocalan, then suspended the truce and resumed their fight against the Kurds. Today, the Kurdish issue is central once more in the pacification of Syria.

Erdogan doesn't really care whether the Syrian regime manages to hold on to power or not; he fears that, in the territorial re-composition of Syria, there will be an area where the Kurds can enjoy their independence. The demonisation of so-called Kurdish "terrorism", the suggestion of connections between the Syrian YPG and the armed struggle conducted by the PKK against Turkey for years, is alas a central part of Erdogan's AKP's agenda, which directs nationalist consensus towards the Islamist leader.

The Turkish military, along with the Syrian Free Army – 10 to 15 thousand units – heading into Afrin (today) and into Manji (probably tomorrow) - two cities on the border with Turkey that were torn from the clutches of Al Baghdadi's militias by the Kurds - represent the practical aspect of this approach, which foregoes any kind of negotiated solution to the issue.

The Syrian Kurds, who control roughly 20/25% of the country, an area that they call "Rojava" ("West") and that includes, along the border with Turkey, the cities of Afrin, Kobane and Jazira, are asking to form a new, autonomous region within Syria. That's why they never raised a finger against Assad's regime, but only against the ISIS, claiming the merit and presumed negotiating prestige thereof. In practice, they already occupy an area that they rid of Islamic terrorists with their own blood. Now that the ISIS is defeated, they lay claim to that same piece of land and to a certain measure of independence.

But Turkey wouldn't be happy to see such a thing happen; they are afraid that the same thing could happen with other groups within their borders and that Rojava could in the future represent a danger for the security of Turkey itself. On January 20, the Turkish military therefore decided to launch operation "olive branch", aimed at dismantling the YPG defenses and preventing the risk that an independent Kurdish state could be born along their borders. It is an uneven fight that sees the Kurd's scant forces up against an army of over a million soldiers.

The Turkish vision which strives to associate the PKK with the YPG, defining both as terrorist factions, is without doubt an exaggeration aimed at justifying the Turk armed intervention in Syria. Although the two organizations are proven to be in contact, especially with the aim of obtaining a piece of land for their community to inhabit in the Middle East, the struggles faced each refer to different geographical regions: the PKK fights against Turkey in the Iraqi mountains, while the YPG fights for Kurdish independence in Syria, without ever having attacked Turkey or the Syrian regime. So far, the YPG, backed by the US, has only done war against the ISIS.

The PKK has been fighting the government in Ankara since 1984 and is considered to be a terrorist organization by the EU, the US and even by Israel, while the YPG was the most qualified ally of the US in the fight against Islamic terrorism within the Syrian Democratic Forces.

The dilemma

The Turkish attack now faces the other players, both regional and international, with a dilemma: should they let Turkey carry on with its ethnic cleansing or should they step in to

stop it, perhaps by means of negotiations that can on the one side reassure Turkey about its border's integrity and on the other downsize the claims of Syria's Kurds. If a solution is not found, the 30 thousand or so YPG (men) / YPJ (women) fighters (representing the bulk of the Syrian Democratic Forces, which also include other ethnic groups and counts on a total of 50 or 60 thousand men), could convert their warring experience into armed opposition or terrorism.

The refusal by the Kurds to partake in the Sochi January conference about Syria – a reconciliation of sorts under Russia's protection – is not a good sign.

Americans, Russians and Syrians

Meanwhile, the credibility of the US is at stake. Their disengagement from the Middle East, coupled with Russia's activism, has already damaged their international prestige. If they choose to abandon the Kurds after helping and supporting them against the ISIS, their image will be inevitably tarnished. For the time being, just to be sure the other players don't forget about them, the US proceeded to bomb a number of Syrian military targets. In other words, they will have to be reckoned with when finding a solution on Syria. This also includes the fate of the Rojava Kurds.

The Russians are also ill-at-ease because, in order to reach social peace in Syria, they will also have to deal with the Kurdish problem. Currently Russia is hiding behind the American embarrassment; they accuse the Kurds of picking the wrong ally and indirectly second Ankara's claims (they also allowed Turkish airplanes inside the Syrian airspace). But the Turkish military presence within Syria is contrary to Russia's interests and damages the stability and integrity of the country that they just fought for: Syria.

