Med-Or Special Report

The Silent Enemy

Presence and evolution of the jihadist threat in the Broader Mediterranean

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Abstract

Jihadist threats in the geopolitical area of the "Broader Mediterranean" have certainly not disappeared, only taken on a different shape. Future mutations will be even more rapid and unpredictable: this is precisely why preventative and counteraction strategies need to be developed both nationally and at the North Atlantic Alliance-level.

The Apparent Silence

In recent years, the phenomenon of jihadist terrorism has gradually faded away, going from being a widely perceived real threat to becoming more punctual, jagged and relatively less recognized by the Western public, which has, on the other hand, also been increasingly emotionally involved by the emergence of new global geopolitical crises including, above all, the war in Ukraine.

However, it is important not to make the mistake of assuming that a phenomenon's eclipse corresponds to its extinction. That would be a serious mistake.

Behind the scenes of the geopolitical scenario, terrorism has increased in proselytes, methods of implementation and, more importantly, it has expanded geographically.

It is no coincidence that such "apparent silence" has coincided with an expansion of jihadism to new parts of the world, increasingly penetrating those geopolitical gaps where the fragility of political power and the weakening of the state dimension have become more acute in recent years. I refer especially to the former Asian Soviet republics, the Horn of Africa, the Sahel and sub-Saharan Africa.

In addition, an increasingly evident correlation has emerged between the rise in terrorism's radicalization and the emergence of new global challenges of various kinds: climatic and environmental, such as water shortages, food shortages, and climate change, circumstances that have exacerbated the situation in areas already affected by state fragility and government crises. Recent examples precisely include what has occurred in Sudan and Niger, which represent only the latest among the crises that have broken out in this area.

Looking with a long-term perspective at the history of jihadist terrorism, it is possible to argue that these episodes of apparent eclipse are actually moments of significant reorganizational activism, often anticipating alarming events and increasing threat levels.

The strategic scenario in the upcoming years will be a mixed one.

The tactical-strategic clash between powers and macro aggregates, inaugurated by the Ukraine affair, will coexist with hotter phenomena of low-intensity confrontation typical of deterrence. In this context terrorism could have a wide margin for growth, looming as a potential asymmetric weapon deployable by the actors in the conflict, a true proxy weapon.

The current "apparent silence" of terrorism, in fact, runs the risk of exploding by adding to the existing crisis scenarios, substantially worsening their pervasiveness and danger.

For this reason, it is important to analyze the changes that have affected the two major organizations that have so far disputed the supremacy of the jihadist scenario, Al Qa'ida and Daesh, while being aware that -alongside them - today there are also new forces and acronyms that can corroborate and extend the severity of the threat on the planet.

The Return of Al Qa'ida

In recent years Al Qa'ida has never disappeared.

And it is well known how the idea of alternating between moments of hiding and re-gurgitations of anti-Western activism, advocated by Al Zawahiri's Qa'idist doctrine, clashed - in the past - with the organization's desire for overexposure sought by Al Zarqawi, the basis of the origin of Daesh thinking.

In fact, Al Qa'ida has never been seduced by the desire to establish in the immediate term a so-called "grand caliphate, home of global jihadism"; rather, it has always projected - as is also evident in the text of Osama Bin Laden's "Program for the New World Order" - the realization of an Islamic caliphate to be established in the long term.

Bin Laden's project highlights the need for a season of gradualism and selection of enemies to counter, starting with the need to first subvert power within Arab countries and then gradually increase the number of anti-Western fronts until such a quantity of unstable areas were generated that the West would hardly be able to cope with.

This strategy would have required a phase of reorganization capable of inducing Western governments to underestimate the threat and, in order to accomplish this, a period of "apparent silence" would have been indispensable, in order to avoid becoming the focus of constant international media attention.

Therefore, it can be stated that Al Qa'ida has never abandoned this theory, which it has pursued over time, finding new strategic forms of projection. Thus, today a "more political" component of the organization can be found, for example, in the Afghan context and which, after the withdrawal of the NATO contingent, contributed to the approval of the creation of the current Taliban government, of which many exponents continue to deal with Al Qa'ida.

