



www.invisible-dog.com

invisibledog@email.com

BEHIND HAFTAR'S OFFENSIVE

It was clear that to set a negotiating table between Khalifa Haftar and Fayeze al Sarraj in Abu Dhabi, a country that has a neutral stance in the Libyan crisis, wouldn't have produced substantial results. On the contrary, that it would have fueled, especially in one of the contenders – Haftar – the perception of being supported in his military desires.

Indeed, behind the attempt to conquer Tripoli there is the unconditional backing of the United Arab Emirates – which have already provided general aerial support – and the 'long arm' of Saudi Arabia, which has an opportunity to oppose Qatar, a supporter of the Misurata militia, of the Islamic militias of the Tripolitania region and of Sarraj himself.

The Saudis are alleged to have given the general money to pay his army. Khalifa Haftar did not go to Riyadh on March 28 to meet king Salman for nothing. Word has it that the Saudis promised the general that a number of Salafite militias from Tripoli would have embraced his cause; the militias of the Madakhala Wahabi movement. Something that didn't occur as far as we know.

But the question lingers: isn't the Fayeze al Sarraj government recognized by the international community and certified by the UN Security Council? If it is, and it is, why are other nations backing Haftar in various ways, fueling his desire to conquer the country militarily?

The guilty, the liars, the inept

Although the UAE and Saudi Arabia are the main culprits of the latest offensive to conquer Tripoli, other countries have also been behaving improperly: on the one side, officially speaking, these countries back negotiations to achieve peace in Libya; on the other, they support the side that appears momentarily stronger militarily speaking: Khalifa Haftar.

It is the case with France, which has its special corps in Cyrenaica. There are French military counselors that support Haftar's army even in this latest offensive, as we write. Denials of the circumstance by the French ambassador in Tripoli are but a part of a diplomatic game made of lies. In Paris they claim that French special corps are in Libya to fight terrorism, not to aid Haftar. But in the hours preceding the attack, a delegation headed by Haftar's son was on board a Falcon jet provided by French authorities which traveled to Paris to secure French backing for the military operation against Tripoli. Despite the secrecy, the French blanket is visibly short: they went so far as to block a declaration of the European Union to condemn the military offensive launched by Haftar. The

purported reason for their veto was that the accusations against the Libyan general were too harsh.

Even Russia – officially speaking – condemns the advance of Haftar's troops towards Tripoli, although it would gain a strategic edge from a rise of Haftar to power – it seems that Russia were promised permission to use a naval base in Libya if Haftar were to win. Russian officials are present today in both the harbors of Tobruk and Derna.

If Moscow really wanted to halt the advance of Haftar, they could easily tell the 300-or-so Russian mercenaries of the Wagner group to stop fighting alongside the general's militias. These Russians are formally known as contractors, former soldiers with preceding military experience in the Russian army that fight for money. These mercenaries have connections in the Russian intelligence. They are mercenaries, but will not fight without the informal approval of the Russian secret services. In substance, the Russian government uses them for dirty jobs unfit for the official army.

Russia is also to blame for giving Haftar weapons such as tanks and artillery, and for giving him assistance with Muammar Ghaddafi's old arsenal. To top it all, Russia also blocked a resolution of the UN Security Council asking Haftar to halt his advance on Tripoli. The general was then summoned to Moscow and informally told to slow down.

The United States also had special ops in Libya, but these were later withdrawn. Truth be told, the words of the Secretary of State Mike Pompeo against Haftar's offensive were among the harshest. Then again, if the general was to conquer power it would not be a defeat for the US, since Haftar has been for a long time (and perhaps is still) on the CIA's payroll. What the US don't like is the relationship between Haftar and Russia. To have a man so close to Moscow at the helm in Libya is something that Washington is uncomfortable with. While withdrawing its troops from Libya, the US sent a fleet headed by aircraft carrier Abraham Lincoln in the Mediterranean off the coasts of Libya. Just a reminder that any solution to the crisis would have to be approved in Washington.

It seems incredible that Khalifa Haftar would embark in a military operation which requires a lengthy preparation and would succeed in obtaining the unconditional support of the UAE and Saudi Arabia (both close allies of the US in the Middle East) without anybody (the CIA especially) taking notice. Perhaps the US initially decided to let things play out and see what happened before they noticed an escalation in the civil war and had to officially condemn Haftar's attack.