The Kurds asked the Syrian regime for support in order to resist against the Turkish army, although Damascus was already struggling on the battlefield, especially in the area of Idlib. But siding with the Kurds (and alleviating the worries of the US) could be advantageous for the regime in Damascus, so they sent some volunteer militias to help the Kurdish plight. As for the Kurds, they see Syrians fighting alongside their militias as the lesser of two evils, or rather, as the only way to survive.

But the only nation that can save the Syrian Kurds from being crushed by Turkey is the US, provided they are still on the same side of the barricade. So far, US military counselors are in the field and it doesn't look like they want to leave. This represents a grave danger for the Turkish military, especially if they were to kill an American while fighting the Kurds.

What solutions are there?

Is there room for a negotiated solution? In theory, yes, because Turkey could settle for a security strip along their border – a buffer zone – 20 or 30 kilometers wide. They are especially weary of the YPG becoming – as was theorized in the past by the US – a local defense force, albeit against the ISIS terrorists.

One solution could be to have the YPG act in conjunction with the US. But this view could hardly be shared by Russia or Syria. The Russians prefer to have the area under the control of Damascus, which would satisfy the Turks in part, would leave the US embittered, and could find widespread diffidence among the Kurds unless the proposal is coupled with a Syrian guarantee on Kurd independence.

And the Kurds?

The Kurds were first betrayed at the 1924 Lausanne treaty, which disavowed the territorial promises of the 1920 Sévres talks. Since then, neither their political representatives, nor their armed wing have managed to achieve the goal of independence. The latest attempt was orchestrated by Masoud Barzani, who tried to claim independence through a referendum of the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq. The attempt failed due to the hostilities of authorities in Baghdad, of a number of other Middle Eastern nations, and to the reluctance of both the US and Russia. The countries where Kurds are demographically predominant (Syria, Turkey, Iran) are afraid of having another independent subject that could further destabilize an area that is already precariously tied to territorial divisions dictated by distant colonial accords. It could produce an ethnic feud between Kurds and Arabs (especially in the area of Manji, controlled by the Syrian Kurds but inhabited by an Arab majority).

Unfortunately, the future plans for Syrian Kurds will likely overlook their aspirations and the reason why they fought. They are but a pawn in a bigger game that involves their neighbors and the hegemonic struggle between Russia and the USA. The solution will be dictated by the interests of foreign nations rather than by Kurdish interests and aspirations. They are likely to be subject to the same fate as the Iraqi Kurds, who were cajoled when they opposed Al Baghdadi's militias, reassured when they expressed their aspirations, then abandoned when they were no longer needed.

Unlike the Iraqi Kurds, who have somewhat of a State of their own, the Syrian Kurds run the risk of being overrun and eliminated altogether if a diplomatic solution is not found. They were valuable allies but now they are a big problem. After their many military successes, the PYD (Democratic Union Party) and its armed faction, the YPG, overestimated their contractual power and the willingness of the US to support them. They didn't understand that the contractual power of a country like Turkey will always be more meaningful than their merits won on the battlefield against Islamic terror. And today, Turkey is fingering them as terrorists and trying to convince the international public opinion of its views.

Israel's stance

Tel Aviv has always kept on good terms with the Iraqi Kurds. As for the Syrian Kurds, they represent an opportunity to weaken the regime in Damascus and to undermine the role of Iran and of the Hezbollah in Syria. The Israeli plane shot down by the Syrian air defense and the Iranian drone shot down over Israel have increased this sense of danger on the part of Tel Aviv. Throughout the Middle East, Israel is the only country that could benefit from the creation of a Kurdish State. Will this produce a synergy with the Kurds? It is too

soon to say, but in the Middle East no option can be wholly excluded. The region is alas a place where proxy wars, dirty games and sudden changes in allegiances are just the usual cup of tea. Whatever the outcome of the dispute between Syrian Kurds and Turkey, it will surely reflect on the Syrian war and on the future of the Middle East as a whole.

