

The Persian Gulf region has certainly been one of the most affected by the terrorist action, with the involvement of three large-scale regional conflicts in Syria, Iraq and Yemen, and a strong regional tension in recent years.

It is in fact the area of the Persian Gulf that where there are some of the major threats from international terrorism, such as in the case of Al Qaeda and the Islamic State, and where are fought some of the most cruel conflicts for the competition and ideological dominance of the most radical factions of jihadism.

A preliminary interpretation

Outlining a picture of the influence of terrorist organizations in such a complex and heterogeneous region as the Middle East - and the Persian Gulf in particular - has prompted the need to define what terrorism means and what organizations are universally recognized as such.

Although paradoxical this premise may appear, the widespread local conflict, the different interests and the very heterogeneous political, ideological, and confessional positions of the region impose at the same time taking particular caution in the interpretation of the phenomenon and in identifying the structures which can formally and universally fall into the ally of terrorist organizations as such recognized by the international community¹.

Most states in the region have its own classification of terrorist organizations, which often represent the result of bilateral conflicts that do not necessarily concern third countries, making the adoption of classifications of local security not only useless but often damaging.

The Persian Gulf regional political narrative is not new to the frequent, as inappropriate, accusation of terrorism as a state of affairs, as is often the narrative of the relationship between Iran and the United States, or between Saudi Arabia and Iran, where the exchange of reciprocal accusations of terrorism usually reflects on the general level, not so much the organization of specific attacks, as broadly as possible, political and military conduct against one or more regional actors.

Only a few countries have been able to conceive a definite definition of terrorism in legal terms, while there is no general international understanding that could serve as the basis for the interpretation of terrorism globally. Much labile is therefore the interpretative profile, especially when extended to the component of funding and ideological support, which often implies a direct responsibility of the sovereign states in eating through third structures the proliferation of acts officially recognized by the states themselves as terrorists².

An analysis of terrorist activities in the Persian Gulf region, therefore, could not ignore the roles and responsibilities of many sovereign states in the region and the overall framework for ideological and financial support to the terrorist organizations themselves, but creating diplomacy embarrassments that few states can afford to manage politically and economically.

It follows that the perception of the terrorist threat is at the same time a global perception as often an individual fact of individual states, which tend to attribute to the action of specific adversarial forces a connotation not always shared by the international community.

1 Paul R. Pillar, "Interpreting Terrorist Waves", *The National Interest*, July 5th 2016, <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/paul-pillar/interpreting-terrorist-waves-16859>

2 James Horley and Ian McPhil, "What's in a name? Interpreting terrorism from the perspective of personal construct Theory", in Marianne Vardalos, Guy Kirby Letts, Herminio Meireles Teixeira, Anas Karzai, Jane Haig, *Engaging Terrorism, a critical and interdisciplinary approach*, Brown Walker Press 2009, p. 119

Al Qaeda and the Islamic State

The two major terrorist organizations that have been engaged in the most recent past, and continue to engage today, the international community and local actors in the Persian Gulf region are undoubtedly those of Al Qaeda and the Islamic State.

The Islamic State is in fact a crippling of the Iraqi structure of Al Qaeda, but it has contrasted with an independent and conflictual posture characterized by the same ambition of territorial hegemony. The Islamic State has, however, been able to capitalize on both the greater military experience of its members - largely from the ranks of the elite forces of the former Iraqi regime - and of a more modern and efficient communication capacity, which, through spectacularization of the violence, he soon became acquainted with the land by gaining a territorial domination which had never been conquered by any of the jihadist organizations.

Both the Islamic State and Al Qaeda are an active part of the conflict in Syria and in Iraq, where they are at the same time opposed to each other and to local government forces, in turn supported by international coalitions present in the territory.

Al Qaeda has reacted to the crisis of the fragmentation of Iraqi jihadism with a policy of degradation that has given rise to regional organizations that emerged above all after the Syrian conflict and became in a short time an integral part of the military fabric that was facing in breaking Syria starting in 2011. In particular, I am honored by the honors of the Syrian conflict before the jihadist organization Jabhat al-Nusra, a direct Qaedist emanation, and then its evolution Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, built on an improbable as little successful maquillage, in order to make it possible to present in the eyes of the international community an organization that is now too compromised with that jihadism that the same international community fights on multiple fronts³.