It is from Afghanistan that Al Qa'ida could conceivably have an influence on all those countries that - all along - would like to follow the path for the establishment of an Islamic State, and it is for this reason that a "more political Al Qa'ida" poses just as serious a threat as a "military Al Qa'ida": it could create a wave of legitimization of jihadism that would become relatively less aggressive from a terrorist perspective but substantially faster in its ability to impact Islamic society in terms of radicalization.

This situation, which the West might overlook, should be considered, on the contrary, an insidious threat, in addition to the fact that - in any case - a second "extremely more belligerent" spirit still coexists in Al Qa'ida.

As of today, intelligence agencies around the world would seem to point to Saif Al Adel as the new leader of Al Qa'ida - although this appointment has not been official-ly noted. But it is important to keep in mind that Al Adel would seem to be the com-mander of precisely that branch of Qa'idism that is most anchored in the traditional

origin of the organization, capable of planning attacks and ushering in a new season of tension toward the West.

In this regard, it is difficult to ignore the fact that Al Adel is currently in Iran accompanied by part of Al Qa'ida's leadership group, and, in relation to the Islamic Republic of Iran's traditional mode of operation in other contexts - where the use of insurgent/terrorist organizations as its local proxies has been demonstrated - it is not difficult to imagine a possible facilitation of certain dynamics that would add up to the classic threat of Al Qa'ida its possible use as a proxy.

One of the ways in which the military Al Qa'ida manifests its presence and, at the same time, its divergence from the political Al Qa'ida is through the organization of demonstrations that blatantly target the West and overflow the will to be exclusively a political entity.

This is because in the face of a new attack, a renewed season of uncertainty, politics would risk becoming embroiled, becoming a target. Ultimately, however, it is likely that between these two forms of the same organization (political Al Qa'ida and military Al Qa'ida) the difference is not so marked, and that what is perceived today as competitiveness is actually destined to merge later.

In any case, these two souls combined make Al Qa'ida a presence that is reorganizing itself in different areas of the planet: primarily in the new empty spaces of the former Asian Soviet republics bordering Afghanistan and in the pro-qa'idist forces ranging from the Middle East to the entire frontline of the Sahel and the Horn of Africa, where several organizations, in recent years, while disputing membership in either the Daesh "brand" or the Al Qa'ida "brand," have never broken away from Qa'idism.

This tension, which we can define as strategic-ideological, risks being the real glue of an Al Qa'ida that could become very active in the future vis-à-vis the West and could be so precisely by knowing how to play with a sometimes more political configuration and sometimes more military configuration, with the sole purpose of destabilizing the West and expanding that sense of insecurity that we are already experiencing.

It should not be forgotten that Al Qa'ida was acting in a world that was relatively quiet at the time, compared to what we are seeing now, when it made its debut on September 11, 2001, with the most heinous atrocity in its history. In fact, a two-year period of economic unrest began at that time, during which 9/11 shook the foundations of the financial system in the West.

What then, in a world where there is now a conflict of deterrence between the large aggregates (the United States, Europe, China and Russia) and the emerging players, and a more strategically complex scenario, can be a threat that adds to the global confrontation that has opened up in recent years, first with the Mediterranean crisis and then with the Ukraine affair?

The extent to which this kind of threat will further increase the perception of insecurity and make the global strategic future more fractious is not yet entirely clear.

Al Qa'ida has chosen a double register for this very reason: we will live in an era where tension will necessitate multiple registers, and the phenomenon of terrorism has taken advantage of these years of eclipse to organize itself in an extremely more complex manner.

The True Face of Daesh

After the fall of the Islamic State, the question of whether Daesh was completely defeated or still capable of posing a threat to the West arose. It was an unnecessary question.

Daesh, in fact, remains extremely dangerous, not least because of the context in which it operates: the Middle East, parts of Africa and Afghanistan's Khorasan province.

Several changes occurred when the anti-Daesh coalition defeated the forces that ruled the Islamic State.

The first is that much of the leadership and organizational backbone of Daesh, the offspring of the Baathists and the security dimension of the Saddam period, was capable of camouflage, dividing and scattering across the territory of Syria and Iraq in a very small form, but still capable of exerting significant influence on the local society.