Many questions

Will Turkey conquer Afrin? What will happen to its relationship with the USA and Russia if they do? In the event, surely the Syrian Kurds will join the ranks of PKK terrorism against Ankara. Assad, unlike his father, whom had underwritten an accord with Turkey on a ban of the PKK, is likely to have a more condescending eye for the Kurdish claims. Will Russia be able to find a diplomatic solution? Or will it have to choose whether to side with Turkey or not? And what will the USA, with its 2000 men stationed in Syria, do? Again, they will have to choose to be with or against Turkey, but also with or against their Kurdish allies. The pretenses and aspirations of Turkey are likely to shape tomorrow's Syria and the future Middle East as a whole.

RISING DOUBTS ON ITALY'S MISSION IN NIGER

On January 17, 2018, the Italian Parliament approved the deployment of a military contingent to Niger. Units that are presently in Afghanistan and Iraq will be redeployed on other scenarios, from Tunisia to Misrata, from the Central African Republic to Morocco. The list includes Niger.

The official scope of the mission is to fight illegal immigration by training the Nigerien army. Other tasks include the stepping up of border checks with Libya and operations to tackle the organized crime groups that traffic human beings. The ultimate goal of the mission is to halt the transit of migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa to Libya and to prevent them from reaching the coast and climbing on a boat headed to Italy.

During a November 2017 summit in Abdijan, the African Union and the European Union signed a deal to this effect. For the coming five years, European investments will reach Africa in exchange for a halt to illegal immigrants and for a quicker repatriation procedure for those that are not granted humanitarian asylum. The agreement has yet to be tested.

A difficult task

Italian soldiers are unlikely to be able to solve the problem on their own. The area is too vast; it's a desert; the borders are just on paper and there is no way to prevent people from transiting. The number of units deployed is also somewhat inadequate to cover an area as big as France. We're talking about 470 units, two airplanes, a few drones and 130 vehicles.

Furthermore, Niger is just another country on the path of the immigrants, although it does represent the entry point to Libya. For centuries, these trade routes benefited the local populations, especially in Agadez. Traffickers are based in Sudan, while their Libyan chapter is responsible for setting the immigrants on their way to Italy.

The presence of other countries

It is the first time that Italian soldiers set foot in Niger. Like other West African countries, the former French colony is accustomed to having French soldiers at home. Operation "Barkhane" can count on roughly 4 thousand men scattered across Mali, Chad, Burkina Faso, Mauritania and Niger. In 2014 it took over for Operation "Serval" in northern Mali and for Operation "Epervier" in Chad. Operation Barkhane will soon be replaced by a multi-nation African contingent that goes by the name of G5 Sahel.

Barkhane's HQ is in N'Djamena, Chad, while the drone base is in Niamey, Niger. Warplanes, helicopter and armored vehicles are all part of a rapid reaction force whose main target is not illegal immigration, but Islamic terrorism. At the same time, French troops help local regimes stay in power, or facilitate their demise if Paris decides they should. The military presence also defends economic interests. In the case of Niger, state-controlled French company AREVA owns uranium mines in Arlit that help fuel nuclear power plants at home. Put into the right perspective, the Italian deployment will have to tag along with the French and will be irrelevant, to say the least, in Niger.

There are, of course, also other foreign military contingents in Niger. The Germans are part of the MINUSMA, based in Niamey. The US has roughly 800 troops on the ground, mainly special forces, both along the border with Mali, where four Rangers were killed in October 2017, and in Agadez, where they are building a military base. Both Germans and Americans are in Niger to fight terrorism, not human traffickers.

Terrorist risk

Most of the countries that have sent troops in the Sahel have done so to counter the rise of radical jihadism. Italy is the only country fighting human traffickers, a task with a minor impact on security. But there is a link between organized crime syndicates and terrorist groups in the management of migrant flows to Libya and Algeria.

It is more likely that the Italian contingent be faced with Islamic terrorists in the near future rather than migrant smugglers. This is because the units will be deployed both in Niamey and in Madama, a remote fortified French outpost 100 km away from the Libyan border, where the old trade routes passed. And terrorist groups are also present in the area. An isolated outpost in the middle of the desert is an easy target. And there are a good number of ideological reasons for an attack.

