

23.11.2015 Terrorism. Paris in the eye of the hurricane

The Islamic State is at war, and Paris is at the heart of the terrorist campaign launched from the Middle East. With some 130 dead, the bottom line of the attack on Friday 13 November is horrendous. Following the 224 killed on the Russian airliner brought down in the Sinai, Islamist terrorism is seeking to frighten public opinion in countries that support those who are fighting in Damascus, Kurdistan or Aleppo. With one objective: for those countries to withdraw their air forces from the combat zone just at the time when, thanks to them, the Kurds at Sinjar and Syrian troops at Aleppo airport are re-taking strategic military locations.

The Islamist state wants to make Paris yield and intimidate all the other European countries. This is why, 10 months on from the Charlie Hebdo killings, Daesh decided to launch another attack, and a still more violent one, on France. The objective of the terrorist war which is at work in Paris is simple: to make the opinions of a terrorised public prevent their governments from backing up France in its military commitment and, by creating such dramas, to persuade France itself to disengage. For that it needs to make the heads of state concerned fearful of very serious consequences, and Paris serves as a demonstration of this terrifying capacity for causing harm.

The early warning signs of this strategy have not been in short supply in recent months. By chance, when the lost soldier of Islamism shot himself in the foot at Villejuif before he could burst into a church to massacre the faithful, or – perhaps? – by effective action, when another Daesh “soldier” was overpowered by American servicemen on the Brussels Thalys just before he was able to spray automatic fire at the passengers pinned to their seats, the warnings have been “cost-free” or almost so. Likewise when another terrorist in the Lyons area tried but failed to blow up a Seveso-class industrial site after having cut his boss’s throat.

Clearly a concerted assault was under way. The similarity of the defensive attitudes of those who are arrested alive is a sign of it when, despite their clear links with Daesh, they persist in putting forward far-fetched explanations – “I wanted to carry out a hold-up in the Thalys” for one, “I had argued with my boss” for the other, in order to stonewall the police investigation. Nothing has been improvised, everything has been prepared carefully, and Paris is at the centre of this macabre strategy.

How can that be changed? It all actually depends on the outcome of the conflict in Syria and Iraq. If the Islamic State is defeated on its home ground in Syria and Iraq, at the heart of Sunni populations of whom it has succeeded in taking control, the external ramifications, in Europe and elsewhere, will have no future. While tension and war last down there, the risk will be permanent, not least in France.

Can Daesh strengthen its “Islamic State” and resist the international coalition ranged against it? In the long term, this seems improbable, and could only arise if it managed to force those who support their enemies on the ground to withdraw that support. This is the aim of terrorist operations such as that in Paris or the bombing of the Russian airliner. François Hollande will, eventually, receive a proposal for a “terrorist ceasefire” in exchange for halting the bombings that support the Kurds and the forces of the Free Syrian Army who are fighting on the ground. Maybe that is already the case. But is the option of “stepping back” even possible? And what will the world of tomorrow look like if Islamist fundamentalism takes its place on the international stage definitively? In any case François Hollande has just answered by launching a new wave of bombings on Raqqa, the “capital” of the Islamist State, 48 hours after the Paris attacks.

The alternative is to accelerate the tempo of the anti-Daesh offensive. This has just seen its first successes since the resistance by the Kurds at Kobani, with the taking of the city of Sinjar by the Kurds and Aleppo airport by the Syrian army supported by Russia.

But finishing off the Islamist State will call for long efforts, and nothing will be possible without bringing together the forces that are actually fighting on the ground: the popular resistance from the Sunni population, whose main component is the Free Syrian Army strongly backed by the USA, the Kurdish resistance which needs to be freed from the continuing Turkish hegemony, still and always, Shiite forces like the Lebanese Hezbollah, itself the target of a murderous attack in Beirut, and the populations who still support the Syrian government.

That would call for real coordination between the United Nations, which, between the Turkish drift into something like fascism, the historic American responsibilities in Iraq and the knowing calculations of the Russia in Syria, will not be easy to achieve.
But is Daesh in the process of bringing everyone together?