What about Italy, the country which – more than any other – could lose out from Haftar's war, since they back Fayez al Sarraj unconditionally? Rome has soldiers deployed in a Misurata hospital and others providing assistance to the Coast Guard in Tripoli. They have a deputy director of the AISE (Italian secret service), general Giovanni Caravelli, who is in touch with Haftar but who doesn't understand the intentions of the Libyan general – or perhaps he just can't find a way to convince or oppose him. Caravelli was in Libya hours before the attack. The purpose of such a privileged contact with the general is obscure, as it doesn't seem to produce any results. In the past, Caravelli had obtained modest results as head of the military division of the Italian secret services and was responsible for his

men amid the Italian contingents abroad. Then he left the secret service – or rather he was told to leave – only to reappear and be handed such a prestigious and delicate task such as convincing Haftar. The results are modest once again.

Perhaps amid all the lies, the most proper behavior was that of Egypt, which notoriously supports Khalifa Haftar and hasn't denied or tried to dissociate itself from his actions. On the other hand, Egypt officially stressed their backing of the general during his latest visit to the Cairo. Abdel Fattah Al Sisi gave Haftar weapons and dispatched military counselors to Libya.

A clue

There was a clue that gave away Haftar's belligerent intentions. In the weeks before the start of the offensive, his son Saddam brokered a power-sharing deal with the authorities in Misurata. The general was willing to accept an interim Prime Minister backed by Misurata in order to have their militias on his side. Alas, his mission failed because the parties did not sufficiently trust one-another.

Khalifa Haftar was trying to use Misurata's dislike for Fayeze al Sarraj. Even then, siding with Haftar was too much for them to endure. Out of the groups operating in the Tripolitania, the Misurata militia are the most efficient and the ones that Haftar fears most. These are the same units that fought against Ghaddafi and that defeated the ISIS in the area near Sirte.

Haftar's army

It is difficult to measure Haftar's military power today, partly because there are numerous militias that are at the window waiting to see the outcome of the military clash before siding with the winner. Even the units fighting for Haftar have their own agenda.

On paper, Khalifa Haftar has 10.000 men, a lot more than Sarraj can deploy. The so-called Libyan National Army uses Sudanese mercenaries from Darfur, from Chad and tribal militias that were once close to Ghaddafi in addition to the 2000/2500 fighters from Zintan's Tarhuna Brigade, a Tuareg militia.

His airforce is mostly comprised of Russian airplanes used by Ghaddafi in addition to other airplanes provided by the UAE and Egypt. A total of 25-27 airplanes (of which only about 10 are working, thanks to the help of Russian technicians). The Emirates also provided a drone for reconnaissance.

The general's intentions

Haftar's military escalation occurred just as the UN was staging the umpteenth peace conference in Ghadames. Again, the timing of his attack confirms his intentions: to take power by force and to become the novel Ghaddafi. The numerous peace conferences (Skhirat, Paris, Palermo) were just a waste of time for the general.

Haftar would have sat at the negotiating table only if he could have achieved supremacy through diplomacy. During the initial negotiations, the general insisted that he be placed at

the head of the Armed forces and of the Ministry of Defense so that he could administer the military forces. The first step for assuming total power.

Finally Khalifa Haftar chose to openly take power by force, possibly in virtue of the circumstances which he perceived as being favorable. The ease with which he conquered the oil fields and the country's southern provinces fueled his sense of invincibility. Certainly the help that he received from abroad heightened his sense of impunity.

What about the negotiations?

Unfortunately Libya is not only facing tribal rivalry, the renown hostility between the Tripolitania and Cyrenaica provinces, the insurgence of Islamic extremism and terrorism, the criminal gangs that roam the country and the feud between the Tebu and the Tuareg, but it also owes a tribute to the aims of foreign nations. It is clear from the numerous visits by ambassadors of Haftar and Sarraj in Qatar, Russia, France, Turkey, to name a few. This interest is explained by Libya's strategic placement in the Mediterranean and by its vast oil fields.

But it must also be said that democracy finds no room in Libyan social culture. Notwithstanding the outcome of Haftar's offensive, the result will always be that one individual will prevail over all the others. So why negotiate? Maybe to avert the possibility of a bloodbath in the process, which would trigger other feuds and other vengeance. It's more of a practical issue rather than an attempt at democracy in a country that never practiced it.

KIDNAPPINGS: THE ACTIVITIES OF A 007

The case of the kidnapping of the Italian aid-worker Silvia Costanza Romano, which took place in Kenya on November 20, 2018, raises the issue of what is the procedure to be followed for such cases. There are two main actors: the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the External Information and Security Agency (AISE). The first operates through the embassy in the country where the event takes place and, in this case, out of Nairobi. Instead, AISE works through its local representative.

