

## **SYRIAN REFUGEES IN ROMANIA: HOSPITALITY VERSUS NATIONAL (IN) SECURITY**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*A SHADOW WAR APPEARS TO BE TAKING PLACE IN SYRIA, WITH AL-QAIDA-ALIGNED GROUPS (OR NOT SO MUCH ALIGNED!) PLAYING AN IMPORTANT PART IN THE FIGHT AGAINST THE FORCES LOYAL TO BASHAR AL-ASSAD'S REGIME. SYRIAN REBELS WOULD BE POORLY ORGANIZED IF THEY WOULD NOT BE SUPPORTED BY AL-QAIDA OR BY THE INFLUX OF JIHADISTS WHICH ENFORCE DISCIPLINE AMONGST REBELS BY RELIGIOUS FERVOR AND BY THE COMBAT EXPERIENCE THEY HAVE ACQUIRED IN AFGHANISTAN, IRAQ, LIBYA AND EGYPT.*

*WESTERN COUNTRIES COULD BE FACED WITH A DANGEROUS SITUATION WHEN THOSE WHO SURVIVE THE CONFLICT IN SYRIA COME IN WESTERN COUNTRIES WITH A JIHADIST EXPERIENCE. IN THIS RESPECT, EUROPEAN STATES MUST DEVELOP A VIABLE STRATEGY ON IMMIGRATION CONTROL, MAINLY FOR ITS MEMBERS STATES WHICH HAVE A MUSLIM POPULATION IN THEIR MIDST. ROMANIA, AS OTHER EUROPEAN STATES, HAS A MUSLIM COMMUNITY COMING FROM SYRIA AND FROM ITS NEIGHBORING STATES. UNFORTUNATELY, SOME OF THESE MUSLIMS ARE KNOWN AS BEING SYMPATHIZERS OF AL-QAIDA-ALIGNED GROUPS ACTING IN SYRIA, WHO CONTINUE TO CONDUCT ACTIVITIES ON THEIR BEHALF AFTER THEIR MOVE TO ROMANIA. FOR INSTANCE, IN DECEMBER 2013, AN AL-QAIDA SITE ANNOUNCED THE DEATH OF ABU MOHAMMAD AL RUMANI (FROM ROMANIA) ON THE BATTLEFIELD IN SYRIA.*

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**KEY WORDS:** REFUGEES, SECURITY, ILLEGAL MIGRATION, TERRORISM

### **INTRODUCTORY NOTE**

After the terrorist attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, a "general uncertainty" or "endless threat" is the major challenge that characterize the new world order. How to distinguish friend from foe? How to delimit the theaters of war? How to assess the duration of hostilities? Because when the enemy is terrorist, it seems downright impossible for it to be located or to anticipate its strategy action.

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The most significant mutation is the end of the era of territoriality - a symbolic end finally imprinted in the collective memory. What most telling evidence of the disappearance of the defense capacity of the territory can we find, other than the terrorist attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001? Strength and weakness, threat and security have become "extraterritorial issues that exceed the territorial application solutions."

In this bleak scenario, the internationalization of terrorism in conjunction with the existence of "state-sponsors" or logistical bases of terrorist organizations on the territory of "failed states" are the asymmetric threats to international security.

### **JIHAD IN SYRIA: AL-QAIDA'S „NEW LIFE”?**

Although the common opinion is that „Arab Spring” destroyed the jihadist ideology, in places where Muslims perceive their economical, social and political situation as being hard, the disillusion generated by this situation creates recruitment opportunities for jihadists.<sup>3</sup>

For this reason, at the periphery of „Arab Spring” blossomed the buds of radicalization, which can be exploited by jihadist groups. Al-Qaida could exploit the events in Libya, and those more recent from Syria, to acquire „new life”.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, developments in Yemen, Egypt, Libya and Syria, placed al-Qaida closer to achieving its objectives of transforming these countries into logistic bases, being possible for jihadist groups to grow and become even more dominant. As such, the West must decide whether to intervene or to adopt a neutral position while al-Qaida-aligned groups are building or expanding bases in North Africa, Iraq and Syria.<sup>5</sup>