This has allowed the organization to hibernate while waiting for a more favorable occasion to resume its operations.

Although many of the organization's political and military executives and commanders have come to be targeted by subsequent operations, these Daesh enclaves still remain.

Two epiphenomena in particular can be seen outside the area where the Islamic State was established.

The first, territorially tangible, is the Daesh organization in Afghan Khorasan, where it has encountered fierce pushback from Al Qa'ida in recent years. However, it has also been able to branch out from Afghanistan, trying to work prospectively in order to attack the West.

The second phenomenon is much more intangible: the Islamic State had established a brand-new, entirely media-driven form of jihadist warfare.

The expertise of some former agents of Saddam Hussein's intelligence services who joined Daesh was crucial in this regard because it allowed for the propagation of the idea of a nascent state, a flag, and a genuine codification of ideology around the world using language familiar to Westerners.

Thus, a global media jihad had been launched, resulting in the emergence of a new phenomenon: sympathizers who had joined the cause of a new homeland of radicalism from thousands of miles away.

This has served as jihadism's leaven and, even today, its entire potential is not fully understood.

We are faced, then, with a conundrum: how capable will this be of affecting the future of jihadism and proselytizing in Europe?

With this shift, the preventive countering of radicalization becomes crucial, and is the real innovation of Daesh, the one that has succeeded to influence, unlike other prerogatives, even Al Qa'ida's parent organization.

Today, no jihadist organization can function without a more "Western" communicative dimension: a dimension that is no longer merely incidental, but foundational to the jihadist offensive.

There is no longer any attack that does not include media and communication management.

This is precisely why we must pay close attention to how this phenomenon evolves and how much it has germinated new possibilities for attack in recent years, and then explore what the frontiers of the new waves of media attacks are.

Undoubtedly this aspect of jihadism's action is the one that has the fewest boundaries: it can target the entire West, Asia, and even South America.

After all, there are very evident indicators of a communicative proliferation of an extremely fruitful signal, as documented by several intelligence agencies.

And this has, among other things, significantly reduced the age of proselytizing.

In fact, when you consider the so-called foreign fighters during the Afghan war and the rise of Al Qa'ida, you realize that you were dealing with a phenomenon in which the average age of those who went to fight in Afghanistan and became radicalized was around 30 years old.

These were, therefore, mature individuals who had already completed their path of radicalization. With Daesh, we immediately noticed an increase in numbers and a significant decrease in the average age, which also affected large segments of the underage population, all the way down to people in the middle years of the study, young individuals who were often unfamiliar with jihadist radicalization, but instead responded to this "media fad" that Daesh was able to create.

If we combine these two aspects today - Daesh's role in the exponential rise in the threat of media proselytizing and the persistence of cells that continue to inspire and strive for the Daesh organization's resurgence - we realize that we are facing a threat that is far from negligible.

Is the competition between Al Qa'ida and Daesh still going on? Does it still have any reason to exist?

This is one of the great dilemmas we will face in the future and one that will not be clarified in a short time because, while both phenomena are increasing in rivalry, there are already indicators of dialogue and cooperation in certain areas (primarily in Africa, but also in Asia).

The possibility that these two faces of jihadism will be kept distinct - for as long as it is convenient for them to be - and that they may later find a unified verticalization, especially if they were to become a form of massive proxy entity used to destabilize ever-widening conflicts and geographic tensions, cannot be overlooked.

Today it is evident that we are dealing with two separate entities, both of which are attempting not just to survive but also to reorganize.

Both of their existences have tainted one another and, more importantly, changed their methods: some elements contained in the language of Inspire and Al Qa'ida's more typical propaganda have in fact become common heritage. From this point of view, many of the minor organizations that do not belong to either Al Qa'ida or Daesh but are inspired by their content and operational practices are today practically indistinguishable.

This is why the phenomenon needs to be fought in all of its facets: it is our responsibility to keep track of the historical development of these organizations, united by a common destiny and, above all, common goals.