To stop the influx of migrants from Agadez to Libya means depriving the local population of a relevant source of income. On the other hand, the 120 million euros spent by the EU in 2017 never reach the local population. Out of money and out of a job, the local people in Agadez will soon turn their anger against the authorities. And the Italians will be seen as being a part of the problem. The first result could be a merger between local tribal groups and terrorists. Secondly, this could lead to a lack of collaboration with local authorities. Only local tribesmen know the desert routes, while most soldiers come from other areas of Niger.

Gaddafi's intuition

Back in 2009, Colonel Muammar Gaddafi contacted several countries, including Italy, to launch a joint anti-terrorism center in Bamako, Mali, aimed at eradicating extremism in the Sahel. The late Libyan dictator had also proposed the constitution of a rapid intervention force, which would also supply weapons and training to local armed forces.

At the time of Gaddafi's proposal, Islamic terrorism in the region was not widespread. However, the supreme guide had foreseen the dangers born out of endemic poverty and social conflict. The proposal was channeled to the different intelligence agencies, but was not welcomed. Although they had reopened their embassies in Libya, the US and UK did not trust the Libyan dictator, the French viewed the move as an intrusion in their sphere of influence, while the Italians and the Germans were willing.

Gaddafi often came up with great ideas that he could not develop into a project. Once a proposal was launched, he would immediately demand supplies and funding. This type of approach ended up arousing a good dose of suspicion.

The limit of the Italian initiative

The Italian deployment in Niger is dictated by a renewed national strategic interest in an area that has long been neglected. The opening of an Italian embassy in Niamey cannot make up for a small and scarcely operational contingent. Especially in a context where everyone else is fighting terror and where there are approximately 600 square km of desert to monitor. Human traffickers, known as passeurs, have started to adopt new, farther and more dangerous, routes than the traditionally beaten tracks. While this makes the controls more difficult, it also puts the passengers in greater peril. And more and more people are dying while crossing the Sahara.

Secondly, the Italians depend on the French. The Italy-France agreement postulates that the French will guarantee the security of the Italian contingent. This will prejudice their autonomy on the ground. At the same time, it is hard to find a credible counterpart in the Nigerien government. The Agadez region is in the hands of cross-border tribes like the Tebou and the Tuareg, that have been profiting from the trade routes for centuries.

The Italian idea of replicating the naval blockade enacted off the Libyan coasts with a similar initiative in Niger has a high risk of being unsuccessful. The transportation of migrants was and is a crucial source of income for Niger. In Libya, it is now one of the country's major businesses. There are dedicated armed groups that either traffic or abuse migrants. The human traffickers earn millions and move thousand of individuals. Money and corruption are crucial, making Libya into the ideal working environment.

TECHNOLOGICAL VS CLASSICAL SPYING

The search for information, normally known as espionage, is made of two concurrent and competing approaches: classical spying and technological information gathering. The first approach, HUMINT (Human Intelligence), is conducted by agents on the field: they contact people, recruit sources and, ultimately, rely on informants.

Instead, technology can count on a series of technical tools: SIGINT (Signal intelligence, that intercepts anything in the air, like radio or telephone transmissions), ELINT (Electronic intelligence, which includes computers and other devices), IMINT (Imagery intelligence, that relies on satellite or aerial videos and photos). Rapid technological developments have pushed several countries to rely more and more on technology as its main source of information, neglecting classical espionage.

There are also other reasons that push agencies to opt for technological intelligence.

The risk factor

It is less dangerous to sit behind a console than to have an agent on the field in a foreign country, possibly during a civil war or in a hostile environment. The agent physically puts his life on line. He or she risks being uncovered by the local counterespionage. And if he or she is found, diplomatic problems follow, because espionage is a hostile activity that can have a great impact on bilateral relations with other countries.

The time factor

Infiltrating an agent in a foreign country and giving him a cover that allows him to operate requires time. Sure, agents can use the cover of a diplomatic mission and this can facilitate their task. Having a diplomatic status automatically gives the agent a reason to be where he is. This is a technique most intelligence agencies use because, among others, it offers a clear advantage: the diplomatic status protects the agent. Apart from the aforementioned diplomatic consequences, if he is exposed, he runs the risk of being expelled rather than arrested. Furthermore, if needed, he can be easily replaced. The only drawback is that everyone knows agents pose as diplomats and this will attract the attention of local intelligence agencies.

