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The Italian shared house for combating terrorism[1]

Alessandro Boncio

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Abstract

Un aspetto spesso trascurato nello spiegare l'efficienza italiana nel contrasto e prevenzione del terrorismo, sia esso interno o internazionale, è rappresentato dalla struttura istituzionale creata nel 2004 per la gestione del problema. A tale proposito, il ruolo del Comitato di Analisi Strategica Antiterrorismo (CASA), il centro italiano di fusione antiterrorismo, si è rivelato essenziale. La necessità di tali organizzazioni fu una diretta conseguenza degli eventi dell'11 settembre 2001, quando gli Stati Uniti avviarono la costituzione di un "fusion center" antiterrorismo, successivamente seguiti da altri paesi europei a seguito degli attacchi jihadisti di Madrid e Londra.

Il compito principale del Comitato era originariamente quello di prevenire attentati terroristici attraverso la condivisione di informazioni in tempo reale tra gli attori statali del comparto sicurezza. Dalla sua creazione, tuttavia, i compiti del CASA sono cambiati ed ampliati: il terrorismo "homegrown" (la fase di leaderless jihad), i Foreign Terrorist Fighters e la recrudescenza dell'estremismo violento interno, hanno portato a un'evoluzione delle competenze del CASA. Il Comitato si è rivelato particolarmente utile nel rafforzare la sinergia tra tutti gli attori coinvolti nelle attività antiterrorismo, rappresentando anche un centro fiorente per "istituzionalizzare" la cultura del sistema di sicurezza nazionale derivante da precedenti esperienze nella lotta al terrorismo interno (Le Brigate rosse, Organizzazioni neofasciste) e di criminalità organizzata (Mafia, Camorra, N'drangheta).

[1] Disclaimer: The original paper was used as a contribution to a report commissioned by the International Centre for Counter Terrorism – The Hague; R. van der Veer, W. Bos, L. van der Heide, "Fusion Centres in Six European Countries: Emergence, Roles and Challenges", *International Centre for Counter Terrorism – The Hague*, February 4, 2019, *https://icct.nl/publication/fusion-centres-in-six-european-countries-emergence-roles-and-challenges/*. All the information originates from open sources and/or personal research and study. The contents of this publication, as well as any mistake or inaccuracy in the text, are the sole responsibility of the author.

A causa del numero non elevato di eventi legati al terrorismo in Italia, esiste solo una percezione generica del ruolo svolto dal CASA nell'opinione pubblica nazionale e, più in generale, tra gli osservatori internazionali, poiché il Comitato viene raramente menzionato come uno strumento sinergico antiterrorismo. Tuttavia, la struttura si è rivelata strumento flessibile ed efficiente e, nonostante la sua ambizione di istituzionalizzare l'approccio italiano al controterrorismo, non è stata gravata dalle pastoie burocratiche che troppo spesso caratterizzano la pubblica amministrazione.

An often overlooked aspect in explaining the Italian efficiency in countering and preventing terrorism, be it domestic or international, is the institutional setting established in 2004 to manage this issue. In this respect, the role of the Antiterrorism Strategic Analysis Committee (CASA – Comitato di Analisi Strategica Antiterrorismo), the Italian counterterrorism fusion centre, has proved to be essential. While the need for centers like this was a direct consequence of 9/11, indeed being the US those starting this kind of center, other European countries started working on similar centers as a consequence of homegrown jihadist attacks.
The Committee primary task was originally to prevent terrorist-related incidents through real-time information sharing among state security agencies.. Since its creation however, the CASA chores widened and changed; homegrown terrorism (leaderless jihad phase), Foreign Terrorist Fighters and the resurgence of domestic violent extremism led to an evolution in the CASA competencies. The Committee proved to be particularly useful in strengthening the synergy between all the actors involved in counterterrorism activities, also representing a thriving hub to 'institutionalise' the national security system culture originating from previous experiences in countering domestic terrorism (The Red Brigades, Neofascist Organizations) and organized crime groups (Mafia, Camorra, N'drangheta).
Due to the contained number of terrorism-related events in Italy, there is just a basic perception of the role played by CASA in the national public opinion and, more broadly, among international observers, as the Committee is seldom mentioned as a synergic counterterrorism tool. The Committee however, proved to be a flexible, efficient tool and, despite its ambition to institutionalise the Italian approach to counterterrorism, was not burdened by the classic bureaucratic problems often characterizing the public administration. An in-depth analysis of this fusion centre can also highlight lessons to be learned for other countries facing the same type of threat as Italy.