According to Philipp Holtmann, a current theme on jihadist forums is the concern that the security services of those countries are too weak, thus they generate the perfect context for the jihadist groups to act. As a result, jihadists have taken advantage of the army and police disorganization, of the civil strife and insurrection, of the access to weapons depots no longer guarded, and of the disillusion of those who had put all their hopes in the regime change, hopes which were dashed.<sup>6</sup>

For instance, in Syria, al-Qaida plays an important role in fighting against forces loyal to Bashar al-Assad's regime. The Syrian rebels would be poorly organized if they wouldn't have al-Qaida in their rank, and if it wouldn't be for the influx of jihadists from Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Jordan, Iraq and North Africa which brought discipline, religious fervor, combat experience from Iraq and funding from Sunni supporters of this group.<sup>7</sup>

Al-Qaida operates in the shadow of the Syrian revolution through Jabhat al-Nusra group (Front to Protect Citizens from of Levant), through Abdullah Azzam and Al Baraa ibn Malik brigades and many other jihadist groups.

For a while, al-Nusra and al-Qaida in Iraq (known as Islamic State for Iraq and Levant – ISIL) fought side by side in Syria. Technically, al-Nusra is an al-Qaida-aligned group, but a rival of al-Qaida in Iraq.

Thus, in early February 2014, al-Qaida's central leadership announced that it had severed ties with the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham. Tensions breached in April 2013

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<sup>3</sup> **Stewart, Scott:** Libya After Gadhafi: Transitioning from Rebellion to Rule, August 24, 2011, [www.stratfor.com](http://www.stratfor.com), accessed at 27.02.2014

<sup>4</sup> Perreault, Laura Julie: Qui succédera à Oussama? La Presse, 02 mai 2011, [www.cyberpresse.ca](http://www.cyberpresse.ca), accessed at 18.05.2014

<sup>5</sup> Scheuer, Michael: Why the Mideast revolts will help al-Qaeda, March 4, 2011, [www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com), accessed at 21.02.2014

<sup>6</sup> Ehrhardt, Christoph: Al Qaida in Libyen. Das Chaos als Chance, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 25 February 2011

<sup>7</sup> Husain, Ed: Al-Qaeda's Specter in Syria, [www.cfr.org](http://www.cfr.org), August 6, 2012, accessed at 17.02.2014

when the leader of the ISIS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, declared that the Iraqi and Syrian factions would now operate together under the name ISIS. Abu Muhammad al-Jolani, al-Nusra's leader, denied Baghdadi's claims. Al-Zawahiri was forced to intervene.<sup>8</sup>

Therefore, in September 2013, al-Zawahiri decided to authorize al-Nusra as the only group empowered by al-Qaida to fight in Syria. Al-Baghdadi refused to obey the decision. Amid disagreements within al-Qaida, a new military alliance was formed, the Islamic Army, which joined brigade components from al-Nusra, Syria Liberation Army brigades, and other independent groups.<sup>9</sup>

It is worth mentioning that Bashar al-Assad's troops, with all the help received from Iran, and Hezbollah, can not cope with the large number of rebel groups. On the other hand, the opposition is unable to control the ground reality and paramilitary groups fighting the Syrian army and Hezbollah. There are hundreds of rebel groups that are very difficult to control, forming alliances every day and who do not always communicate with each other. Battles between al-Qaida brigades, the Islamic Army and the remnants of Syria Liberation Army, on one hand and government troops allied with Hezbollah and other paramilitary groups, on the other hand, continue.