There are also other ways to infiltrate an agent that require more time. First, he/she needs a front: a company working abroad or a delegation visiting a nation (the so-called "legal travelers"). In order not to catch the attention of the local counterespionage, the cover story needs to be legitimate and credible. And this takes time and effort.

Sometimes intelligence agencies choose to use state-owned enterprises, like most national airlines. This is another widely employed front and hardly a durable cover. Most of the countries in Eastern Europe employ this expedient. An airline representative or a station manager that monitors all boarding, disembarking operations, loading and unloading of airplanes can move freely because of their role. In addition, they can contact people without being noticed and monitor anything that happens inside an airport.

The time factor to recruit informers

Any agent that works abroad needs some time to begin operating. He needs to blend into the social texture of the country; he needs to make new friends and find sources that will help him gather news of interest to him. It's a PR world that requires a good amount of time to consolidate relationships. Actually, the longer an agent operates in a country, the wider his contacts and the deeper his relations will be.

Only a limited number of intelligence agencies, such as the Russian's, are capable of building identities for their agents and provide them with a wide array of covers abroad. Furthermore, they are in sleep for a number of years before being activated as an asset for espionage.

The data from technological spying

As mentioned earlier, technological spying has the indisputable advantage of being fast and limited only by technical tools. The agent is a mere technician; this implies that anything he is capable of acquiring depends solely on the quality of the tools he is employing. His activities are ongoing, and a wide range of different pieces of data are obtained. He doesn't need a cover, nor does he have to conceal his actions in fear of being exposed, nor does he risk being arrested or eliminated. Zero risks.

Too much data

When all radio and telephone conversations around the globe are monitored, as do the Americans alongside the other English-speaking countries, the issue is how to distinguish what is useful, from what is not. The problem is not information gathering, but its selection. And while it's relatively simple to use technology to obtain data, it's not that easy to spot the right one. This is the main issue the NSA is currently facing. Sometimes key words are used, or geographical areas are defined, or a certain number of sources selected, yet the problem remains.

The time a HUMINT agent requires to become effective are similar to the time needed to select technologically-acquired news. Raw data that needs to be transformed into news, real data with information value.

Contextualizing news

Data gathered by technological tools is aseptic, it is not influenced by the social context of where it is produced, nor does it fall into a context. It is soulless and arid data. The technician collecting it is not emotionally involved; he receives so much data in such a short time span that he is often incapable of immediately appreciating its relevance. He collects data and hands it over for analysis. His only relationship he entertains is with his console. All he sees is data and no information. He is a mere technician-

The difference between an agent and a technician

When a piece of information is gathered by an agent on the field from one of his sources, given his background, he is immediately capable of distinguishing where the data is

relevant or not. He is the first analyst of himself and can evaluate the reliability of his source based on how the information was communicated to him, from the reactions of his counterpart. He doesn't only share data, but also pieces of information. And can also immediately spot disinformation efforts.

The data he acquires is put into context, something a technician in front of a machine miles away cannot do. In other words, any data collected through HUMINT is enriched by a series of details that color its importance, meaning and reliability.

The experience of the CIA

For a certain period, the CIA tossed HUMINT aside, with dire consequences on its operations. During the Second Gulf War, the 800 or so CIA agents that were in Baghdad could not walk out of the Green Zone because they did not have adequate covers and had been spotted. The security restrictions imposed by the agency blocked any chance of operating. One of the rare cases of a contact with a local informant turned into a trap; luckily the agent came out alive. Basically the entire Second Gulf War played out without adequate US HUMINT on the ground.

At the same time, the US were intercepting every telephone conversation; after all a US company was offering the service in Iraq. The enemy's radio signals were tapped, but there was no HUMINT follow up on the ground. And that massive amount of data was not able to prevent attacks, IEDs or the rise of terrorism. This intelligence failure was the result of the presumption that technology could replace HUMINT. Following this experience, the CIA learned from its mistakes and went back to getting its men on the ground.

A balanced mix

Classical espionage and technological data gathering need each other to produce information. They don't replace each other, but integrate one another. Technology cannot replace human relationships and the informations they produce. Although it is difficult to measure them on a scale of effectiveness, the quality of the data gathered by classical espionage is superior. Less data, more information.