Keywords

Antiterrorism, jihadismo, estremismo violento, intelligence, forze di polizia

Counterterrorism, jihadism, violent extremism, intelligence, law enforcement

1. Introduction

On May 2018, fourteen people were arrested in two different counterterrorism operations in Italy. The Financial Police investigated an international *hawala* circuit, uncovering the collection of more than two millions of Euro as a money-laundering scheme intended to finance the acquisition

of firearms for terrorist use[2]; at the same time, the State Police investigation revealed a logistic cell in Sardinia that was responsible for the illegal money allocation to the former Jabhat al-Nusra terrorist group. Finally, police undercover personnel in cooperation with intelligence agencies successfully penetrated both cells and collected intelligence to corroborate the investigations[3].

On March 2019 instead, The State Police arrested the first Foreign Terrorist Fighter returnee on Italian soil, after receiving a detailed warning of his presence near Naples from the Internal Information and Security Agency, later corroborated by Interpol[4]. The Algerian national was apprehended after returning from Syria where he fought alongside ISIS; the man lived in Italy from 2003 to 2013 and was later radicalized in Algeria before leaving for the SIRAQ region.

Both police operations are just examples of recent counterterrorism activities prompted and coordinated by the Antiterrorism Strategic Analysis Committee (C.A.S.A. – Comitato di Analisi Strategica Antiterrorismo), the Italian counterterrorism fusion centre. Its acronym means "house" and the Committee is indeed the place where law enforcement and intelligence agencies are sharing real-time intelligence regarding terrorism[5].

National counterterrorism fusion centres were initially introduced in the United States after the catastrophic 9/11 events, but effective cooperation and information sharing later became a prominent subject of consideration also in Europe after the rise of homegrown jihadism; this led to the evaluations of existing counterterrorism structures in the wake of the homegrown terrorism generation emergence and to the establishment of CT fusion centres, often following deadly terrorist attacks.

In November 2003, a suicide attack against the Italian military contingent deployed in Al-Nassiriyah (Iraq) killed 28 (19 of whom where Carabinieri and Army personnel) and wounded 58 individuals; subsequently, the Political Authority realized that, to prevent further similar events in the country and

[2] Hawala is an Islamic informal system of value transfer via a network of brokers (hawaladars), without material exchange of cash. The transactions are based on the honor and system; trust and extensive use of connections, are the components that distinguish it from other remittance systems

[3] V.N., "Money transfer illegali per finanziare la jihad: arrestati 14 fiancheggiatori", *Il Sole 24 Ore*, May 10, 2018, https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/notizie/2018-05-10/terrorismo-arrestati-14-fiancheggiatori-formazioni-jihadiste-081156.shtml?uuid=AEGPd1lE.

[4] "terrorista islamico arrestato dalla Polizia di Caserta. Era ricercato internazionale!, *Caserta Web*, March 1, 2019, https://casertaweb.com/notizie/terrorista-islamico-ricercato-internazionale-arrestato-dalla-polizia-caserta.

[5] Lower Chamber Report on the activities of the Counterterrorism Strategic Analysis Committee, March 11th, 2015, http://documenti.camera.it/leg17/resoconti/commissioni/stenografici/html/30/indag/c30_flussi/2015/03/11/indice_stenografico.0023.html.

abroad, an ad-hoc structure was required, to share and analyze all relevant information coming from different CT agencies. In May 2004, after a trial period, the Antiterrorism Strategic Analysis Committee was officially established with a Ministry of Interior Decree, which disciplined the National Plan for the Management of Terrorist Events[6]. The Committee is directly linked to the National Crisis Unit, another body summoned by the Interior Minister ahead of events with national security implications[7].

2. Mandate and competences

The C.A.S.A. strength originates from its legal mandate, that binds the whole Italian security information structure to cooperate with it. The Committee is a permanent structure, reporting directly to the Minister of Interiors, with meetings held on a weekly basis to share and analyze the most recent information associated with the domestic and international terrorist threat on Italian soil and abroad. Moreover, the Interior Minister can request additional meetings whenever deemed appropriate, due to ongoing or imminent events relevant for the national security[8].

C.A.S.A. primary competence is to analyze information originating from law enforcement and intelligence agencies, as well as from international cooperation and liaison officers contributions[9]. Ongoing investigations and monitoring activities are discussed during the meetings to assess the situation, foresee possible future evolutions and trends and analyze possible course of actions to be implemented. Warnings received are also examined and different actors are subsequently tasked with the evaluation of the information and the sources reliability.

Another C.A.S.A responsibility is to plan and coordinate activities for the prevention of terrorist incidents on Italian soil, monitoring (among others) radicalization hubs, online terrorist propaganda, prison situations and radi-

[6] The May 6, 2004 Ministry of Interior decree was classified on October 2, 2004 for national security reasons.

