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IS THE ISIS REALLY DEFEATED?

The military defeats of the ISIS must have induced many to think that Islamic terror like Al Baghdadi's ISIS or Al Qaeda was alas nearing extinction.

But reality is another cup of tea: although the idea of setting up a caliphate in the Arab regions of the world waned with each defeat, radical Islamic ideology is very much alive.

The ambitious theocratic design that impressed many Islamic volunteers around the globe was downsized but the goals of the Salafi doctrine that inspired the ISIS will not be abandoned. There was a shift from conventional warfare to a non-conventional kind of fight called terrorism. And the warfare of terror does not feed on territorial conquest but on the charm of an ideology, on the just cause of a war fought for religion's sake.

In practical terms, the open war waged by the ISIS to conquer a territory was in ways less dangerous than crawling terror where each person can become a target; where all are afraid. Non-specific danger creates uncertainty and the enemy becomes invisible and unpredictable.

Conventional warfare thus turns into a psychological confrontation. A more subtle and a harder one to fight. The ISIS is like the mythological Hydra, a monster whose heads reappear elsewhere each time they are chopped off.

The ISIS was defeated in Syria and Iraq, losing almost all of the territory that it controlled. But the ISIS isn't just about territory. It is about the ideas inherent in the radical Islam that accompanies it and it is currently seeking other theaters and other battles. Unfortunately, there are many around the globe.

The schools of thought

The Koran and the Sunna have always been the object of interpretation by the juridic schools of Islam, cultural gatherings where the dictates of Islam are transformed into laws. The approach of these schools loosely reflects the tendencies of the "umma", or the Islamic community as a whole.

There is the "Hanafite" juridic school, the most widespread of the lot, which gives ample room to customs but also to opportunity (it tends to be moderate, albeit bound to tradition). This school is also considered to be "liberal" and tolerant.

There is the "Maliki" school, especially rooted in Morocco and North Africa. This school is also moderate.

There is the “Shafi’i” school, which often resorts to analytic reasoning (and thus leaves room for human intelligence in the elaboration of the laws of Islam).

There is the “Hambali” school, the most dangerous of them all, because it leaves no room for human thought, nor to an analytic approach but is based solely on the literal communication of the sacred scriptures.

Saudi Wahabi Islam is a descendant of the Hambali school and so are the ISIS and Al Qaeda. The dangerousness of Wahabi Islam is not only theological in nature but also financial, because it has rivers of Saudi money driving it.

On the opposite front we find, especially in Africa, other moderate Islamic groups:

There is Sufism, which integrates the cult of Saints and is influenced by the strong cultural animist African roots. For this reason Sufis are seen by Salafis as apostates. Sufi Islam also gives birth to many confraternities (Qadiryah, Muridyah, Tijanyyah, etc.) whose members share a common spiritual life tied to the rules of Islam.

The cultural problem

The ISIS feeds off symbols that justify its existence and produce followers and terror.

Surely the ambition to set up their own State has been abandoned but there are other motivations that can give significance and justification to the terrorist’s fight. These ‘justifications’ are founded in religion, or rather in the radical interpretation of the sacred scriptures of Islam.

The ISIS will not be uprooted by fighting it on the ground but rather on the Islamic, theological, level. The problem isn’t military – if not marginally so – but rather cultural. Once the religious premises that feed Islamic terror fail, the support that the ISIS received in the Arab world and among the Muslim international community will also falter. In practice, the fight against Islamic terror must be fought in the Islamic world. This is especially true of the ISIS that – unlike Al Qaeda – targets apostates: people that, although Muslim, neglect the dictates of Islam.

The clash today is between moderate Islam, like the one promoted by qualified schools of thought such as that of the Al Azhar University of Cairo, and Salafi Islam, where the Koran’s concepts are absorbed in their literal form, decontextualized or interpreted, and turned into the wealth of leaders that aren’t culturally and theologically qualified.

The volunteers

There are thousands of Islamic volunteers that fought in the ranks of the ISIS. For many of them it was a one-way ticket. They have been identified by their nations’ authorities and have committed crimes that they will be made accountable for. They don’t know where to hide and are looking for other, unstable, areas of the world where they can continue their religious fight. The Middle East, Africa and Asia offer many opportunities to these individuals.

In the Middle East

The ISIS, unlike Al Qaeda, has promoted the fight against Shiites and there is a strong possibility that it will continue to do so in the clash between Iran and its Sunni neighbors. Many volunteers could join the fight. But there are also other battles that they could join - like the Palestinian cause – by joining the ranks of the more extremist organizations in the region, such as Hamas or the Palestinian Islamic Jihad.