As for the U.S. and Western countries, they want to ensure that al-Qaida will not be able to hijack the Syrian uprising. The fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime can lead to a „sanctuary of jihadists” in Syria, as happened in Afghanistan in the 1990s. Therefore they are concerned to avoid the installation of a state of chaos in Syria, as happened in Iraq during 2003-2007, situation in which the jihadist groups would strengthen their position.<sup>10</sup>

In this respect we must quote Matthew Olsen, who said that “Syria has become the preeminent location for al-Qaida-aligned groups to recruit, and to train and outfit what is now a growing number of extremists, some of whom seek to conduct external attacks”.<sup>11</sup>

### **ROMANIA UNDER THE SPECTER OF JIHADIST THREAT IN SYRIA?**

Romania is under the attention of foreigners originating from known Muslim countries exporting terrorist threat especially as a place of transit, shelter or logistics, level of threat to national security being influenced by the occurrence or perpetuation of violent events in areas affected by terrorism (Afghanistan, Pakistan, Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Turkey, the Palestinian Autonomous Territories, Somalia, Mali, etc.) and by increased anti-Western messages broadcast in fundamentalist Islamic circles.

One factor that has affected the dynamics of threats to national security is the involvement of terrorist organisations in the national territory, in illegal migration activities westward of people from Middle East, Asia and Africa, some of which are known for terrorist activities in their areas of origin.

In this respect, it is worth mentioning that Romania, as other European states, has a Muslim community coming from Syria and from its neighboring states. Unfortunately, some of these Muslims are known as being sympathizers of al-Qaida-aligned groups acting in Syria, who continue to conduct activities on their behalf after their move to Romania. For

<sup>8</sup> [Mendelsohn](#), Barak: After Disowning ISIS, al Qaeda is Back On Top, February 13, 2014, [www.foreignaffairs.com/articles](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles), accessed at 27.05.2014

<sup>9</sup> Ilie, Ana: Retrospectiva 2013: Siria - un razboi al umbrelor si al aparentelor, 31 Decembrie 2013, Ziare.com, accessed at 27.02.2014

<sup>10</sup> **Kaplan, Robert D:** Syria and the Limits of Comparison, August 28, 2013, [www.stratfor.com](http://www.stratfor.com), accessed at 07.06.2014

<sup>11</sup> Editorial: Syria's forgotten war shouldn't be forgotten, 03/12/14, [www.saratogian.com/opinion](http://www.saratogian.com/opinion), accessed at 27.02.2014

instance, in December 2013, an al-Qaida site announced the death of Abu Mohammad al-Rumani (from Romania) on the battlefield in Syria.<sup>12</sup>

In the context of Syrian civil war we must mention that, in 2013, Iraqi citizen Harpah Aldain Nayyef Khalid Salah (aka Salid Harba) and Syrian origin lebanese citizen Zeiab Abdul Rahman (alias Abdul Razak Harba) were expelled and declared undesirable due to their involvement in the promotion of jihadist movements in the Middle East. Those concerned facilitated the illegal entry in Romania of people coming from spaces proliferating terrorist threats and their actions succeeded in religious radicalization (up to an extreme level) of persons who have agreed to combat missions in extremist groups in the Middle East.<sup>13</sup>

### **SYRIAN REFUGEES: BETWEEN THE HUMANITARIAN CRISIS AND ILLEGAL MIGRATION NETWORKS**

The conflict in Syria in March 2011 and has generated one of the most severe humanitarian crises in the world. The international humanitarian response is struggling to keep pace with the rapid developments of the situation in the conflict zone.

On 22 February 2014, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution RES/2139 (2014)<sup>14</sup>, which brings up resolution 2042 (2012), 2043 (2012) and 2118 (2013) and presidential statements of August 3, 2011, 21 March 2012, April 5, 2012 and October 2, 2013. The resolution into question "the unacceptability of violence and their escalation that led to the deaths of more than 100 000 people, including more than 10 000 children, as reported by the Secretary-General and United Nations Secretary General's Special representative for Children and Armed Conflict."<sup>15</sup>

In addition, there are allegations of human rights violations brought by non-governmental parties to the conflict. Observers claim that hundreds of prisoners and political prisoners have died in detention following torture. The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic to the United Nations underlined that "careless manner in which the warring parties out fighting" is the main cause of civilian casualties and the displacement of the population<sup>16</sup>.