Both structures operate, as it should be, in coordination with each other. Two channels are activated respectively:

- the embassy turns to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to sensitize the counterpart on the Italian government's concern for the safety of its compatriot;
- the representative of the Intelligence Services, in this case the Bureau Chief, does the same with his local counterpart, specifically the Kenyan National Intelligence Service, monitoring on the ground what the other party has implemented. Investigations are carried out by the Kenyan police who carries out the probe, mans checkpoints or carries out arrests. The result of this activity is continuously communicated to the Italian authorities on the spot.

Two different sets of responsibilities

Although both Italian bodies are important in their dialogue with local institutions, once the Kenyan authorities have been sensitized by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, they have played their role almost completely. The ambassador will remain in continuous contact with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs both in Rome and in Nairobi, he will certainly ask for and obtain a meeting with the Kenyan Interior Minister. He will also be the spokesperson for those Italian investigative bodies working with the local Ministry of Justice. He will also be able to activate and solicit the honorary consul of Malindi, who is territorially competent in the light of where the abduction occurred, the village of Chakama. The same will be possible with the other honorary consul in Mombasa who works in the coastal area of Kenya.

But the operational part, the one that refers to all the initiatives that can be implemented to free the hostage, it falls on the Bureau Chief of the AISE. It is he who continually converses with the local Services, it is he who establishes a direct contact with the police, he is the one who is entitled to provide operational suggestions to the other party, to advise against any operations that are too dangerous, to solicit useful initiatives during the investigations. It is still he who acts as an intermediary between the Italian investigative departments, in this case the ROS (Special Operational Grouping of the Carabinieri), and the local security organizations. It is not interference, obviously it cannot go beyond the limits of insistence, but certainly what he says "must" be considered.

The arms of the Bureau Chief

The Bureau Chief, or rather the one that performs his job well, certainly has an excellent relationship with the National Intelligence Service and this means that the collaboration of the counterpart is not only out of duty, but also out of participation. The Bureau Chief is a bit like the ambassador of AISE in the country, when he speaks he does so on behalf of his Director in Rome and therefore enjoys consideration, perhaps not in public, equal to that of his counterpart of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ambassador.

If he does well, he will have had the time and opportunity to get to know influential local individuals, he will also have the opportunity to lobby his requests with the benefit of these contacts. For obvious reasons of contiguity between the respective jobs in the security field, generally the Chief of Police is one of these.

Another area where AISE develops personal relationships is that of the Italian community residing in Kenya. It is a numerically consistent community and, in this specific case, it has very qualified people inserted in the local social fabric. An awareness-raising activity can also be carried out through these links.

Certainly a lever that can be used with Intelligence Services in this type of bilateral relationship are training courses, an official invitation from the Director to visit Italy, the supply of materials or equipment. These are gestures of consideration that, when applied to the Agencies of developing countries, such as Kenya, have a very high positive spillover coefficient.

A possible negotiation for the release

Although officially government authorities always deny the payment of a ransom, the reality is that when the life or safety of a hostage is at stake, Italy is among those countries that is willing to negotiate for its release. It happened widely in Iraq. It happened recently in Syria.

Obviously it is an activity that takes place secretly with (preferably) or without the assistance of local security forces. In this case the first problem is to find the interlocutor who speaks on behalf of the kidnappers. The second is to evaluate its reliability. In other words, the contractual power at its disposal must be verified. And it must obviously provide evidence that it actually has access to the hostage.

A good part of this activity is always the responsibility of the local Bureau, even if certainly other agents from the Main Office are also involved in the operation. Any negotiation is extremely delicate, generally the ransom is paid in a third country, the timings of the release of the hostage and the payment of the ransom must be well coordinated, other intermediaries are often involved and of which the Bureau Chief probably doesn't know the identity. And when there is money and there is a person's life involved it is good that more people evaluate the initiatives, take responsibility, make the right decisions.

The Bureau and other Intelligence Agencies

In the country in which he resides, the Bureau Chief also develops contacts with his counterparts of other Intelligence Agencies that operate just like he does. These are

contacts that are created in the context of common acquaintances, it is also part of that empathy that brings people who do the same job together and maybe share the same risks.

A Bureau Chief will get to know these colleagues sooner or later, also because identifying them for security purposes is part of his job. He must know under what cover they act, how they are introduced into the local social fabric, what they do and what they look for in their nation's informational priorities. Generally, intelligence agencies, whether friends or foes, do not share information or news, do not carry out joint operations, nor can they be deemed reliable when they share info with you. But, when there is an event like the one that sees the kidnapping of an Italian aid-worker, there is some degree of solidarity. This is so also because the line between crime and terrorism (and the latter affects everyone), in an area close to the border with Somalia, is always very thin. Simply put, we help each other, we give ourselves a hand, we share specific news. It is no longer an intelligence problem with often competing roles, but something different.