They could move to Yemen where there are territories controlled by Al Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula. They could go to the Sinai, where there are three ‘just’ causes: to fight Al Sisi’s military regime; to fight along the border with Israel; to support the Palestinians in Gaza.

Many of these volunteers are experienced veterans that could join many other battles as well: the Kurdish fight against Ankara; the Iraqi Kurdish fight or the former Baath party fight against the Shiite authorities in Baghdad; the Sunni fight against the Alawites. Wherever there is a crisis or a crawling civil war, there will be an opportunity for their presence. Every pretext pays.

Even if there were no chance of a religious war, the sheer presence of authoritarian regimes, which the Middle East is riddled with, could justify a new war, a guerrilla attack or an act of terror.

Afghanistan and surroundings

In Afghanistan Al Qaeda is still strong. But there are differences in the approaches of Al Qaeda and the ISIS, especially in terms of targets and operative procedures. While the ISIS tries to strike against the “tafkir” - Muslims who do not follow the precepts of Islam (this category includes the Shiites and the moderate Muslims), Al Qaeda’s fight is centered on the “kafir”, or the miscreants: individuals who do not believe in the Islamic God (specifically speaking, Americans and Christians).

Despite the diversities, the strenuous competition to market each one’s brand and the evident military defeat on the ground, an agreement between these two formations cannot be ruled out. Afghanistan’s instability is contagious, especially in neighboring Islamic former Soviet republics like Tajikistan (a militarily feeble and socially unstable nation), Turkmenistan (also weak and unstable) and in some measure Uzbekistan.

The African continent

Although African Islam is less ‘theological’ than Middle Eastern Islam, the religious connotation here has also become the reason for many battles. And if the religious motives are not sufficient, there are many other reasons and social claims onto which a religious tag can be applied.

Muslim African countries are comprised of huge, unstable territories with uncontrolled borders and endless deserted areas; these are all parameters that give the Islamic volunteers an ideal operative scenario. According to analysts, there has recently been an

increase in the number of African countries that have suffered Islamic terrorist attacks and in the number of victims thereof.

It is a scourge fueled by the chronically poor population, their scarce cultural level, unemployment, the lack of essential services, the violation of human rights and in the social marginalization coupled with abuses perpetrated by the many African authoritarian regimes. The social element is often prevalent over the religious one. Interestingly enough, unlike in the Middle East, terrorism in Africa does not use the internet to recruit or indoctrinate its would-be members.

How the new terror is structured

The military defeat and the loss of territory forced the ISIS to change its ways. They abandoned a hierarchical, pyramidal and centralized structure to adopt a new, decentralized form. In practice, each terrorist group presently operates independently: it finds its targets, fights where and how it pleases, has its own operative plans, its own economic independence and its own recruitment system. Al Baghdadi is no longer at the helm: his statement in August this year was more of a reminder that he is still alive rather than that he is still leading the troops.

A terrorist threat made up of many independent structures is very difficult to uproot on the operative level. Every victory is partial, never whole.

How to fight terrorism

The US approach is purely military, at least as far as the ISIS and Al Qaeda in the Middle East, Africa and Asia are concerned: air strikes; widespread deployment of drones; special operations. But this asymmetrical war has moved out of the Middle East and taken root elsewhere as well.

The Italian approach

The Italian approach is a more cultural one and is channeled through the most important Mosque in the boot-shaped peninsula. The Rome Mosque is the epicenter of Muslim presence in Italy. The Cultural Center of this Mosque, which is the backbone of Italian Islam, is now headed by an Italian-Moroccan Muslim director. He is connected to the Maliki branch of Islam. This person, who is also a former member of Italian parliament, replaced the Saudi ambassador as director of the center. Not only was the previous director a foreigner, but a Wahabi as well.

Italy is trying to be rid of radical Islam – inspired and controlled from abroad – in order to support a more moderate, Italian, Islam. It is an attempt, still too recent to evaluate, to promote the emergence of an Italian branch of Islam that takes into account the social and cultural context of the country it inhabits.

Theological considerations notwithstanding, it is a positive note on the security level. Imams will be observed and the places where they teach – often set up abusively here and

there in Italy – will also undergo controls. Last but not least, Italians will understand what is being said if the sermons will be in Italian.

THE DIRTY GAME IN LIBYA

The latest developments in Libya, that range from the fighting in the streets of Tripoli to the different militias split between their support or opposition to PM Fayed al Sarraj and from the bellicose arguments of Khalifa Haftar and the chaos that envelops most of the country, show that events have turned for the worse.

