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Terrorism in Europe

The French Veterans of Globalized Jihad

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Today there is surely not a single United Nations member state without nationals enrolled in Daesh, the very poorly-named "Islamic State." In a field where it is illusory to expect reliable data, evaluation of US intelligence can provide a guideline for analysing a trend rather than being taken at face value. In any case, American intelligence sources estimated that in 2015, Daesh had 30,000 foreign fighters from over one hundred countries, in contrast to half that number a year earlier.

Beyond the figures, this estimate reveals a jihadi recruitment dynamic on a world-wide scale that has experienced exponential growth. This dynamic is fundamentally fuelled by the flaws of anti-Daesh mobilizations, which often do nothing more than accentuate the threat instead of combating it effectively. Thus in August 2013, America's backing down after Obama committed to strike Assad allowed jihadi propaganda to hammer home the message that the chemical bombardments of Damascus were the fruit of a vast conspiracy associating Moscow, Washington DC and Europe.

The result was an acceleration of those travelling to Syria to "take up jihad," since the country was easily accessible from Turkey. For the first time in the history of jihad, images of the victims of Assad's gas shelling served as an argument for "humanitarian" recruitment in the name of solidarity with the Syrian people, who had been abandoned by all. The reality on the ground was entirely different, of course, with tension between Daesh and the revolutionary forces escalating to the point of open confrontation in January 2014, when the jihadists were expelled from the provinces of Aleppo and Idlib in the northwest of the country.

The second rupture in the recruitment curve occurred in the summer of 2014: the proclamation of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's "caliphate" based in Mosul, Iraq's second city, effectively left the United States indifferent, until the ordeal of an American hostage led the White House to mobilize a "coalition" against Daesh. The strictly aerial campaign undertaken in Iraq, then Syria, proved counter-productive in the long run: only military action on the ground can inflict a substantial defeat on Daesh, while the losses arising from air raids are largely compensated by soaring international recruitment (we saw how foreign "volunteers" went from 15 to 30,000 in the first year of the air raid campaign).

And finally, Russia's massive offensive in Syria as of September 2015 has led to an unprecedented rise in the number of those "taking up jihad." This bombardment campaign, which has taken a heavy toll on the civilian population, only marginally aims at Daesh targets, so focussed is it on defending the Assad regime and thus on destroying revolutionary positions. The anti-Assad groups are the only ones also resolutely committed to the struggle against Daesh, which Assad and his regime have constantly handled with kid gloves, going as far as handing over the oasis of Palmyra to them in May 2015. To make matters worse, the crusade rhetoric in vogue in Moscow, with the Orthodox Church blessing Russian bomber aircraft, cannot but encourage jihadi propaganda.

In Daesh's globalized recruitment process, the errors of states and "coalitions" intended to fight the organization play a decisive role. Jihadi propaganda has moreover attained an impressive degree of sophistication, with personalized messages sent to potential recruits unearthed on social networks before they are approached more physically. The dissemination of communiqués, brochures and videos in various languages, with or without subtitles, is

part of this world-wide campaign. Just as there is no longer a standard profile, there is likewise no longer a priority target country either. It is a global phenomenon that actually teaches us more about the world we live in than about Daesh itself.

Al-Qaeda organized its foreign "volunteers" by nationality, with a guesthouse (*madhafa*) for them in Pakistan and a specific training camp in Afghanistan. Daesh, on the other hand, is organized on a linguistic basis, with Arabic-speaking, Anglophone, Francophone and Russian-speaking sectors and centres. Daesh's Arabic "contingent" is by far the largest, with a major presence of Saudi Arabians, Jordanians, Tunisians and Libyans. These Arab jihadists are not only engaged in the commission of terrorist attacks in their countries of origin, but also in the consolidation of the Daesh "branches" in Yemen, Egypt and Libya.

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The approximatively five thousand European jihadists, with all nationalities taken together, can be scheduled, when necessary, to perpetrate attacks in their countries of origin or neighbouring ones: the French-Belgian corridor, already patent in the May 2014 attack against the Jewish Museum in Brussels, was tragically confirmed in the November 2015 massacres in Paris and Saint-Denis, often with connections to Spain, Germany and the United Kingdom. However, European jihadists, the majority of whom do not speak Arabic, play an essential role in population control in Syria, where Daesh is perceived as an occupying army (as opposed to Iraq, where the Shiite sectarianism of the Baghdad authorities has rejected part of the Sunni community under Daesh control).

This is why Daesh goes to substantial lengths to enlist Europeans, destined to marry jihadists of the same language and/or nationality. Often more ideologized than their colleagues, these militants accentuate social and linguistic alienation in a family cell wholly controlled by the totalitarian Daesh organization. A French "volunteer" who married a Syrian would undoubtedly eventually grasp the magnitude of the oppression inflicted by Daesh on the local Arabic populations, though Sunni. But conjugal confinement with these jihadi "comfort women" aggravates the indoctrination logic and orientates their violence against Syrian populations (pillage, rape and plundering are legitimized in the name of a supposed "Islamic" law of loot, facilitating jihadi recruitment of many more or less reformed delinquents).

