ROMANIAN DECION-MAKERS IN SECURITY POLICIES' PERCEPTION OF THE TERRORIST THREAT: ROMANIA AS A POTENTIAL TARGET FOR DAESH TERRORIST ATTACKS

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Abstract: This paper aims at analyzing the Romanian decision-makers in security policies' perception of the Daesh terrorist organization and, particularly, of the potential effects of this organization on the Romanian national territory. In this respect, we designed a transversal qualitative research, conducted through interviews with 31 experts in security policies, 22 of which are Romanian, in order to assess their adequacy of knowledge in relation with the theoretical framework and, respectively, the perception of insiders from Middle East (political decision makers, diplomats, religious leaders, scholars, security specialists, intelligence analysts). The level of this perception assessment in very important because the decision makers in security policies need to know accurately the phenomena subjected to their own policies. Moreover, this knowledge should be neutral, not influenced by ideologies or media agenda setting. It is also very important to note whether security policies decision-makers are influenced or not by the sensationalist nature of packing information about Daesh attacks in classical or old media. In simple terms, this adequate perception of the widespread conflict in the Middle East, the escalation of the conflicts in the area over the last 40 years, the expansion and diversification of the forms in which Jihadist-Salafist terrorist organizations act are important elements in the balanced and correctly assumed position in relation with the national security policies. In a nutshell, Romania's readiness for terrorist attacks organized by Daesh or other similar organizations depends on the level of awareness of this threat by the Romanian decision-makers in security policies. Implicitly, the evaluation of these decision-makers' perception is one of the evaluation modalities of Romania's preparedness in the field of combating terrorist attacks.

Keywords: The Islamic State (Daesh); Middle East; terrorist attacks; Romanian national security

1. INTRODUCTION

The Daesh[1] Terrorist Organization is the most feared group that has abandoned the classical direction of action and proclaimed the Islamic Caliphate. The claim of statehood invoked by such an organization surprised the Western countries, although in the Middle East it was not the first terrorist group aiming at the status of a state entity. One of such groups is Tawhid (or Islamic Tawhid) from Tripoli, Lebanon, almost unknown in Europe, but still active. The intended state is the proto-structure entitled Caliphate, a historical form of political organization, considered „successful" for the Muslim society. According to the Daesh

doctrine, a return to the "golden age" of the dawn of Islam is possible through *jihad*, which will end with a new transnational Islamic Caliphate, in which Muslim citizens must obey Islamic law *Al Sharia* in its strictest interpretation:

> ISIS represents that form of ultra-orthodoxy that eschews nuance, sect, variations of opinion based on diligent reading (ijtihad) and demands, in the strict sense, submission (الاستسلام) to the only principles it regards as fully Islamic. Its model for enforcing this regime is not the bookish culture that grew quickly out of Arabia and Persia after the eighth century but the roughly hundred-year period of bloody succession wars and expansion following the Prophet's death in 632. (Hoffmann, 2015)

The Islamic Caliphate was proclaimed by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi on June 29, 2014. This was possible based on the Daesh increasing operational capacity and on its territorial expansion (Barna, 2015), respectively on the amplification of military

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[1] Daesh was developed on the structure of the Al-Qaeda franchise in Iraq, later became the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), then, following the merger with Al-Nusra, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) or the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham/ Syria (ISIS).

successes (culminating in the occupation of Mosul).

Fortunately, the Daesh formula of territorially extended terrorist organization was defeated in March, 2019. Unfortunately, Daesh preserved sufficient operational capabilities to allow it to carry out terrorist attacks in various parts of the world, while withdrawing into the hard-to penetrate space of the 'The Virtual Caliphate'. Different researchers opted for the distinction between the two phases of the existence and manifestation of Daesh using a classical notation for successive versions of computer software: Daesh 1.0 and Daesh 2.0. The concept of Daesh 2.0 illustrates the post-territorial status of the Islamic State, i.e. 'The Virtual Caliphate'. The term was promoted and studied as a potential phase of the Daesh's evolution, in a series of studies prior to March 2019, by Atwan (2015), Al-Istrabadi & Ganguly (2018), Sultan (2018). It was introduced in the Romanian specialized literature by Stoian-Karadeli (2019). Chronologically speaking, there existed a territorial version until March 2019, Daesh 1.0, and a virtual version, Daesh 2.0[2], starting with April 2019.

2. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

In a broader research on the analysis of the Daesh effects on the regional security environment (El Benni, 2020; Lesenciuc & El Benni, 2019:29-40), we have analyzed separately the proposed effects of the terrorist threat on national security. We set as a general objective of the research: the analysis of the degree of the Daesh phenomenon knowledge/ perception by the Romanian decision makers in the field of security policies. The specific objective in connection with the direction that is the topic of this article is to analyze the relationship between the Middle East crisis perception and phenomena such as terrorism and migration within states that have become targets of terrorist attacks or desirable destinations for migrants. Furthermore, in relation with this specific objective, we focused the interest of our analysis on Romania and on the possible consequences regarding our national security, arising from the conflict in the Middle East. In this respect, we opted for a transversal qualitative research, conducted through an investigation based on interview with 31 experts (22 Romanian, 9 from Egypt, Israel, the Netherlands, Syria, Turkey,

United States of America and the Palestinian territory). In order to operate more easily and for an easier interpretation of the research results, we assigned numbers to each interviewee and pre-coded the variables: gender, religion, profession, age, and country of origin into an alphanumeric formula that allows anonymization of sources and easy reading of variables previously mentioned.

