

Terrorism: ISIS strikes Europe and threatens Italy

As stated recently by the so-called Islamic State (ISIS), through the jihadi social networks, and reported by international media, Italy is a potential objective for terroristic attacks. It is an option that would bring Italy to the dynamic of the global conflict, involving in particular Europe as confirmed by the attacks in Paris, Bruxelles, London, Nice, Berlin and more recently Barcellona.

A violent phenomenon involving, in particular, young individuals of the second and third generations of Muslims with European nationality or born in Europe, extremely radicalized and recruited by jihadi groups fighting in the Middle East and North Africa.

As reported by the Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI)¹, the terror attacks in Europe involved 73 percent of European citizens or with a European passport, 11 percent of irregular immigrants, refugees or asylum seekers and 16 percent of legal immigrants.

The role of the foreign fighters who returned from the extreme experience within the Islamic State in Iraq, Syria and Libya is increasing. A significant number of attempts or effective terrorist attacks conducted in Europe involved jihadist foreign fighters. A study² found that 45% of the 42 "well documented" terrorist plans intended for Western Europe, in the period 2014-2016, saw the participation of at least one subject who had fought for ISIS. A recent ISPI report has also highlighted that nearly a fifth (12) of the 65 jihadist terrorist leaders in Europe and North America, from the proclamation of the so-called Caliphate in June 2014, boasted an experience as foreign fighter. Moreover, these individuals tend to be involved in the most lethal attacks, such as Paris and Brussels.³

The risk of terrorism in Europe is concrete, the possibility of an attack to Italy exists and should not be underestimated, as recently stated by the commander of the Vatican's Swiss guards who declared to be "ready to face any threat". It would surprise the contrary, but the emphasis of the media on online threats and jihadi videos has attracted the attention of a public opinion that is increasingly feeling the risk.

"Attack Italy": a real threat or an overestimated alarm?

Security warnings have recently increased as result of jihadi "new messages" disseminated through the social network Telegram and reported by "Site" – a US company that follows the online activities of jihadist organizations - that stated "Attack Italy". Are these recent web threats realistic or we are facing too much alarm?

It is important not to underestimate a threat that is probable and inevitable, but the consequence of these alarms is a sort of a collective hysteria resulting from the mass media amplification and the uncontrolled virtual sharing through the social networks. This is exactly what terrorists want.

Old and new information contribute creating confusion and therefore fear, in part because of the misleading assessment of the "Site" analysts: the video threat to Pope Francis in August adds to other old appeals. This way of presenting the message reinforces its strength.

1 Fact Checking: Migrazioni, ISPI report, 18 July 2017, at <http://www.ispionline.it/it/articoli/articolo/europa/fact-checking-migrazioni-17046?platform=hootsuite>.

2 P. Nesser, A. Stenersen e E. Oftedal, *Jihadi Terrorism in Europe: The IS-Effect*, in «Perspectives on Terrorism», Vol. 10, No. 6, 2016, pp. 3-24.

3 Francesco Marone, *La minaccia dei foreign fighters*, ISPI Commentary, August 4, 2017, in <http://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/la-minaccia-dei-foreign-fighters-17190>.

As the Italian terrorism study center ITSTIME (*Italian Team for Security, Terroristic Issues & Managing Emergencies*) has clearly highlighted, the "Site" recently also revamped another old threat by ISIS, spread originally on the Web on November 26, 2016. Furthermore, on August the "Site" shared a picture of a jihadist symbol in New York: once again, the US analysts group made a "mistake" publishing an old picture dated 2014. This kind of inaccuracy arms the responsible information and amplifies the indirect effect of ISIS's propaganda, which can also take advantage of these old appeals, penetrating more and more collective imagination.