New empty spaces and the "crescent of terror"

One enduring feature of the first thirty years of jihadist terrorism has been the extraordinary correspondence between its evolution and the expansion of so-called "empty spaces" that offer ground for geopolitical fractures (particularly civil wars, State failures, loss of control over borders and institutional prerogatives).

This linkage is evidently mirrored upon world maps. After all, it also reflects Bin Laden's vision as expressed in his "For a New World Order" program.

Looking beyond the Afghan contingency, we can identify the main expansion areas of jihadist terrorism with the "empty spaces" delivered by geopolitics throughout the last decades: the entire Middle East, Yemen, Libya, the Sinai, the Sahel, the former Soviet republics bordering Afghanistan. Then the Horn of Africa, Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan.

Today we doubtlessly face the endemic spread of terrorism within such empty spaces.

Two such areas ought to be highlighted. First, strong signals of radicalization have been registered across the former Soviet republics of Central Asia, from Uyghur China to Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan. These occurrences stem from several external indicators as well as from local instances of radicalization. Many perpetrators of recent terrorist attacks hailed from these areas: bombings in the US (such as the Boston attack) come to mind, as well as the Stockholm attack or operation Takim.

We therefore face new, worrying trends across an area that will play an increasingly crucial role in the wake of the Ukraine conflict and the realization of the new Chinese Silk Road, threatening to become a new hotspot for jihadist terrorism in the years to come.

The second macro-area is the broad range of the African Sahel. Terror groups affiliated to Al-Qaeda and Daesh, as well as spontaneous formations stemming from local insurrectionism, have become increasingly active across the territorial expanse stretching from Mauritania to the Gulf of Aden and to Somalia and Sudan, affecting the Sahel and its borders with the Maghreb.

These two areas risk becoming a new breeding ground for international terrorism alongside established theatres.

It is therefore necessary to understand why such areas have become the epicenter for the proliferation of new empty spaces, the phenomena affecting them and the driving factors behind the local increase in jihadist terrorism.

Let us start from the Asian sector.

In the wake of the fall of the Soviet Union, the former Soviet republics of Central Asia have undertaken different paths to State-building.

In several cases this has led to the formation of autocratic regimes that often relied on deep ties with the Russian establishment. One key result has consequently been the repressive approach to State minorities, ethnically diverse and often tribal in nature, such as the Turkic groups scattered from Uyghur China to Turkmenistan and Uzbeki-

stan. Such groups are often excluded from political power and discriminated in their customs and identity.

The combination of such a treatment and the closeness to the core of Afghan jihadism has engendered the radicalization of multiple instances of ethnic insurrection.

The attempt to resist forms of secularization and massification often associated with the new forms of State power has sown fertile ground for the radicalization of Muslim minorities.

In the early days of Afghanistan's struggle against jihadism and before the rise of the Taliban, when the country strongly opposed and ostracized terror groups, the porous mountain border between Afghanistan and the former Soviet republics registered an influx of jihadist militants into the new State entities, thereby favoring their radicalization.

Moreover, China's overwhelming economic influence and determinism often resulted in the stripping away of minorities' religious prerogatives and identity by the new autocracies.

All this has contributed to create a geographical and cultural vacuum that makes Central Asia one of the most important breeding grounds of jihadist terrorism in the world.

Footage released by Daesh that shows entire Kazak and Caucasic communities joining the ranks of the Islamic State stands witness to the importance of a trend that will influence the evolution of global jihadism for years to come.

Opposition to the new Silk Road and to certain forms of Chinese influence will be strengthened considerably by such communities and by the capacity for revitalization of jihadist terrorism in Europe and the West.

The circulation of people and ideas from Central Asia may therefore imbue jihadist radicalism in the West with new vitality – a risk that has been heightened enormously by the Ukrainian conflict. Militias hailing from that part of the world have gradually taken part in the fighting, often against Russia, and may create new pockets of radicalization in Eastern Europe.

A separate line of reasoning, more complex and articulate, must be applied to the African theatre stretching from Mauritania to the Horn of Africa and linking the Atlantic and Pacific side of the continent across the semi-desertic expanse of the Sahel – the so-called sub-Saharan range.