Useless UN decisions

The United Nations is supposed to be the sole authority tasked with managing global affairs. Its executive branch, the UN Security Council, unanimously approved a Resolution that supported the December 17, 2015 Skhirat agreement that stated that the only legitimate authority was the government led by Sarraj.

The Resolution included sanctions for those who opposed the deal, called for the disarmament or disbandment of the militias and a number of other measures to favor a national accord. None of these provisions have ever been applied. Even the Government of National Accord that the UN supported has become powerless.

Despite the fact that this was not an easy task, that talks and diplomatic initiatives had involved all major Libyan players, it is striking to see those same Permanent Members that approved the Resolution acting in the frontline to undermine its foundations. The UN risks becoming useless if its decisions are not imposed by everyone, let alone by its executive branch.

The second consideration points the finger against the unethical behaviour of those that could have opposed the Resolution by voting against it, or used their veto power, and that are now undermining the very credibility of the institution they pretend to represent. And they do so blatantly in Libya.

Fayed al Sarraj, the internationally acclaimed leader in Tripoli, is left on his own; everyone talks to General Khalifa Haftar, the man that wants to replace Sarraj; Haftar should have used his army to support a national unity government instead of threatening it. But he never did.

Haftar can behave the way he does because he can count on Egypt's unconditional support. The French also stand by his side and have sent special forces to Cyrenaica. While the UAE provides aerial support and the Saudis pump money. At the same time, the Russians favor him because they are looking for new naval bases in the Mediterranean and the US don't really mind him. After all, the General was on the CIA's payroll when he was trying to oust Muammar Gaddafi and is now an American citizen.

Politics of hypocrisy

Hence the question: if prominent members of the UN Security Council like Khalifa Haftar so much, why didn't they choose him as Libya's legitimate leader when they had the chance?

The answer lies in the ambiguous conscience of the international community: Haftar is inconvenient, he doesn't envisage a democratic future for Libya and has no interest for negotiations since he only talks war.

Choosing to side with Khalifa Haftar meant and still means accepting the idea that after having toppled a dictator manu militari, another dictator is set to replace him. It is by no coincidence that Haftar was part of the 1969 coup that brought Gaddafi to power and that he was part of that regime for a long time before falling in disgrace. His concept of national reconciliation is not about diplomacy and talks, but rather about threats, scuffles and the physical elimination of opponents.

This is why, at least officially, not a single country has decided to dirty its hands by showing its support for Khalifa Haftar. It was better to oppose him officially and then support him under the counter. The key word to give him an aura of legitimacy was "reconciliation". Yes, the General doesn't respect the UN Resolution, he doesn't plan to disarm his militias dubbed "Libyan National Army", but the international community has to support the "reconciliation" process. So please, Mr. Haftar, stop the bloodshed and we'll get you back in through the back door. It is extravagant to think that any of this will help the negotiations.

But, by opening the doors to all actors, regardless of their legitimacy, to the talks, Haftar has been welcomed as the key player and main actor on stage.

Local developments

The recent turn of events have shown that: Fayed al Sarraj doesn't have the backing of its militias, as several of them turned down the request to intervene against the 7th Brigade from Tahrira. The PM also lacks political support. He is a dead man walking.

On the other hand, Khalifa Haftar has an army on his side and can count on the political and military support of the former Gaddafi loyalists. This is why the Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Enzo Moavero, recently flew to Benghazi to meet with Haftar and plans to hold a conference in Palermo where all major Libyan actors will convene.

By supporting Haftar we come to terms with the fact that the Libya of tomorrow will be much the same as the Libya of the past. It also means accepting the language of war as the only way out of a conflict. No more negotiations, conferences, talks, peace deals. They are all useless. It also implies that the UN has failed, or was betrayed, because those who run it decided to ignore the decisions they had taken. It means that the war in 2011 was pointless, as its only result has been death and destruction for ordinary Libyans.

If this is how it was going to end, we could have stuck with Gaddafi and his heir, Saif al Islam, the man that wanted to bring democratic reforms in Libya.

The international approach

No one cares whether Libya turns into a democracy. Oil and gas. This is what everyone is after. Gazprom, Gazpromneft and Tatneft from Russia, Total from France, Eni from Italy and Marathon Oil from the US are all after Libya's rich oil and gas reserves that are worth

billions. Other businesses of interest are the railway linking Benghazi to Sirte and arms trafficking or sales.