[7] Ministry of Interior official website http://www.interno.gov.it/it/temi/sicurezza/antiterrorismo.

[8] Parliamentary Annual report, XV Legislature (April 2006 - April 2008), pp.11-12, http://leg15.camera.it/_dati/leg15/lavori/documentiparlamentari/indiceetesti/033/001/00000001.pdf.

[9] For instance, after the Westminster attack on March 22, 2017, the C.A.S.A. was called for an extraordinary meeting and the Scotland Yard Liaison Officer in Rome participated to the reunion. Same thing happened after the Manchester terrorist attack on May 22, 2017; *Ministry of Interior press releases* http://www.interno.gov.it/it/sala-stampa/comunicati-stampa/antiterrorismo-comitato-analisi-strategica-intensifica-misure-sicurezza-e-vigilanza; http://www.interno.gov.it/it/sala-stampa/comunicati-stampa/comitato-analisi-strategica-antiterrorismo-dopo-i-tragici-fatti-manchester.

calized individuals. A Technical Working Group – composed by Committee representatives - establishes the procedures for implementing preventive measures approved by C.A.S.A. and delegated to the Police Authorities on the national territory[10].

Finally, the Committee mandate authorize it to establish bilateral relationships with other counterterrorism fusion centers, also outside the European borders. For instance, since the foundation of the Italian fusion center, Italy and the United States have signed a cooperation agreement to share information and monitor individuals investigated for terrorist activities; the data received are managed directly by the C.A.S.A., who provides the law enforcement agencies with all the necessary information to perform their duties[11].

3. Composition and evolution of the C.A.S.A.

The Committee is practically a joint operation room chaired by the Central Director of the Prevention Police or by the Interior Minister itself, and hosts the counterterrorism highest representatives of the law enforcement and intelligence agencies, the Financial Police and Penitentiary Administration Department (D.A.P.). Moreover, liaison officers from other countries might be invited to the meetings to provide qualified contributions. The minimalist structure and the weekly meetings make C.A.S.A. a flexible supra-agency working as a bottom up assessment tool and as top-down executive instrument at the same time.

Both Italian law enforcement agencies (Carabinieri Corps and State Police) have general jurisdiction on counterterrorism investigations, with national, regional and provincial specialized units fulfilling the investigative activities to counter domestic and international terrorism.

The intelligence agencies (Internal Information and Security Agency – A.I.S.I., and External Information and Security Agency – A.I.S.E.) counterterrorism main task is instead to collect and analyze information (intelligence activities), to be provided (also in cooperation with similar agencies abroad) to law enforcement agencies, to ensure police investigations and assess priorities in countering the risks.

[10] "A colloquio con il Presidente del Comitato Analisi Strategica Antiterrorismo", *Gnosis – Rivista Italiana di Intelligence*, op. cit.

[11] "A colloquio con il Presidente del Comitato Analisi Strategica Antiterrorismo", *Gnosis – Rivista Italiana di Intelligence*, op. cit.

The financial Police is a specialized force, usually tasked by the National Anti-Mafia and Anti-Terrorism Prosecutor for the investigations on the subject of money laundering and terrorism financing[12].

Finally, the Penitentiary Administration Department is responsible for monitoring and investigating inmates charged or convicted with terrorist offences, as well as common criminals presumed at risk of violent radicalization[13].

As already highlighted, since its establishment the Committee evaluates alerts and ongoing investigations for potential terrorist threats. In time however, the fusion center competences evolved and adapted to the changing terrorist landscape, so that the C.A.S.A. can be currently considered both a strategic and a tactical tool in preventing and countering terrorism.

At the strategic level the Committee "*analyze and evaluate relevant information related to domestic and international terrorism*" in an international cooperation framework, providing the Political Authority with the significant elements required to evaluate the risk and originate directives. In a top-down model, it is through the C.A.S.A. that coordination in the investigative activities is fulfilled and good practices from other countries are discussed[14]. Moreover, the national level of terrorism alert is eventually set by the Minister of Interior through advice from the Committee after its comprehensive assessment of the situation[15].

At the tactical level, the weekly meetings allow data to flow during the evaluation over the ongoing investigations and intelligence activities. Bottom-up information from law enforcement and intelligence agencies concerning individuals believed to be at risk of violent radicalization, also provide the Minister of Interiors with the elements to evaluate the adoption of possible courses of action and limit the terrorist threat. An important caveat to this activity is the tool of deportation for reasons of State Security, frequently used to prevent the spreading of jihadist ideology; the level of radicalization

[12] Guardia di Finanza website, http://www.gdf.gov.it/chi-siamo/organizzazione/compiti-istituzionali/antiterrorismo.