It was estimated that in early 2016, some 600 French citizens were fighting among the ranks of Daesh, essentially in Syria. If there is a French peculiarity, it is perhaps the fact that a quarter to a third of them are converts. It was, in fact, a convert from La Réunion, Fabien Clain, who claimed authorship of the first 13 November 2015 attacks. In any case, it is quite possible that countries other than France are also experiencing jihadi recruitment of converts though not yet aware of it... Daesh's "francophone" logic leads these French people to enter joint units with francophone Maghrebi and Belgians (whose membership in Daesh is estimated at 270).

Jihadi propaganda can opportunistically brandish different reasons for its terrorist ruthlessness against France over the course of 2015. No-one should fall into the cynical trap of these brainwashing tactics, which aim to inculpate the victims to the greater glory of the executioners. The truth is that France was attacked for its Republican model, for what it is and not for what it does. The more or less harmonious coexistence in France of the largest Jewish community in Europe and the largest Muslim population on the continent, all within a secular framework, is in itself unbearable for Daesh.

France also paid a high price for the line it has consistently followed in Syria, dismissing Assad and Daesh and opening an alternative, revolutionary third track for the Syrian people. In this regard, the 13 November 2015 attacks aimed as much to trigger a spiral of intercommunity violence as to push France into military escalation in Syria. French society has not given in to these provocations, despite their unbridled violence, and Paris, while intensifying its air strikes against Daesh in Syria, has not yielded to the temptation of a "Holy Alliance" with Russia nor engagement of troops on the ground. Daesh's attempt to blackmail France can thus be largely considered a failure, at least at this stage.

The least analyzed dimension, however, lies in the presence of French "veterans" in the jihadi hierarchy whom some believe have participated in all the organization's stages of development, from the group's transformation from the Movement for Oneness and Jihad into al-Qaeda's Iraqi branch in 2004, to the advent of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant ten years later, designated by the Arabic acronym of Daesh. These French "veterans" harbour an obsessive hostility against their country of origin, where they have often spent long years in prison.

The key figure in the shadow world is the French-Tunisian Boubaker al-Hakim. Born in Paris in 1983, he moved to Damascus in July 2002, officially to study Arabic. In reality, he was hosted by Bashar al-Assad's intelligence service, which in Arabic is generically called the *Mukhabarat*. It was with their assistance that al-Hakim secretly sojourned in Iraq, before returning to France in January 2003. In fact, Assad and Saddam Hussein, both Baathists, shared some of their clandestine resources to deal with the imminence of an American invasion of Iraq, which the Syrian dictator feared would be but a first step towards the destabilization of his own country.

Boubaker al-Hakim returned to Iraq in March 2003 and joined the "Arab Legion" of volunteers mobilized for the defence of the Baghdad regime. Interviewed by the French media, he invited his "buddies" from Buttes-Chaumont, the large park in north-eastern Paris, to join him in combating the American invaders. After the fall of Saddam Hussein, he went into hiding with the support of both the Syrian and Iraqi Mukhabarat. This experience is all the more important, since these Mukhabarat were trained in the Soviet School of the most unbridled violence and the most insidious indoctrination.

Al-Hakim returned to France to establish the Buttes-Chaumont network, as it was called during his trial. He recruited his brother Redouane and some "buddies" such as Peter Cherif and Mohamed el-Ayouni, before assisting in their transfer to Iraq via Damascus. From March to August 2004, Boubaker al-Hakim sojourned in the anti-American guerrilla stronghold that Fallujah, in western Iraq, had become. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the Jordanian leader of the Movement for Oneness and Jihad, was joined by many former Iraqi Mukhabarat agents. It was on this amalgamation of jihadi subversion and Baathist terror that al-Qaeda in Iraq and its "management of savagery" (in Arabic, *Idârat al-tawahhush*, which is the title of what is likely the organization's most popular manual) was based.

The French "volunteers" paid a heavy price for this anti-American jihad in Iraq: Redouane al-Hakim was killed in an air raid, Mohammed al-Ayouni lost an eye and an arm in an explosion, Peter Cherif was imprisoned after the fall of Fallujah in November 2004. But the aura of Boubaker al-Hakim emerged bolstered in the circle of his Buttes-Chaumont "buddies", in particular the brothers Cherif and Said Kouachi. In January 2005, the French police dismantled the Buttes-Chaumont network: al-Hakim, whose extradition France finally obtained from Syria, was sentenced to seven years in prison, Mohamed el-Ayouni and Cherif Kouachi each received a three-year sentence, while Said walked. Just as al-Hakim remained the mentor of the network, el-Ayouni, who had paid the price of his engagement in Iraq with his flesh, became a model for Salim Benghalem, the delinquent sharing his prison cell.