This requires access to observers and humanitarian organizations, condemns the terrorist acts that have resulted in countless casualties and material damage, performed by individuals associated with terrorist group Al-Qaeda and similar to those involved.

Although the UN resolution opens new horizons for humanitarian aid, conflict observation and documentation of war crimes, the three years of war have left deep wounds in the bodies and minds of the Syrians. The lack of oversight by international institutions, the civilian population, with international volunteers have tried through various ways and means, tried documenting the conflict, gathering and organizing humanitarian aid internally. They resorted to crowdsourcing for achieving their goals.

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<sup>12</sup> Ilie, Ana: Retrospectiva 2013: Siria - un razboi al umbrelor si al aparentelor, 31 Decembrie 2013, Ziare.com, accessed at 27.02.2014

<sup>13</sup> Popescu, Andrei Luca: Un irakian și un libanez, expulzați din România pentru că promovau și finanțau Jihadul. Ce afaceri aveau cei doi suspecți de terorism, 24.05.2013, <http://www.gandul.info/stiri>, accessed at 27.05.2014

<sup>14</sup>[http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s\\_res\\_2139.pdf](http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_res_2139.pdf)

<sup>15</sup>[http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s\\_res\\_2139.pdf](http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_res_2139.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> Report of Commission of Inquiry on Syria A/HRC/22/59, February 5, 2013

in the bodies and minds of the Syrians. The lack of oversight by international agencies, has left civilian population, along with international volunteers, to try through various ways and means, documenting the conflict, gathering intelligence, and judiciously organizing humanitarian aid internally. They resorted to crowdsourcing for achieving goals.

The events triggered a relentless spiral of repression and protest, and the conflict in Syria has forcibly moved 7 million people from their homes, including 4.5 million internally displaced people and 2.5 million refugees who have fled abroad<sup>17</sup>.

As in all crises of refugees, the majority of those who were inside the country were stranded on the other side of the border. Most of the Syrian refugees is housed in four of the five neighbors of Syria: Lebanon as main receiver with more than 900,000 Registered Refugees UNHCR; Turkey and Jordan each with nearly 600,000 refugees; and Iraq with about 220,000 refugees. Israel, so far, has kept its border closed.

Other refugees have traveled on to other destinations, where they had relatives or friends. The 135,000 Syrian refugees are currently hosted by Egypt, and tens of thousands are in Maghreb countries. By contrast, Europe's response to the refugee crisis was limited and uneven. Moreover, it has been consistently exceeded by these events, as shown in the table.

Europe has taken only a small proportion (2.9 percent) of the total population of Syrian refugees. Between March 2011 and December 2013, 28 Member States (MS) of the European Union (EU) received 69 740 asylum applications from citizens of Syria and issued 41 695 positive decisions. These numbers are small in absolute terms, but they represent only a fraction of which is 2301533 Syrian refugees in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq, Egypt during the same period. The European nations have responded to the refugee crisis unevenly. Only two countries took two-thirds of asylum seekers accepted by the 28 Member States: Sweden and Germany, with respectively 23 110 and 20 700 and 11 495 applications received and 16 610 positive decisions. A third state, Bulgaria, is worth a mention because it received 4545 applications from the beginning of the crisis, 70 percent of them came four months between August and November 2013. Other new states received between 1000 and 3500 applications each and in the remaining 16 states less than 1,000, including Lithuania and Austria, which has not received any asylum seeker in Syria.

Before the riots, there was a regular flow of Syrian asylum seekers in Europe. If the refugee crisis grew in the second half of 2011, existing flows were simply magnified, EU28 received almost a third of Syrian refugees in the first year of the crisis. But Europe has opened the door for refugees in proportion to their departure from Syria and share the global refugee flows fell to 4.1 percent in 2012, and to 2.3 percent in 2013. The majority of Syrian asylum seekers are able to submit an application to the EU refugee status or temporary protection (86.7 percent of positive decisions in 2011-13), which is a sign of openness.