This area has historically cradled several jihadist movements at different times.

A first historical phase saw the spread of jihadist movements connected to Algeria and its conflict of national liberation and independence.

Part of those fighters moved to Afghanistan to fight off the Soviet invasion and subsequently became affiliated with Qaidism: others remained in the area to establish Al Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb, a formation active in the desertic ranges between Algeria, Libya and the Sahel.

These organizations were then joined by others such as the Al-Macina Liberation Front, Ansar al-Dine, Al Morabitoun and others that built scattered enclaves across the Sahel.

Their motivations always differed. Some followed the wake of insurgencies against Western presence and pro-Western governments, often expressing grievances related to the marginalization of ethnic groups across the Sahel heartland. Others followed a more clearly qaidist inspiration and subsequently joined Daesh, following in the footsteps of traditional jihadist movements.

The bulk of those formations has historically been divided, but the 2017 alliance between its main groups strongly stabilized endemic terrorist activity in the area. This part of Africa highlights the relationship between geopolitical dynamics and endemic terrorism: the Sahel is home to the most economically depressed countries of the continent, suffering the most from climate change, food and water scarcity, pervasive informal economies. These areas often lack a reliable source of income for most of the population and are characterized by a difficult political history that has led countries such as France to strengthen their security footprint and undertake military missions such as Operation Barkhane: all within a context in which socioeconomic grievances strongly interconnect with ethnic insurgencies.

Part of the area also holds significant geostrategic importance due to the presence of crucial economic resources such as uranium and rare earths, which make it ground for competition among major powers. The combination of economic and political risk has allowed terrorism to graft onto personal grievances.

It is a trend first observed in southern Libya, which then spread across the entirety of the Sahel.

The region has historically hosted different forms of illicit trade, such as drugs – coming from South America through Mauritania and across the desert, then reaching the West, often by way of the Balkans – and human trafficking.

In the seemingly bygone age of the slave trade, Arab slavers ranged across this route in search of the forced labor that would populate the colonies in North and South America.

Nomadic groups across the Sahel often rely on informal economies for their sustenance.

The drying up of Lake Chad and the lack of water for agriculture and sheep-farming has forced an ever-greater share of the population to turn to illegal forms of trade.

Jihadist movements understood that such reliance offered them a double edge: it could fill their coffers and nourish terrorist sympathies in segments of the population that had thus far proved difficult to sway.

Involving the population in illicit trafficking would also ensure their tolerance of the terror networks running the operations.

Moreover, the West has usually left direct intervention within the purview of single States – such as France – and has appeared ineffective and divided in its attempt to restore order.

Here, a "perfect storm" comes into play.

New actors such as Turkey – able and willing to pursue a neo-Ottoman policy – and old ones such as Russia were clever enough to exploit the power vacuum through non-classical strategies, seeking to upset existing equilibria and supplant the role of

the West in Africa. We saw it happen in Libya, in between Turkish presence and the Wagner Group.

Wagner serves as a proxy militia: a sort of "new Foreign Legion" distantly similar to the colonial corps created by the French, which offers a military force that is both less accountable and easier to deploy.

Wagner initially played a support role for failing States who could not adequately contain terrorist threats: it has been the case of Mali – where conflict is again erupting between the government and the Tuareg rebel forces, which are reportedly advancing in the country's northern reaches – and subsequently of several other Sahelian States.

Subsequently, however, Wagner has become both a standing feature of these regimes and a subversive force within them, carrying out destabilizing activities even after the death of its founder, Evgenij Prigožin: an event that may further increase the margins for uncertainty.

Recent developments in Sudan and Niger provide two among several examples of just such an uncertainty. Through the broad range of Western and Central Africa – which registered, in Gabon, the eight coups in three years across the continent – and particularly across the Sahel, Africa can be split into two halves, exploiting endemic terrorism and trafficking to destabilize Europe and the West.

The empty space of the Sahel and the combination of different kinds of threat – terrorism, trafficking and proxy activity from spoiler countries – can turn the area into a base of operations against Europe and the West.