Stability. This is what businesses want, regardless of how it is obtained or enforced. Stability also means making sure Islamic extremism doesn't find a safe haven along the coasts of the Mediterranean. And, as far as Italy is concerned, also implies putting a halt to the human trafficking towards its shores.

Democracy, human rights, national reconciliation are a bunch of useless words for those advancing their own agenda in Libya. And if Khalifa Haftar's ambitions end up coinciding with the interests of foreign actors, then the General is set to become the Gaddafi of the future.

Seif and the future of the country

The historical paradox is that the only person that could contrast the ambitions of Khalifa Haftar is Gaddafi's son, Saif al Islam. Following his release from the jails in Zintan, Saif has regained the support of the old guard. Gaddafi's loyalists have the economic resources and still exert a great influence over their respective tribes (those that granted Muammar Gaddafi over 40 years of reign). If properly channeled, this could benefit the military and social support Saif needs.

Saif al Islam was chosen by his father to succeed him and he would have done so by introducing a series of reforms to move Libya closer to a democracy. By doing so he had found the resistance and opposition of the Revolutionary Council that saw its power threatened. Saif spoke about democracy, human rights, reconciliation and a new Constitution. And when the war broke out – him being the first son – he had to become one of his father's staunchest supporters and became a commander on the field despite his lack of military experience.

After he was captured by the rebels, he was put on trial at the International Criminal Court where he was accused of crimes against humanity. Now that Saif is free, he tours his country and is reviving the links with the tribes that once supported his defunct father. Saif al Islam is possibly the most popular among the regime's loyalists, while Haftar was long seen as just another traitor.

It is a paradox that the man that could introduce democracy to Libya is the son of the ousted dictator. But Saif al Islam is a better guess than Khalifa Haftar can ever be. The conflict has caused more than 50 thousand victims, the civil war has dismembered a State, while terrorist groups and human traffickers have taken over. Anyone with a militia or a weapon became ambitious and socially dangerous. The final nemesis is that the future of Libya is in the hands of two men: an ambitious traitor that also happens to be a General and the son of a dictator that was put to death by his own people.

THE US APPROACH TO THE PALESTINIAN ISSUE

The issue relating to Palestine is one of the many problems affecting the Middle East. It is also one of the oldest issues and probably the hardest to solve. Conflicts, terrorism, endless negotiations, ignored deals and popular uprisings have entrenched the opposing parties. A long trail of blood that, as time goes by, becomes more difficult to unravel.

The current scenario is as follows:

- Israel is unwilling to concede anything, it continues to expand its settlements expropriating Palestinian lands regardless of the UN's injunctions and with the US support to any violation guaranteed by its veto power at the Security Council. Israel's military is strong, its government is run by the far right and its intention is to maintain its dominant role in the Middle East. Its only worry derives from Iranian expansionism in Syria and beyond. The Israelis are concerned by the Palestinians only because of the security threat that comes from the Gaza Strip.

- On the other hand, the Palestinian community is split between the National Palestinian Authority in Ramallah led by a weak President as is Abu Mazen, who's negotiating power is next to zero, and the radical elements represented by Hamas in Gaza that continue to fuel the tensions with Israel through ongoing protests that cause numerous victims.

A lack of support

The Palestinian situation has worsened because even the Arab countries that once supported its cause (or rather exploited it) are now closer to Israel than to Palestine. Rather than promoting the rights of the Palestinians, Arabs are worried by the expanding Iranian sphere of influence in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. They have no interest in supporting the Palestinian demands and entering into a collision course with Israel. In fact, they know the Israelis have the only army that could confront and possibly defeat Teheran. A marriage of convenience where disagreements from the past are not welcome.

Abandoned by everyone, the Palestinians only have two options left: to keep on fighting as is proposed by Hamas or to accept any solution that is imposed on them by a negotiation that does not care about what they have to say. It's a choice between desperation and resignation.

The American carelessness

This dead end for the Palestinians has been favored by the ruthless and undiplomatic stance of US President Donald Trump. After having designated his son-in-law Jared Kushner as his adviser on the Palestinian issue along chief negotiator Jason Greenblatt, Trump has decided to move the US embassy to Jerusalem. A break with the past associated with the concurrent decision to cut all funding to the Palestinians and to the UN agency tasked with delivering humanitarian aid to them, UNRWA.

The United States have chosen to stop being an impartial negotiator and to side with Israel. By doing so they have ceased to be super partes, fueled tensions in the talks and

put the Palestinians with their back to the wall. Rather than a negotiator, Trump acted as a blackmailer.