In Kenya are deployed the representatives of several Intelligence Services, and some of them are very important. Perhaps the CIA representative could be asked (both from the Main Office in Rome but also from the Bureau Chief) for support in wiretapping, the use of a drone to locate the kidnappers' hideout considering the massive American presence in Djibouti.

What happens in Rome

While agents work on the field in Kenya, emergency units are set up in Rome to follow the event. As regards the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, there is a Crisis Unit which operates mainly in these types of emergencies. It is the structure that dialogues with the ambassador in Nairobi and interfaces with the relatives of the kidnapped aid-worker back in Italy. The Unit continuously communicates the evolution of the investigative activity.

But still in Italy, even AISE has its own Operations Room which follows the world's most important security events around the clock. For the kidnapping of Silvia Costanza Romano this structure has certainly activated a specific desk. All information of interest is communicated to the Italian Prime Minister or to the Undersecretary with responsibility for the Services (AISE depends on the Presidency of the Council of Ministers) through the DIS (Department for Information and Security), which coordinates the activity both of the AISE and the AISI, or, if authorized, directly. The government is therefore continuously informed on the evolution of the case.

If news of interest emerges on the conditions of the compatriot or on the evolution of the investigations, these can be supplied from the AISE also to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to be brought to the knowledge of the relatives.

Useful synergies

Whatever information the Bureau Chief acquires in Nairobi is transmitted directly to Rome and, if there are no contraindications, it is a good rule that the ambassador is also informed at a later date. The same should, indeed "must" happen in the opposite direction.

Synergies are useful to ensure that we avoid overlaps of initiatives, waste of resources that would otherwise be put to better use. Also because, in the end, both the Bureau Chief and the Ambassador need to be informed respectively and act accordingly. It may also happen that either one of them, in a specific moment of the awareness-raising activity, needs the other.

The results

It is clear that, as effective as the awareness-raising activity of the Ambassador or the intervention of the Bureau Chief may be, the success or failure of the activity of the Intelligence Services depends on the investigative capability of the latter. The hunt for kidnappers and the eventual release of the hostage, whose been in the hands of criminals for months, is however also linked to a number of activities which are largely hidden, to a series of characters who move about in the shadows and who will eventually contribute, together with local police, to the ultimate success. Characters, as in the case of the local Bureau Chief, who do not have a face or a name and who once everything is hopefully successful, will not even have the right satisfaction of being cited to Italian public opinion.

THE REACTIONS OF A THREATENED IRAN

On 25 February 2019, taking by surprise those who are interested in Iranian affairs, Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif filed his resignation letter from the post he has held since 2013. The man who had negotiated the 2015 nuclear agreement, the moderate voice in the country's international relations suddenly decided to leave the political scene. However, the resignation was dismissed by President Hassan Rouhani and Zarif remained in place. The gesture was motivated by a series of internal and international events.

International events

The US decision to invalidate the agreement on the Iranian nuclear program was the classic straw that undermined and challenged Zarif's moderate foreign policy. It was, in the eyes of his detractors, a delegitimization of his work. That this agreement is still considered valid by the other signatory countries, such as the European Union, does not change the substance of the event, since the United States is still the most important country sitting at the negotiating table.

Since he took office in the White House, President Donald Trump has carried out an aggressive policy towards Tehran. He did so verbally, systematically, trying to demonize the Iranian theocracy in the eyes of the world. He also did so by announcing and implementing sanctions and threatening the countries that had violated them by continuing to trade, especially oil, with Iran. He also did this by organizing, in Warsaw in February, an international conference generically aimed at the "stabilization of the Middle East", but who was instead dedicated to trying to coagulate international consensus against Iran. He has done so recently by putting the Pasdarans on the list of terrorist groups.

To all this then we must add the continuous visits to the Gulf and the declarations of the various US personalities and envoys. Also in terms of regional foreign policy, Israeli threats and under-the-counter agreements with the Sunni Gulf countries have also raised the level of the threat to Iran.

So many provocations could not come without consequences, even domestically.

The domestic situation

Iran's foreign policy has always fluctuated between two opposing positions: a moderate one, open to dialogue with the outside world; the radical one, therefore more aggressive, aimed at playing and relying on the balance of power in the relationships with other countries. The point of balance between these two trends is the Supreme Guide Ali Khamenei who, from time to time, according to his own assessment of the risks and benefits, obviously based on social stability of the regime, opts to favor or oppose moderate or conservative stances.