A negative aspect is the number of Syrian refugees who turn to smugglers to reach Europe increased at the beginning of the crisis, something which is of course a sign of closure. Reports of Syrians who turned to smuggling by sea in Greece or Italy, compared to those who regularly seek asylum in EU28 increased from 14.7 percent in 2011 to 40.9 percent in 2012 and 44.7 percent in 2013.

These 44.7 percent of those who applied for asylum in Europe last year failed to reach the territory of a Member State. That number has increased from 947 in 2011-8509 to

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<sup>17</sup> Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) at <http://www.unocha.org/crisis/syria>; for refugees in countries neighbouring on Syria by the UN Refugee Agency at <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>; and for refugees in the EU by Eurostat at <http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/population/data/database>.

2012 and 18972 in 2013 should be interpreted as a response to the obstacles set by Greece and Bulgaria to border protection with Turkey - those police patrols or wire fences. Împinși de disperare, mulți dintre acești oameni își încearcă norocul trecând granița, ilegal, în țări din Uniunea Europeană. Greece is a good example. In the three years since the beginning of the conflict in Syria, Greek police and port authorities arrested Syrian refugees 16211 illegal at sea trying to reach another European destination, because Greece has a reputation of not granting asylum to Syrian (25 cases of positive decision of 1015 applications received).

In the past two years, Romania has become one of their entrance doors to the West. According to Silviu Turza from the Inspectorate General for Immigration, if in 2012 Romania had only 269 asylum applications from Syrian refugees, in 2013 there was a dramatic increase in asylum applications to 1018 by this national group. Most claims are made by Syrians who have legally entered Romania. There are also refugees who risk their lives turning to illegal migration networks. The smuggling problem has acquired a special scale. Recently, prosecutors from the Combating and Investigation Terrorism Directorate removed a network of smugglers specializing in illegal shipments of Syrian refugees. According to DIICOT, Syrian refugees arriving illegally in Romania, are transported through the crossings in Romania, hidden in trucks or sea freight. <sup>18</sup>

### **INSTEAD OF CONCLUSIONS ...**

On the activity of jihadists in Syria stands as eloquent testimony that of Bakri Sabbagh, Syrian refugee in Romania, according to which two boys who stationed in a car listening to radio were decapitated, with cold blood by some young people aged between 20 and 30 years, with witnesses, on the grounds that radio listening is considered a "sin" of by them. <sup>19</sup>

In this context it is worth mentioning that at the end of 2011, an Iraqi citizen named Mohamad Al Dulaimi Asae Ali was indicted in Romania on charges of illegal migration through his network that coordinated the route through Iraq - Bulgaria - Romania - Hungary, Western Europe, which facilitated access to our country of Iraqis wanted in their country of origin for terrorist acts for al Qaeda in Iraq.

We cannot help but wonder how many human traffickers like Ali Mohamad Al Dulaimi Asae facilitate access in Romania of jihadists from Syria who beheads people whose only "sin" is listening to the radio in the car?

It is the duty of intelligence for such a thing not to happen! Because in this era marked by global jihadist insurgency, intelligence can afford few mistakes!

In this sense, the mission of the Romanian Intelligence Service, the national authority in preventing and combating terrorism is to protect the public from terrorist threats through intelligence and cooperation at national and international level in order to identify and eliminate vulnerabilities and threat factors to Romania generated by terrorist organizations and to prevent the importation of terrorism, including from networks of illegal migration from areas of conflict to our country and Europe.

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<sup>18</sup> \*\*\* [Din interior. Război, traficanti, durere. Povetile refugiaților sirieni din Romnia, http://www.digi24.ro/Stiri/Digi24/Special/Reportaj](http://www.digi24.ro/Stiri/Digi24/Special/Reportaj), accesat la 17.06.2014

<sup>19</sup> \*\*\* [Din interior. Război, traficanti, durere. Povetile refugiaților sirieni din Romnia, http://www.digi24.ro/Stiri/Digi24/Special/Reportaj](http://www.digi24.ro/Stiri/Digi24/Special/Reportaj), 16