Moreover, this part of the world threatens to coalesce – as it happened across the Sinai and may happen across Somalia and Yemen through the Gulf of Aden – into a "crescent of terror" both ideal and geographical in nature. One that crosses Afghanistan, the Middle East and Africa to encircle Europe and the West.

A "crescent of terror" that is also an explicit callback to Bin Laden's program of threat proliferation and the unification of the Arab world under the banner of a radical, bellicose Caliphate.

A new threat that may – in light also of recent developments in Palestine and Syria – increase the pressure on a Western world already worn out by the Ukraine conflict and its consequences over the European and NATO system.

The Threats: Caucasus and Balkans

It seems increasingly clear that the events connected to the war in Ukraine are also opening implications for the development of jihadist terrorism.

There are two areas of concern - to be perfectly frank, these were already of concern before the war -: the Caucasus and the Balkans, which, for different reasons, have represented, over the last twenty years, areas in which jihadism has taken root particularly well.

These are not classic empty spaces of geopolitical order; these are areas in which several factors are mixed, as they are regions - the Caucasus because of Russian and

Turkish influence, and the Balkans because of the past wars in the former Yugoslavia - in which there has been a real fracture.

But beyond this, there is an identity problem: in these areas the religion is divided between the Muslim and the Orthodox sides, where the identity and ethnic clash has had peaks of great tension, that have never subsided, and which today may represent a very important driving force for jihadism.

The Chechen issue has been going on in the Caucasus for several years.

The Chechens today are strongly implicated in the events in Ukraine due to the commitment that Kadyrov has put on Putin's side against the Ukrainian army, and also due to the speculative attitude of a part of the radical Chechen Muslim world which decided to fight against Kadyrov on the side of the Ukrainians.

This is likely to be added to the fact that a substantial part of the Chechen diaspora in the Western world has embarked on a perceptible path of radicalization in recent years, and at the same time has become heavily involved in the dynamics of illegality - arms trafficking, drug trafficking and prostitution - in many countries in Europe.

The European intelligence and police forces somehow keep under control and try to repress as much as possible this flow of illegality that often borders and mixes with radicalization paths. For this reason, the Chechen diaspora can be an important and substantial source of growth of jihadism in Europe and it risks being even more so due to the events of the war in Ukraine. The latter are contributing to exacerbating the radicalization paths that overlap illegality and terrorism, taking advantage of a network of organized groups, often armed, throughout the western region.

Looking at the latest European attacks, moreover, it becomes clear that some of the terrorists had dealings with this world, either because they were being supplied with weapons and equipment by the Chechens, or because they were Chechen nationals.

Similar remarks can be made in relation to the Balkans, where, however, the situation is extremely complex since the former Yugoslavia was in the throes of overcoming the conflict, which had a primarily ethnic-identitarian character.

From this point of view, it is quite evident that the legacy of those conflicts was a fruitful sprout for those who wanted to continue the fight against the oppression against a battered Muslim world.

The image of Srebrenica and the ethnic cleansing during the years of the former Yugoslav war is still very strong - and jihadist enclaves have taken root in some countries (Kosovo, Bosnia, Macedonia), being frequently the offspring of the mujaheddin who went to fight in the former Yugoslav wars.

These highly closed communities, which are secluded and have represented a perennial threat to Europe - and in some ways also a logistical base which has helped the penetration of manpower for terrorism - are unfortunately still active.

In fact, in the Balkans in recent years there has been no strong and unitary policy to prevent radicalization – and it was something that we had hoped for in our work at NATO - thereby fostering a significant growth in the number of sympathizers in parallel with the development of Daesh, which in its most acute and intense phase has shown particular attention to proselytism in the Balkans.

We all remember the video "Honor is in Jihad" which, starting from the Christian persecution of Muslims in the Middle Ages, led all the way to Srebrenica and the desire for ethnic cleansing, identifying terrorism and the Islamic State as the path to liberation for Muslims from the oppression of the Serbs and of the non-Muslim part of the Balkans.

It is a frightening and at the same time dangerous video, which attracted many proselytes in the Daesh period. It should not be forgotten that Muhaxheri, the so-called "butcher of the Balkans" in the ranks of Daesh, came from Kosovo, and that many of the IS fighters reached the new bastion of jihadism from the Balkans.