In reference to the methodological approach, the current research is not unique. We considered the model of similar designs in terms of identifying the perception of decision-makers in the field of US foreign policy on the role of the United States in the international system and, implicitly, of identifying the decisions, norms, commitments and long-term implications. The research was done by Naomi Bailin Wish (1980:532-554) from Seton Hall University. Also, we considered the perception of political marketing tools by the decision-makers in cultural policy, in the case of Greek researchers Eleni Apostori and George J. Avlonidis (2010:111-134) from University of Economics and Business in Athens. The research based on a similar methodological design of the perception of Romanian decision-makers in the field of security policies on the Daesh terrorist phenomenon is however unique and can be a useful tool in their explicit engagement in designing or amending security documents.

3. RESEARCH RESULTS. ROMANIA AS A POTENTIAL TARGET OF TERRORIST ATTACKS

Several experts interviewed expressed the opinion that a real terrorist danger is unlikely for several reasons, including: Romania is not an attractive target:

> Romania is not an area of interest for terrorist organizations. They plan the attacks so that the minimum of resources has maximum possible impact (20 MCOPa4+RO).

Diplomatically, Romania has had good relations with many countries from the Middle East; Romania has a very well developed intelligence system (10 MCOPa5+RO). There are several answers to claim the contrary. The interviewees stating it consider that the big wave of immigrants could create premises for Romania to become a target for terrorist attacks.

Also, given that Daesh has lost the territory of the Caliphate in Iraq and Syria and increased its activity in the virtual environment (including the

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[2] Sometimes the ISIS 2.0 proposed by the head of Interpol, Jürgen Stock, is also used.

possibility of concentrating the terrorist attacks in Europe and in Romania, as well), there are favorable conditions for such attacks, among which there should be mentioned: the lack of an upgrade of the Romanian legislation in the area of intelligence; lack of coordination of actions carried out by institutions with responsibilities in combating terrorism; poor knowledge of terrorist organizations' ways of action; lack of training to identify and counteract terrorist actions and to support the authorities (04 MCOPa4+RO).

Another reason why Romania may become a target for terrorist attacks is its joining the anti-terrorist coalition that aims to take action up to the complete annihilation of international terrorism.

An interviewed expert claimed that Romania is not yet on the map of terrorist attacks because it does not have a strategic role in the Middle East conflict (31 MCOPa4+RO). This does not mean there are no threats, or that there were not attempts that have been thwarted, or that Romanian decision-makers consider the country protected under the Euro-Atlantic umbrella. The NATO membership leads to an increase in 'magnetism' in attracting terrorists (12 MCOPa4+RO). The optimistic answers reveal that Romania has a well-articulated specialized prevention system, and well-prepared forces to deal with terrorist attacks. Also, the main purpose of the specialized intelligence services is to prevent and extinguish the attack attempts. Romania was considered an example for good practices in preventing terrorist attacks (07 MCOPa4+RO, member of the Joint Standing Committee and the Senate for exercising parliamentary control over the activity of the national intelligence service). In this respect, Romania played a major role in the prevention of terrorist attacks, especially after it had warned against the attacks in Paris, for example. In terms of prevention, Romania is under the BLUE code (05 MCOOf6+RO), explicitly and fully explained by expert 05 MCOOf6+RO:

> Since 2004, Romania has had a National Terrorist Alert System in order to support the process of planning counterterrorism activities at the national level, as well as to inform people about the level of terrorist threat. Currently, in Romania, the level of terrorist alert is PRECAUTIONARY (BLUE). The available information and the current events indicate a low risk of terrorist attack. However, Romania, as a member of the EU and NATO, is subjected to the same security risks as the other member states, as well.

One of the respondents considers that, like any other state, Romania can be a target for terrorist attacks. These attacks might have approximately the same characteristics as those that took place in Western European countries. The very fact that there are or may be terrorists in transit through Romania is a risk, judging that, in order not to be captured, they could detonate themselves. That is why *The National Defense Strategy* (SNAp, 2015) includes among the Euro-Atlantic security dimensions the emergence of terrorist groups and the augmentation of migration:

> The **emergence of terrorist groups** stimulates the phenomenon of Islamic radicalization at European level, highlighting the risks posed by the return to the EU territory of the European jihadists who were previously engaged in fighting or training programs in states with active terrorist issues.
> Increasing **migration** from conflict or precarious economic areas has created challenges for the member states' ability to manage the flow of illegal immigrants and take over/ integrate them into local communities (SNAp, 2015:12-13).