Al Qaeda first, and the Islamic State then, have been able to capitalize on the growth opportunity resulting from the post-2003 Iraqi institutional collapse and the subsequent rise to the power of the Shiite majority, who was not free from responsibility in defining a sectarian policy that it has exacerbated the Sunni people, pushing them to embrace the radicalism of both organizations as a protection of their own interests and their communities⁴.

The Syrian conflict, arising as a result of protests against the repression of the Damascus regime in some provinces and subsequently fueled by apparent external interference in attacking Syria as a central element of Iran's proxy system, has led to the possibility of expanding Islamic State immediately after the fall of the Sunni-majority provinces of Iraq.

The evolution of the conflict, however, soon saw the participation of a number of actors on the various fronts of the war, with the consequent need to make some justified in the eyes of the international community, in order to justify above all the political and logistical support⁵.

The Syrian crisis then saw the entry of state actors such as Iran and Russia, and alongside these Lebanese Hezbollah militias, considered a terrorist organization by Israel and subjected to a more ambiguous classification within the lists of terrorist organizations recognized by the European Union, where Hezbollah is inserted for a better-defined "military wing" in the fragile attempt to respond to pressing Israeli demands, without compromising the relationship with one of Lebanon's leading political parties.

The Islamic State has been able to temporarily unify under its rule a vast territory that included almost a third of Syria and at the same time one third of the territory of Iraq, creating an unprecedented economic and social system in the region. After breaking down the Iraqi and Syrian

3 Colin P. Clarke, "Al Qaeda in Syria can change its name, but not its stripe", *The Rand Blog*, rand Corporation, 23rd March 2017, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2017/03/al-qaeda-in-syria-can-change-its-name-but-not-its-stripes.html>

4 Daniel L. Byman, "The history of Al Qaeda", *Opinions*, Brookings Institution, 1 September 2011, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/the-history-of-al-qaeda/>

5 Daniel L. Byman, "What's in a name? The new Jabhat al-Nusra and the future of Al Qaeda", *Lawfare*, 24 October 2016, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/whats-name-new-jabhat-al-nusra-and-future-al-qaeda>

military forces, the Islamic State has become one of the main goals of regional and global military politics, through an unmatched series of international missions that have succeeded in trying to hit them without special success economic and political.

Only through a complete redefinition of the military strategy in the field, Russia and Iran on the one hand, and the Iraqi militaries and militias on the other, have progressively succeeded in regaining the territories once under the rule of the Caliphate, releasing the main strongholds under the control of ISIS and narrowing in the summer of 2017 the area of combat to a small portion of Iraqi territory and a narrow area of Syrian territory around the "capital" of the Islamic State at Raqqa⁶.

The presence of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula has nevertheless been limited to conflicts in Syria and Iraq. The escalation that led to the Yemeni crisis and the intervention of a Saudi-based military coalition engaged in an attempt to re-establish what the Saudis regard as legitimate local government, unsuccessfully still today, evidence of the ramifications of Al Qaeda and its regional support network⁷.

The United Arab Emirates, however, has repeatedly complained about the sometimes ambiguous role of Saudi Arabia in supporting Qaeda-style training, or in any case close to the jihadist organization formerly chaired by Osama Bin Laden, calling for US support in the management of terrestrial operations where these militias were present and fully operational⁸. The poor military planning of Riyadh, the simultaneous strenuous resistance of Houthi's rebel militias - accused by the Saudis and Emirates of getting Tehran's direct support in the conduct of the conflict - and the presence of Al Qaeda militias fighting for goals not entirely transparent and linear with the spirit of the mission, led to the withdrawal of the United Arab Emirates' s military mission, later replaced by mercenary militias hired in the region and on the international military professional market.

The United States has actively contributed in supporting the Yemeni and Emirates' affiliated forces in the field of the relationship with Riyadh, politically reinvigorated by Donald Trump but criticized on the ground precisely because of the varying position against Qaeda militias.

6 Martin Chulov, "Iraqi forces enter Mosul mosque where Isis declared Caliphate", *The Guardian*, 29 June 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/29/mosul-mosque-where-isis-declared-caliphate-has-been-recaptured>

7 Maher Farrukh, Al Qaeda's base in Yemen, *Critical Threats*, 20 June 2017, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/al-qaedas-base-in-yemen>

8 "US- backed Yemeni troops push Al Qaeda out of Shaabwa", *BBC*, 4 agosto 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-40833914>