Tests for a real threat

The threat to the West, and to Italy, is real and has its own peculiarities. A new terrorism that aims to start a new kind of insurrectional phenomenon that has no ambition to mobilize the masses of European citizens in order to overthrow governments“ but, on the contrary, aims to induce many Muslims in Europe to join the fight against all the “infidels”.This "new insurrectional terrorism" has nothing to do with the old political terrorism of the 70s and the 80s.It started in the Middle East after the US invasion of Iraq, in 2003, and developed in the mid-2000s. In 2014 attracted the attention of the world through an effective mix of “marketing”, “premium branding” and “franchising”. ISIS has imposed itself on the battlefield, Iraq and Syria (and then Libya and Afghanistan) and on the global imagination.

Today, however, ISIS has lost almost everything that has gained over ten years: territories, energy resources, access to trade and finance channels, but it maintained its media appeal.

The loss of the "territory" forced ISIS to concentrate on a new social approach that aims to high penetration through the outsourcing of violence. Its message tries to convince thousands of radical individuals and dozens of young people to become "proximity weapons" - real smart weapons ready to enter into action to “kill and die” in the name of the Caliphate.

Most of jihadi attacks carried out in Europe involved second or third generation citizens. This is a specific evidence of the involvement of young generations, particularly from urban peripheral areas, which may not be immune to the claims and narrative of Islamist propaganda, both face-to-face and online. ISIS organization and strategy evolve and move towards a new social approach to, recruit “would-be” fighters all over the world, without them ever having set foot on the battlefield in the Middle East and North Africa, in order to conduct operations within their own countries. In parallel to this of recruitment, a recent Europol study⁴ reported some 300 cases of radicalization attempts by ISIS recruits in the period 2015-2016 involving migrants and asylum seekers.

In the Middle East, North Africa and Europe, ISIS has been able to put in place two types of direct threat to the security of citizens and national institutions.

On the one hand, the "organized and structured" one, that brought to the attacks in Paris and Brussels: suicide commando militarily prepared and equipped that used asymmetric warfare techniques developed in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan. A threat that will continue to grow with the return of thousands of foreign fighter and with the availability of weapons facilitated by a growing connection with the organized crime.

On the other hand, the threat is "unorganized or semi-structured": individuals, who emulates the most striking and media-relevant actions presented by ISIS with its propaganda. It is based on low-cost actions carried out with easy-to-find tools used as weapons, such as knives and cars, with high level of improvisation. This tactic is able to spread panic and imposes relevant security policy measures. A “low-income” social approach that brings an increasing number of events, which are not able in repeating the operational success of the organized attacks in Paris and Brussels. The

4 *Changes modus operandi of Islamic State (IS) revisited*, Europol report, November 2016, in https://www.europol.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/modus_operandi_is_revisited.pdf

problematic Barcelona attack and the previous minor episodes (in terms of number of attackers and equipment) in Nice and London show a weakening of ISIS because of the lack of effective operational and planning capabilities, but they are a clear indication that ISIS maintains the will to hit and its recruitment capabilities. For the next future ISIS will probably concentrate on its ability to influence the radicalized youths and this represents a more dangerous threat than the one that has emerged in recent years. European countries have developed and implemented different kind of responses. In addition to the more traditional repressive measures, numerous States have launched initiatives and "soft" prevention and rehabilitation programs, with the aim of "countering violent extremism" (CVE), but with results that are not satisfactory, as highlighted by the negatively concluded Spanish and French experiences.⁵

The management of the returning jihadists from the war theater represents a complex challenge. They are a relatively large group of people with different psychological profiles, experience and motivations. One of the most important aspect is that this group includes not only male foreign fighters, but also women and children who have moved to the so-called Islamic State without directly taking part to combat.

For these reasons, not only the direct foreign fighters but also the large community in which they are included represent the focus of the overstressed intelligence and investigative European organizations, which are concentrated on countering terrorism and radicalization phenomena.

⁵ Humera Khan, *Why Countering Extremism Fails*, Foreign Affairs, 18 February 2015, and Clarke Jones, *Why countering violent extremism programs are failing*, Policy Forum, 30 June 2017.