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## BECAUSE SYRIA: I'M YOUR FRIENDLY NEIGHBORHOOD TERRORIST

— Isabelle Lasserre

In both Syria and Iraq, Daesh is losing territory fast. The organization barely now controls 40 percent of the 60,000 km<sup>2</sup> it occupied in the region in October 2014. The disintegration of the caliphate installed on the land of the Sham -- the old name for Syria -- has led some to foretell its disappearance in the medium term. But this good news will not have as a consequence the end of Islamist terrorism.

The decline of Daesh in Syria is being accompanied by a return of Al Qaeda. Its own demise had been announced somewhat prematurely after the fall of the Taliban in Kabul. Having been shocked and discomfited by the loss of its historical leader Osama Bin Laden, the terrorist nebula is back in force: in the Sahel, in the Arabian peninsula, in Libya and in Syria where the old Al-Nusra front, which is very active in Aleppo, has changed its appearance by calling itself Fatah al Sham, but has not changed its methods or its enemy.

Anticipating its territorial decline, Daesh has been adjusting to the new circumstances. The senior members of the organization are planning to go underground if needed. The jihadists were given the instruction to strike at the heart of Western societies, through organized attacks or, when this is not possible, through attacks of inspiration or opportunity.

Finally, experts are considering the possibility of an alliance between Daesh and Al Qaeda, which, in spite of their rivalry, share the same objective of combating supposedly irreligious Muslim regimes and Western societies.

Thanks to its internet-based recruitment techniques, Daesh is certain to attract recruits. If not in Syria, where the flow of foreign fighters has slowed down, at least in Europe, where the possibility of a mass

return of the Jihadists has become the nightmare of the authorities.

This is only one of the paradoxes of the evolution of the Syrian conflict: the weakening of Daesh could, at least in the beginning, mean more terrorist acts.

In their Syrian adventure, the fighters of Daesh have been "helped" by the international community. Of all the powers involved in the conflict to achieve their strategic interests, none has made the Islamic State its priority.

The Russian obsession is to support the Syrian regime; that of the Americans is to disengage from the region; that of the Turks is to put an end to the territorial ambitions of the Kurds and to regain a certain influence at its borders on the steps of the old Ottoman empire; that of Shiite Iran is to win the battle against Sunni Saudi Arabia and vice versa. As for Europe, it has been standing aloof, divided and unable to defend itself without outside help.

Recent developments seem to suggest that the Russian intervention could save the life of Bashar al-Assad, literally and politically. If this is the case, the first victim would not be terrorism. By repressing violently the peaceful demonstrations in March 2011, by releasing Islamists from prison, the Syrian regime bears the primary responsibility for the disaster in which its country is now drowning. Repression has stirred the jihadist fire in the world. With Assad remaining in power, the opponents, who are sucked up by the jihadist movements, could only become more radicalized. Terrorist groups feed upon wars. Hezbollah was born from the war in Lebanon. Al Qaeda evolved in the Afghan civil war in the 1990s. ISIS has grown on the unstable lands of the Levant.

Syria is the largest provider of refugees in the world. And if migrants constitute a huge humanitarian problem, they also mean a security headache for European societies. They are important targets for the jihadist recruiters, because they are not well integrated, with a robbed past and a forbidden future. Wherever they go, they carry politics with them.

Since history cannot be remade, we will never know how the destiny of Syria would have been had Barack Obama not abandoned the idea of punishing Damascus when it crossed the “red line” on chemical weapons in August 2013. But this retreat eroded the political credit of the United States and its allies, thus catalyzing the Russian breakthrough. Russia, by sustaining the war, is feeding the terrorism that Moscow is pretending to fight. This might lead to a Russian-led stalemate.

It is Europe that, in the Western world, and because of its geographical location and its considerable Muslim communities, is the main target of the jihadists. But the Orlando attack in June 2016 has come to remind Americans, who thought they had greater immunity, that they too remain a favorite target for the jihadists.

The crises in the Middle East are no longer external to us. They are now embedded in the societies of the West.

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