The so-called US plan

For the past two years Donald Trump has claimed he is preparing a peace plan that should see the light by the end of 2018. A plan emphatically dubbed as “the plan of the century” that, according to Israeli news, should deliver its share of do’s and don’ts. A plan that has been negotiated with the Israeli government after contacts with Ramallah and that seems to address the coexistence between Israelis and Palestinians rather than solving territorial issues. Jerusalem capital of the Palestinian state has been taken off the table after the US decision to hand it over to Israel; the return of the refugees, the destruction of the illegal settlements in the West Bank, the respect of the boundaries of the Palestinian State as it was in 1967, the connection between Gaza and the West bank have all been sidelined.

Trump’s pragmatic approach doesn’t care about the principles and values associated with the Palestinian cause. He only talks money. Funds that should be provided to solve the problem and that should come from the Gulf countries. He’s allegedly offering a new capital for Palestine, in Qalqilya, in exchange for giving up any claims on Jerusalem. What Donald Trump forgets is the religious symbolism associated with Jerusalem.

Whatever the content, once the deal will be publicized the only option left to the Palestinians will be to accept or reject the proposal. The truth is the US President doesn’t care if the blackmailing of the Palestinians works or not. What he is after is the consensus of the Arab countries to his plan. What the Palestinians decide to do is irrelevant. If the Arab countries agree to the US initiative a major hurdle in their relationship with Israel will be removed. This also means that the fate of Palestine will not affect their liason with Tel Aviv anymore.

In other words, the Israeli-Palestinian peace plan is a false flag to achieve another objective. And what the Palestinians choose will not influence the outcome.

Israel is the United States’ strategic partner in the Middle East and even more so now that Russia has stepped in in Syria and has increased its grip on the region. The decision to move the US embassy to Jerusalem clearly goes in this direction, along with the support to the Israeli military.

Hamas and Gaza

The US exploits the situation in Gaza. Hamas is the ruler of the Strip after its landslide victory in the 2006 elections. And Hamas opposes the ANP and by doing so it weakens the negotiating position of Mahmoud Abbas. And this plays into the hands of those who want to diminish the role of the ANP.

Israel plays the same game. They would rather strike a deal with Hamas because of the turmoil along its southern borders than with the authorities in Ramallah. Furthermore, the Israelis know Iran supports Hamas. While Abu Mazen is trying to assert international law and universal self-determination principles, Hamas is more down to earth: sanctions that

block essential goods, unemployment, economic crisis, a naval blockade, the lack of electricity and water, lack of hygiene and hospitals in meltdown. Two million people living in desperate conditions.

The ANP's decision to block the funds for public servicemen in Gaza could backfire and push Hamas to negotiate with the Israelis rather than with Ramallah. The fact that Hamas is on the terror list of several countries is of little or no importance anymore.

Synergies for the American plan

The US are aware that it is not enough to have Israel at its side to solve the Palestinian issue. This is why they have decided to co-opt neighboring countries to its cause. Egypt is relevant on Gaza, since it contributes to the economic choking of the Strip. Cairo has its own reasons: Egyptian authorities fear that Palestinian radicals might merge with the ISIS groups that roam in the Sinai.

But there are also historical reasons: from 1948 and until the 1967 debacle, when Israel occupied the Strip, Egypt ruled over Gaza. The Palestinians took over in 1994 following the Oslo talks, but there are a number of Egyptian nationalists that still claim those territories.

The West Bank instead was part of Transjordan, the country ruled by the Hashemite kingdom after the collapse of the Ottoman empire. This was also occupied by the Israelis in 1967. Jordan has kept close ties with the West Bank and has provided economic support to the area. On another note: roughly half of all Jordanians – although no statistics exist on the topic for this very reason – are of Palestinian descent.

What the American plan seems to include is the provision to confederate the West Bank with Jordan and the Gaza Strip to Egypt. And adieu to Palestine.

The main question international observers are asking is whether this plan has any chance of success. It is hard to believe that the imposition of peace, whereby one of the two contenders takes the decisions, while the other is called in or forced to accept a deal, can bring a lasting solution. This is the case for the unilateralism of the US approach, as is for the Israeli de facto policy that has alienated any room for negotiations.

To think that the panacea for 60 years of conflict will come on the day that the United States propose to the Palestinian National Authority a make or break deal threatening to increase sanctions in case of a refusal is a mere fantasy. As the Arab Israeli citizens have realized when they turned overnight into second class people for them not being Jewish, so will the Palestinians share a similar fate if they are put under the rule of foreign countries.