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Middle East

The Islamic State, symptom of a crisis of regional domination

- IV Online magazine - 2016 - IV492 - January 2016 -

Publication date: Thursday 21 January 2016

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Daesh? The name has been on everyone's lips for several months, especially since the attacks in Paris...

The Islamic State controls an area larger than Britain, with a population of between 8 and 10 million people, and it has stepped up attacks outside its "borders" in recent months, from Beirut to Sharm El Sheikh via Tunisia and Turkey. It has become an inexhaustible source of articles and interventions by "experts", but also of rumours and fantasies. The pure incarnation of "absolute barbarism", a "creature" of the United States, an expression of the "laggard" character of Arab societies ... What exactly is it?

The cradle of Daesh: a ravaged Iraq

The development of Daesh cannot be understood as the mere expansion of an ideology advocating a particularly reactionary vision and application of Islam. Islamic fundamentalism, including its most violent and retrograde versions, was not born in the last few years: to understand that, it is enough to take a look at the Arabian Peninsula, where Saudi Arabia and the Gulf emirates have for decades made it an instrument of domestic and foreign policy.

Understanding the development of Daesh means taking into account the material conditions that made it possible, observing the changes at work in the region.

And one of the first things to consider is of course the impact of external intervention in Arab countries, whether military expeditions or the unfailing support given by Western countries to authoritarian regimes that have systematically eliminated all progressive opposition and promoted, directly or not, the fundamentalist challenge.

The destruction of Iraq is thus one of the key factors explaining the development of Daesh, which was not born in Syria or Saudi Arabia, but on the ruins of a country ravaged by military interventions. It is in fact in the US-run prisons and the Sunni towns and villages attacked by foreign armies or their Iraqi Shiite auxiliaries that the first cells of what would become Daesh were formed in the mid-2000s.

In the summer of 2014, when the Islamic State quickly took control of several Iraqi provinces, we thus "discovered" the significant presence of former officers of Saddam Hussein in the political-military apparatus of Daesh, from Abu Abdu Rahman al-Bidawi, in the leadership of military operations, to Abu Ahmed al-Alwani, who was appointed "governor" of the province of Al Anbar, and Saddam al-Jamal, appointed "governor" of the province of Deir el -Zor in Syria.

A crisis of domination in the region

This considerable presence indicates that the driving force behind Daesh is not only religious radicalization, but also the desire to oppose the policies imposed by the West and its regional allies. The pro-Western Iraqi regime installed in 2004, through its policy of marginalization of the Sunnis (dominant under Saddam Hussein), its bloody repression of any contestation and its alliance with Iran, was instrumental in legitimizing the rhetoric and the actions of Daesh:

some Sunni regions even welcomed the Islamic State as a liberator.

So although religious ideology is at the heart of the project and the discourse of Daesh, it actually in fact overlaps with other dimensions: social, political, economic. The development of the Islamic State is the expression of a crisis of domination in the region, as evidenced by the 2010-2011 uprisings, and of the inability of the existing regimes and their imperialist sponsors to restore calm and stability. Daesh has thus built on a double failure: that of the Arab uprisings confronted with the counter-revolution, but also that of the institutional counter-revolutionary forces, both the regimes and political Islam.

It is for this reason that we cannot fail to notice that the Islamic State finds part of its force of attraction in its rejection of borders and of politico-administrative centres that originated in a colonial carve-up and of "independences" that do not challenge imperialist hegemony in the region. Thus, and even though the Islamic State has adopted the worst local forms of domination (reactionary ideology and authoritarian practices), it appears to tens of thousands of young people frustrated by the failure of the uprisings in 2010- 2011 as a "novelty" in a regional system frozen for decades.

Until when?

Daesh now boasts a real and considerable war treasure. Its annual budget is estimated to be between 2.5 and 3 billion dollars. Raising taxes, fleecing traders, hostage taking, human trafficking ... These are all sources of funding for the Islamic State, which also has oil resources which provide a guaranteed rent at little cost. All the same, contrary to some fantasies, the oil is basically sold within the territories controlled by the Islamic State: a captive market, with people forced for their daily needs (petrol, heating fuel, etc.) to deal with the smugglers of Daesh or their intermediaries.

Furthermore, the Islamic State also continues to benefit from the more or less discreet support of notables and informal groups in Saudi Arabia and the Emirates, who see the expansion of the Islamic State as a way to counter the Iranian (Shiite) rival. This is the other tragedy faced by the peoples of the region: even though the imperialist countries claim to want to put an end to Daesh, their regional allies are far from considering it as the enemy to be defeated. From Erdogan's Turkey, delighted to see the Kurds confronted by the Islamic State, to the Gulf states, whose ideology is close to that of Daesh, and to Iraq ruled by Shiites who see little interest in reconquering hostile Sunni areas, the regional powers are, de facto, playing the game of the Islamic State.

So we should reject any schematic vision: an enemy of the peoples of the region, Daesh is the expression of the bankruptcy of a system of domination in the service of Western countries and their regional allies. Unwavering opposition to Daesh cannot ignore the socio-historical conditions of its development: to ally with authoritarian regimes in the region and perpetuate the military chaos is to render service to the Islamic State. So, although it means swimming against the stream, only a policy of support for the peoples and for groups fighting against both Daesh and the authoritarian regimes can make it possible to see a glimmer of light in a regional sky that is decidedly dark.