Even in our country, if we consider the events of Sefqet Krasniqi or Bilal Bosnić, who were eventually arrested, pro-Jihadist proselytism was very often linked to elements from the Balkans.

The weapons used during the Paris attacks came from the Balkans, like the attempted assaulters on the Rialto Bridge in Venice, arrested by a brilliant Italian operation.

This was also the case for the Vienna terrorist attack.

Therefore, there is a very strong link between terrorism in Europe and the Balkan affiliation.

The Balkans are now a fundamental crossroads for the fight against terrorism in Europe and, unfortunately, due to the war in Ukraine, there is a risk that they will be even more so. Actually, pro-Russian sovereignism is very strong in some countries such as Serbia and it theorizes the Balkans to be free again from the Muslim presence and to be linked to an idea of orthodox and ethnically pure identity, producing the consolidation of an ever-stronger jihadist radicalism as an antithesis to this phenomenon.

Apparently, the efforts already made are not enough. Europe needs to push the local governments in the Balkan area - especially those wishing to join the European Union - to provide themselves with a double strategy: the repressive one - which already exists - and the preventive one. It is, therefore, clear that the Balkans' fragility is the ease with which media jihadism can attract sympathizers motivated by a new cause and by a will antithetical to the sovereignist proselytism emanating from Russia and Serbian nationalism.

There is a need to build a real policy on this point, which has so far been pursued separately by the EU states and should instead be undertaken by both NATO and the European Union.

From the dangers that can come from the Caucasus and the Balkans a new upsurge of European terrorism can result, and therefore taking care of these two areas is, after the war in Ukraine, an absolute priority for all EU states and, above all, for our country.

The European Stage

To conclude, it is increasingly evident that this future dynamic of jihadist terrorism sees Europe as its natural stage. There will be an expansion into Africa and Asia, as already analyzed: these will be the new bases of terrorism, the new hub from which it will start and spread.

But terrorism, which after the advent of media-jihad needs a stage to function at

its best, can only find this dimension in Europe. Because Europe is the place where all those contradictions converge today, such as the clash between sovereignty and democracy and an idea of a society suspended between contrasts and forms of inclusion, contributing to amplifying the reactions provoked by terrorist dynamics.

This has been the case in recent years and will likely be in the future, as the events of the war in Ukraine make the European population even more vulnerable. It will be a season during which the attempts to realize structured and organized attacks will coexist with single aggressors, lone wolves, homemade and rudimentary assaults.

What matters is to feed the feeling of insecurity that underlies the logic of internal clash in a society that would like to recover the identity proper to European culture, in opposition to the emergence of a radicalism that is associated with immigration and to the presence of populations from the global South.

It is precisely this dynamic that makes Europe the natural stage for terrorism.

In order to meet this challenge, we need to invest in prevention. If we were to frame the greatest threat to Europe – apart from the attacks that can come from organized networks described so far – this would be the ability of media-jihadism to attract proselytes in the younger generations. An army of sympathizers who can potentially go into action and be the fuel of the external will – coming from these new empty spaces and these new scenarios of terrorism – to hit Europe.

That is why it is very important to continue the path of prevention, as Europol very wisely said in its last report, and as we have been advocating for years.

Together with Stefano Dambruoso, we had worked on the law on the preventive fight against jihadist radicalization in Italy: a law that has never been approved and which should instead, in an extremely bipartisan manner, be a central part of the legislative planning of our Parliament, at a standstill with the 2015 decree of which we had the honor of being rapporteurs, but which would need to be implemented because of the dynamic described herein.

We cannot wait for the problem to erupt in order to tackle it.

Several actions would need to be taken: the first is to provide Italy with a prevention instrument and make it parallel to the anti-terrorism decree.

Similarly, if we want to overcome radicalization and solve the problems that can potentially come from the other side of the Mediterranean, we need to turn them into opportunities and invest in prevention and aid measures. This is a challenging idea that should involve both Italy and Europe.

Secondly, there is a need to standardize, or at least create a compatibility, between the legislative dimensions related to terrorism among European and NATO countries.