[13] "Relazione al Parlamento sull'attività delle Forze di Polizia e sullo stato dell'ordine e della sicurezza e sulla criminalità organizzata", *Dipartimento dell'Amministrazione Penitenziaria*, ed.2013, pp.1304-1307, http://www.camera.it/_dati/leg17/lavori/documentiparlamentari/indiceetesti/038/002v02/00000038.pdf; "Sventati attentati grazie al lavoro di prevenzione in carcere della Polizia Penitenziaria", *Polizia Penitenziaria*, January 19, 2019, https://www.poliziapenitenziaria.it/sventati-attentati-grazie-alla-prevenzione-in-carcere-cosi-il-procuratore-nazionale-cafiero-de-raho.

[14] F. Roberti, L. Giannini, "Manuale dell'antiterrorismo", *Laurus Robuffo*, 2016, pp. 39-40.

[15] "Come funziona il Comitato Antiterrorismo", *Il Sole 24 ore*, August 19, 2017, http://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/notizie/2017-08-18/come-funziona-comitato-antiterrorismo-211636.shtml?uuid=AEs9moEC.

reached by monitored individuals is discussed during the C.A.S.A. meetings and proposals of deportation decrees are consequently examined[16].

Since 2014 the Committee also implemented a list of foreign terrorist fighters (Italian citizens, foreigners resident in Italy and Italian citizens residing elsewhere), mapping routes to and from fighting zones, facilitators and other relevant investigative information.

To highlight some figures and activities of the C.A.S.A., in 2017 the Committee (summoned in permanent session since September 2014) held fifty regular meetings and ten emergency reunions; 806 topics were examined, 420 alerts were evaluated and 105 deportation decrees were issued as a result of consultation in the Committee[17].

4. Conclusions

The "new" terrorist threat is fluid in its semblance, transnational, cybernetic and often tangentially linked to criminality. To counter such complex phenomenon, the Italian C.A.S.A. ensure a perfect synergy between all actors involved in fighting terrorism and perfectly represent the national security system culture originating from its previous experience with past domestic terrorism and organized crime groups[18]. The Committee features, as a strategic structure and as an operative body tasked with investigative and intelligence analysis, makes it a ductile, effective, non-bureaucratic tool, characterized by the rapidity in the acquisition, sharing and verification of the information, that enables better operational analysis and the exchange of actionable intelligence that the Minister of Interior could implement through local units on the territory. As a former Director of the Italian Intelligence stated, "*We learned a very harsh lesson during our domestic terrorism years; from that we understood how important is it to maintain a constant dialogue at the operational level between intelligence and law enforcement actors*"[19].

[16] 2018 Intelligence Agencies Annual Report to the Parliament, *Sistema di Informazione per la Sicurezza della Repubblica*, February 2018, p.86, https://www.sicurezzanazionale.gov.it/sisr.nsf/relazione-2018.html.

[17] Annual report to the Parliament, "Law enforcement agencies activities, National Security and Public Order situation and organized crime groups overview", *Ministry of Interior*, 2017, p.11, http://www.interno.gov.it/sites/default/files/relazione_al_parlamento_anno_2017_.pdf.

[18] M. Minniti, "Le minacce per l'intelligence" p.163, in "L'Italia e la minaccia jihadista. Quale politica estera?", *Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale - ISPI*, January 28, 2015, https://www.ispionline.it/it/EBook/L%27italia%20e%20la%20minaccia%20jihadista.pdf.

[19] S. Kirchgaessner, L. Tondo, "why has Italy been spared mass terror attacks in recent years?" *The Guardian*, June 23, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/23/why-has-italy-been-spared-mass-terror-attacks-in-recent-years.

Due to the lower numbers of terrorism related events in Italy, there is just a generic perception of the C.A.S.A. in the public opinion, as the Committee is seldom mentioned as a counterterrorism synergic tool. Political and judiciary officials however, praise the structure as a virtuous model and counterterrorism analysts are well aware of its inherent value. The Committee evolution in its 15 years of existence reflect the growth of homegrown terrorism (the *leaderless jihad* phase), the Foreign Terrorist Fighters phenomenon, the resurgence of right wing extremism, and confirm the commitment to the prevention of terrorist related risks, highlighted by the extent of the information exchange held, regarding the entire spectrum of the jihadist declinations, be it current or potential[20].

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[20] 2018 Intelligence Agencies Annual Report to the Parliament, *Sistema di Informazione per la Sicurezza della Repubblica*, op. cit. p. 76.

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