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While the Buttes-Chaumont militants were in prison, the French police dismantled another "network" in 2007, also dedicated to sending jihadists to Iraq via Syria. It was called the Artigat network, due to the central role of this village and the farm there run by a Syrian Islamist, Abdelilah Dandachi, who changed his name to Olivier Corel when he was naturalized a French citizen. This network included Fabien Clain (who was to claim Daesh as the author of the November 2015 attacks in Paris) and Sabri Essid (who would receive numerous visits from his stepbrother, Mohamed Merah, killed in March 2012 in Toulouse after having assassinated three soldiers and carried out a bloody attack on a Jewish school).

Freed in January 2011, Boubaker al-Hakim went to Tunisia, where a popular uprising overthrew the Ben Ali dictatorship. He placed himself at the service of Abou Iyad (real name Seifallah Benhassine), who at that time launched the Salafist movement of Sup-

porters of Islamic Law (Ansar al-Sharia/AS). Al-Hakim patiently organized the clandestine, armed branch of AS, largely responsible for the assault on the US Embassy in September 2012 (the police were overwhelmed and it was the presidential guard itself that broke up the riot, which could explain the suicide attack in Tunis against said presidential guard, just after the November 2015 Paris attacks).

In 2013, al-Hakim was responsible, indirectly in February, directly in July, for two political assassinations that nearly derailed the democratic transition in Tunisia. The manoeuvre failed due to the quadripartite mediation between nationalists and Islamists by a Quartet whose accomplishment was crowned by the Nobel Peace Prize. Al-Hakim saw his Tunisian plans crumble and he returned to Daesh under the pseudonym of Abou Mouqatel. For Baghdadi and his partisans, al-Hakim is a major asset in their strategy of francophone subversion and expansion in Tunisia, or even Libya (where Ansar al-Sharia set up some training camps close to the Tunisian border).

In January 2015, the attack on the Charlie Hebdo offices by the Kouachi brothers clearly bore the mark of Boubaker al-Hakim, even if authorship was initially attributed to al-Qaeda in Yemen, both to cloud the issue and to bolster Daesh in its aggressive bid to take over the entire jihadi galaxy. Two months later, the attack on the Bardo Museum, where some twenty foreign tourists were assassinated, demonstrated that Daesh, inspired by al-Hakim, was developing a coordinated campaign against secular France and democratic Tunisia, both held up to public jihadi contempt. On 26 June 2015, a Tunisian terrorist who had trained in a Libyan Ansar al-Sharia camp, massacred 39 people in Sousse, the majority of them British tourists, while a French jihadist, after having tortured his employer, nearly caused a chain of explosions at a chemical site in Isère. Again, Boubaker al-Hakim's signature was evident in the planning of this double attack, while Daesh struck on the same day in Kuwait and Yemen. The aim is to spread such terror through savagery (*tawahhush*) that it becomes staggering, undermining the defences of the country and society under attack.

Boubaker al-Hakim readily speaks in jihadi groups about this "savagery," which he claims effective, in both France and Europe in general: "Kill anyone. All the infidels over there are targets. Do not wear yourselves out seeking difficult targets. Kill whoever you can among the infidels." Such instructions could not reflect better the savagery shown by the assassins of eastern Paris and the Stade de France on 13 November 2015. And we have seen how, as with the Charlie Hebdo/Bardo sequence, another attack did not fail to follow the French carnage, this time in Tunisia.

Boubaker al-Hakim's exact position on Daesh's organizational chart is imprecise, mainly because said chart is largely unknown. It would seem, in any case, that it is Salim Benghalem, a follower of one of his disciples, who had himself been "jihadized" by Mohamed al-Ayouni, who is in charge of welcoming Daesh's francophone volunteers. Insofar as Fabien Clain, his function in the Daesh propaganda machine is backed by that of another "veteran" in the Artigat network, Sabri Essid, who appears in at least one execution video.

The role of these French jihad "veterans" over the course of more than a decade, the assistance they have had from the Syrian services and the former Iraqi Mukhabarat, the terrorist triangle thereafter appearing between Syria-Iraq/Tunisia-Libya/France-Belgium, the explicit, infectious violence of jihadi propaganda in French, the role played by European auxiliary "volunteers" in the jihadi occupation of the Syrian section of the Euphrates River valley,… all of these considerations seem well removed from the French debates on schools, prisons or the suburbs. This does not detract from the importance or legitimacy of these debates. It would, however, be wise to resituate this unprecedented threat in all the depth of its double context–historical and geographic.

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