All states should develop both a repressive and a preventive strategy in their legislation and coordinate their operational activities to make them similar.

Cooperation between police and intelligence forces is not enough: there is a need for similar tools that can be used with analogy, inspired by the same principles and

operational methods, and that concern not only the sphere of counterterrorism but also other regulatory aspects.

From this point of view, it is necessary to have an operational standard in Europe that allows for a more effective counterterrorism strategy.

Thirdly, this practice should be extended to neighboring and more worrying areas, primarily the Balkans.

Europe should, therefore, take on the burden of building a continental counterterrorism dynamic and, subsequently, there is a need to deploy a new season of aid to the other side of the Mediterranean.

We have been talking about this, as Med-Or Foundation, over the past year with great determination. Meeting the Presidents of Niger, Somalia, and many Sahel countries, we realized that the fight against terrorism is part of everyday life. And we won't win the challenge if we do not help these countries to stabilize their territories, and to prevent such area to become the new hub of terrorism – due to the economic and environmental difficulties of this whole strip of Africa.

On this point, Europe should take the lead. It should invest in technology, in its capacity to intervene, in financial aid to develop African economies and to provide these countries with the proper means to fight terrorism.

If Europe won't do this, others will, as the Russians with the Wagner Group and other countries, such as Turkey, are doing for other purposes than the European ones.

We want the idea of a democratic and peaceful society to triumph and the possibility to establish in these territories a free trade area, as Europe had imagined in the Barcelona process of 1998.

To do this, we need financial resources and concrete aid, including anti-terrorism policies.

Much of our future depends on our generosity and, in order to combat tomorrow's terrorism, today's commitment and consistency are essential, which means an enormous assumption of responsibility for Europe.

Conclusions

To envisage the possible evolutionary scenarios of jihadist terrorism in the coming years, we cannot help but notice that this could, unfortunately, add up to other types of threats. It may in some ways become complementary to them in some respects and contribute to the future era of global security that we might call "the transition to Tiepid Warfare."

The world now knows more than just the "cold weight" of deterrence, which has grown stronger, broader, and more complex over time as more actors seek to develop offensive nuclear technologies and introduce new forms of deterrence in space, cyberspace, and communication.

In this new phase, deterrence will have to coexist with low-intensity, hybrid conflict phenomena, which are not always conducted with conventional actions and by tra-

ditional armies, but by proxies, private militias, and hybrid forms of conflict, as well as rising tensions and rivalries among major global powers.

Within this framework, terrorism could become a key component in undermining and worsening some existing rifts. For these reasons, in this increasingly conflict-ridden international context, the developing cleavage between the West and the rest of the world is a cause for concern.

The unexpected rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran, key players in the intra-Muslim tension of recent years, which has been so riddled with jihadist terrorism, may close a wound, but it may open new ones since it is a relationship that begins by trying to leave the West aside, not least because of its shortcomings and limitations.

It is especially important for the West to look at what is happening in opposition to its model of international order, which is strengthening autocracies and undemocratic systems.

This reality cannot be separated from the emergence of jihadist terrorism: if the geopolitical confrontation worsens, terrorism may find fertile ground to create a new split, precisely on the fault line of the West - rest of the world confrontation. This has the potential to deepen this dichotomy and combine it with other unsolved contradictions of the West, such as the issue of immigration and integration of varied communities in a continent with such a low demographic rate.

This could be the real discriminator, capable of altering electoral behavior, politics, and the resilience of Western systems. That is why it is important for the West not to be myopic and to be able to spread the culture of rights and to understand, without entrenching itself in its own certainties, the fractures that drive the planet.

The West will win this challenge if it learns to see beyond itself, if it returns to being a beacon of generosity for the rest of the world, because democracy and freedom cannot exist without generosity.

The fate of counterterrorism will be determined by this, and the West will have to prepare itself to win the tepid war that we now, unfortunately, face, starting with Ukraine and the crises that much of the African continent is experiencing.

Overcoming today's challenges, even those that can only be guessed at right now, is the only way to guarantee tomorrow's security.

The Author

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