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Defense College

NATO DEFENSE COLLEGE FOUNDATION

STRATEGIC TRENDS

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EMERGING CHALLENGES

Lone wolves could survive ISIS

In the week that ISIS linked attacks hit Brussels with at the Zaventem airport and the Maelbeek subway station, reminding Europe that some jihadists enjoy a degree of complacency in certain European cities, a simultaneous territorial retreat of ISIS in the Syrian and Iraqi fronts occurred with the retaking of Palmyra by Assad's army and the Iraqi offensive to liberate Mosul. The expulsion of Daesh from Palmyra and eventually Mosul, two cities which have symbolised the rise of Dawla, confirms the trend that the "caliphate" is in trouble and in retreat. There are essentially three factors that have contributed to the recent setbacks of ISIS:

- 1) the bolder military operations of Assad, robustly supported by Russia, Iran and Hezbollah;
- 2) the coalition operations, spearheaded by the United States, in which Kurdish militants are playing a prominent role;
- 3) the renewed Iraqi army combat capabilities.

It is well understood that the current players in the Syrian conflict do not share the same objectives or priorities. Nevertheless, the continuation of the ceasefire is contributing to a partial improving of the situation.

There is still a flow of foreign fighters from SYRAQ to Libya and European countries. Since last November, according to NATO estimates, approximately 20% of the foreign fighters in SYRAQ have returned to their countries of origin. Out of a total of 70.000 ISIS troops, 8.000 foreign fighters have been killed in the fighting and in coalition raids.

According to estimates given last October by the International Centre for Counter Terrorism, 100 of the approximately 440 fighters from Belgium had returned to their homeland as well as 271 French foreign fighters from the approximately 1.200 who were in SYRAQ. The return of the fighters also includes other countries such as Britain where 250 out of a total of 700 have returned, Bosnia and Herzegovina with 51 out of 217 and Holland with 35 out of 210.

These are important numbers but they may represent only a small part of the Daesh's potential in Europe to which must be added the potential lone wolves. To understand the risk of lone wolves, we must remember the call for global jihad by al Baghdad (Dawla's leader) in June 2014. On that occasion, he exhorted all the faithful to go to Syria and Iraq for the construction of the self-styled caliphate, and, at the same time, he urged those who could not travel to SYRAQ to fight in their own countries.

The dense network connivance that protected the Belgian terrorist Salah Abdeslam, combined with radical and distorted versions of Sunni Islam, is the breeding ground where modern jihadism grows and develops. A brand of armed radicalism is rising which, in many cases, does not require any contact with mosques and for which indoctrination and instruction via Twitter, YouTube or Instagram is sufficient, also because in several cases religion plays a minor motivation role. This is perhaps the greatest challenge posed by al Baghdadi and it likely to go beyond the demise of ISIS in SYRAQ.