It is clear that, by increasing the tension with Israel and neighboring countries and after assessing the danger from American threats, the reaction of Iranian foreign policy can only become a more radical. Zarif became the predestined victim of this tendency.

Another circumstance which should be taken into consideration are the Iranian victories in Syria and against Sunni terrorism, its political-military expansion in the Middle East; all these have certainly fueled the ambitions of those who, domestically in Iran, sympathize with more radical positions both in foreign and domestic politics.

The person who today personifies more than others the extremist wing of Iranian foreign policy, in virtue of the military conquests that have accompanied the struggle against ISIS and the support for the regime of Bashar al Assad, is General Qasem Soleimani, who commands the Al Quds Brigades of the Pasdarans abroad.

Victories on the ground have fueled the prestige of the General who, at least on regional military questions, has become the privileged interlocutor of the Russians, the Turks, the governments of Iraq and Syria and even the Americans. In fact, he represents a parallel diplomacy that for a certain period has been both in agreement and in competition with the diplomacy of Zarif, but which lately seems instead to have entered a collision course with the latter.

Perhaps not coincidentally, Zarif's resignation preceded a State visit to Tehran by Syrian President Bashar Assad – an important event that had been in the wait for 7 years – in which the Supreme Guide Khamenei would be joined by General Soleimani, but not Mohammad Javad Zarif. An institutional rudeness that the Minister of Foreign Affairs perceived as a de-legitimization of his role at the very moment when, after the military defeat of ISIS, the Syrian issue became more political and diplomatic.

The Supreme Council for National Security

Iran's foreign policy is drawn up within this body which is chaired by the President of the Republic Rouhani, a moderate just like Zarif, but who is ultimately subject to the decision of the Supreme Guide who endorses or amends his decisions. There sits the Minister of Defense, the Foreign and Interior Ministers, two representatives of the Guide, the Chief of Staffs of the Armed Forces and that of the Pasdaran, the Parliament Speaker, the Minister of Intelligence, the Head of Justice and, depending on the topics, other ministers.

Security issues dictate foreign decisions and therefore, when these "necessities" prevail, the balance shifts from diplomacy to military or intelligence issues. American threats have certainly pushed Iran in this direction.

The elements of Iranian foreign policy

Since the advent of Khomeini, Iran's foreign policy reflects a country living under siege, surrounded by hostile regional rivals with whom it competes not only for the leadership of the Middle East, but also for religious issues. The competition between Sunnis and Shiites is a push towards extremism.

The situation has worsened with the growing hostility of the US administration which therefore increased the fear of international isolation in Iranian authorities. The war in Iraq and the Syrian crisis have, on the one hand, increased the risks to regional stability, but also provided opportunities for an expansion of Tehran's sphere of influence in the Middle

East. Indeed, Iran develops its own foreign policy based on a pragmatism influenced by events.

Iran under threat

Zarif's reappointment can therefore be read as Khamenei's will to leave the moderate option open. On the one hand, the Supreme Guide supports the growing domestic radicalization of Iranian politics, on the other it leaves room for a moderate foreign policy. This political balancing act is also dictated by prudence in view of next year's parliamentary elections. The vote determines a growing clash between the two souls of Iranian politics and therefore it is not excluded that the country's foreign policy, with or without Zarif, will be affected.

The greater the perception of an external threat, the more Iranian public opinion tends to shift to radical positions.

The US Administration, through a series of statements by President Trump, has also tried to support Iranian opposition in its attempt to get rid of the current theocratic system. A hope that does not take into account the fact that the Iranians, when faced with an external danger, have the capacity to come together under the banner of nationalism.

In this regard, it would be enough to take a look at the recent history of the country: in February 1979, the Ayatollah Khomeini arrived in Tehran in the wake of a revolution that saw the overthrow of the Shah after a series of rallies, clashes and attacks. A country weakened by the aftermath of a revolution and civil war suffered, a year later – we are in September 1980 – the military attack by Saddam Hussein. Faced with such a threat, the Iranian people regroup, forget divisions and resentments. The war will last for eight years and will cost nearly one million victims on the Iranian side.

Furthermore, apart from Iranian nationalism, we must not forget another detail: the United States had initially tried to support Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi and supported Saddam Hussein in the war against Iran. If the US continues to define Iran a "Rogue State", the Iranians have all the reasons to continue labeling the United States as the "Great Satan".