Among the identified risks there exists one with low probability, but with a major impact, namely, the action of terrorist groups:

> **The radicalization of the extremist entities** present on the Romanian territory can occur on the background of the accentuation of the extremist currents of ethnic, religious or other origin (SNAp, 2015:15).

This makes less probable its transformation into a target for terrorist attacks. Also, the Muslim population from Romania is not situated in the vicinity of extremist ideas. Moreover, the Muslim inhabitants in Romania would not be willing to provide support for the organization of such actions. Under the circumstances in which the American presence in Romania would become more consistent than now the possibility that Romania become a target of the Islamist terrorist attacks could also increase:

> In general, Romania has no relevant image or impact in relation to the potential image capital that can be exploited by terrorist actions (compared to Western European countries). The terrorist attacks could occur in case of the increasing American presence on the Romanian territory – Kogălniceanu, Deveselu (n.a.: military bases). The most important aspect is the absence of *home grown terrorism*, while the lack of a local support makes planning a terrorist attack in Romania inappropriate. In general, we can be a target of terrorist actions by chance (06 MCOPU4+RO).

Given that Romania would become more attractive from a tourist point of view, the chances to become a target for terrorism would increase:

> If Romania became a more important player within Europe or the entire world, we would expect terrorist attacks. Another way in which Romania could become a target would be the new height reached by tourism in Romania, but this is also not very likely in the future years (20 MCOPa4+RO).

One of the experts thinks that Romania will be subjected to terrorist threats 'from three horizons': as a member of the NATO and EU and as a part of Western civilization; as a country situated in the vicinity of Muslim strategic rift in the Black Sea and Balkan areas, not far from the Middle East, and as a participant in the global war on terror, within the US-led coalition. At the same time, it is possible for Romania to be specially considered by certain terrorist groups, networks and organizations, in order to use the national territory for certain network, infrastructure and logistics elements of the previously mentioned groups (02 MCOPU5+RO).

Moreover, one of the interviewed experts, 21 MISLR5+SY, stated on issues regarding the effects of spreading terrorism in Eastern Europe, including Romania, that there is a common guilt (including Romania) for not revealing the truth with regard to the Middle East. All these countries are guilty for maintaining a complicit silence on crimes against humankind:

> Everyone is blamed for the existence of Daesh, everyone! This petty world, including Romania, is guilty of silence. [...] I am a victim of Daesh because the world is accustomed with prejudices. When people see a Muslim, they say terrorist. But there is no clear definition of terrorism. It does not exist! I ask, and I ask again, in order to answer you: what does 'terrorism' mean?

Overall, in the context of the loss of territory and of the Daesh virtual expansion through the Virtual Caliphate, the terrorist organization still remains a threat to regional and global security, with effects on the Romanian national security. It is necessary to identify the risks associated with this virtual expansion, in a wide range of scenarios (in the "three horizons" described above), to propose effective regulatory and action tools, able to respond to the new challenges (ISIS 2.0/ Daesh 2.0), to prevent and combat terrorist attacks, to advocate for a united commitment in international efforts to reduce or even to eradicate the terrorist

phenomenon. From this point of view, there is need for "strengthening international cooperation on counter-terrorism, based on a broader and deeper vision" (02 MCOPU5+RO) and for active approaches, including preparing people for such actions. All of these steps must be taken in strict compliance with international agreements, the principles of democracy and international law and

> with the identification of a reasonable and effective balance between restrictions, coercion and punitive actions, on the one hand, and the unaltered protection of democratic freedoms and rights, including responsible transparency and the right to be informed, on the other hand (02 MCOPU5+RO).

Romania can and must play an active role in order to provide a correct and complete picture of the confrontations in the Middle East, near the areas of its immediate interest, the Extended Black Sea Area, and to contribute to the achievement of a legal framework necessary for the materialization of political decisions.

4.CONCLUSIONS

Through this study we intended to broaden the area of knowledge of the Daesh phenomenon, but, even more important, we managed to identify aspects related to the in-depth analysis of the phenomenon through the interviewed experts. The research method permitted the study of aspects or phenomena occurring in such opaque cultural spaces, whose realities are not correctly and fully reflected through old and new media and which, unfortunately, are not reflected in the Romanian specialized literature, either. The research allowed highlighting the differences in insiders' perception (i.e. natives in Middle East, directly or indirectly affected by the Daesh phenomenon, that know well the terrorist organizations form the interior of their own cultures affected by the effects of terrorist attacks) and outsiders' perception (experts with a potential decision-making role in security policies). From this perspective, the study highlighted the fact the interviewed experts know very well the terrorist phenomenon (including Daesh), except for some particular aspects, affected by the subjective perception or by ideological interests of their parties. The experts even succeeded to predict, based on facts and documents, the physical disappearance of the Islamic Caliphate and the appearance of the Virtual Islamic Caliphate.

The answers given by those who agreed to be part in the investigation based on interview helped to the in-depth understanding of the Daesh

phenomenon. We can conclude that the experts know very well the general issues. In general, the decision-making experts in security policies know very well the phenomenon, identified the manner in which Romania could be affected directly by terrorist attacks, or could respond to challenges posed by the phenomenon of migration.

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