

Chile, domestic security threats and intelligence challenges

Matteo Pugliese

Chile's challenges

The choice of Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi to begin his first visit in Latin America from Santiago, the last 23 of October, highlights the strategic role that Italy assigns to Chile, as leading country in South America. Chile is trying to position itself as the regional business platform, nevertheless it still faces many security threats. The 2005 report of the US Embassy in Chile, addressed to the State Department, emphasizes: "While Chile officially condemns terrorism and terrorist organizations, there is evidence of some private support among small groups in Chile for terrorist organizations such as Hizballah, anti-U.S. Islamist groups, FARC and anti-U.S. Bolivarian groups."

The Mapuche insurgency

The most serious issue affects the Mapuche natives, mainly settled in the southern region of Araucania. The Santiago government is reluctant to openly talk about terrorism, but in 2015 the Overseas Security Advisory Council (OSAC), a body of the US State Department, does acknowledge the existence of terrorism and rates its intensity as low. This report was hailed by the opposition parties as a step forward for the admission of the problem. Diplomatic cables recently released by WikiLeaks indicate that the Chilean government solicited the U.S. intelligence to investigate the Mapuche and FBI took charge of it between 2008 and 2010.

Out of 17 million people in Chile, the Mapuche represent about one million, however, the 1980 Constitution enacted by Pinochet does not mention indigenous peoples. Natives claim the free exploitation of the land, which is sacred in their tradition, but this collides with government concessions to logging, water and other raw materials corporations.

While the majority of Mapuche is peaceful people, several extremist groups usually target trucks travelling the Chilean highways from north to south. According to the natives, truckers represent the policy of corporations that plunder the land and damage the traditional economy. The attacks are carried out through arsons, roadblocks and brutal riots with Carabineros. Until 2014, Santiago administration

used to prosecute such attacks with the anti-terrorism legislation, but a ruling by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights has considerably restricted its use. In May 2015, the Interior Undersecretary Mahmoud Aleuy visited Araucania, as to meet the truckers' unions. In accordance with the district attorney, eight trucks and two houses had already been torched since the beginning of the year. Aleuy declared it was the action of "criminals exploiting the Mapuche cause".

In August 2015, a group of around forty Mapuche occupied the Conadi HQ in Temuco, the regional capital. Conadi is the body entitled to deal with indigenous affairs. After 21 days of occupation, the 7 of September at 5 am, special forces from Carabineros (GOPE) raided the occupied building and 31 mapuche were arrested. Conadi director Alberto Pizarro affirmed that the intervention had been approved by the government, which also had ordered the Carabineros of escorting the commercial trucks with armoured vehicles along the Route 5.

The last 29 of January 2016, one of the most serious outbreaks of violence occurred. The Carabineros responsible for protecting a timber company (Forestal Arauco) were caught in an ambush near Lanco, Los Rios region, by twenty hooded assailants who shot with rifles against the soldiers, wounding two in the face and in the stomach. Later, the raiders burned down six between agricultural machinery and company's vans. Although arsons are daily actions, armed attacks targeting Carabineros are quite rare. The regional government and the Interior Ministry invoked the application of the anti-terrorism act.

There are several pages on social networks supporting the Mapuche cause, such as Kizugünewtun ("Independence"), which counts more than six thousand followers on Facebook and updates on the movements of Carabineros across the region. People there openly talk about secession, insurgency and reunification with Mapuche of Argentina. There are also statements in support of the Palestinian knives Intifada or the Kurdish struggle. Indeed, the unsolved conflict and the violence have enraged the companies, the situation might also discourage tourism in one of the most attractive regions of Chile.

The anarchist threat

From 2008 to 2014, more than 261 improvised explosive devices (IED) have been left. In 2006, one of them exploded at the entrance of the Chilean intelligence HQ, but the most serious attack took place the 8 of September 2014 in Santiago, at the Escuela Militar subway stop, in the wealthy neighborhood of Las Condes. The IED was made up of a fire extinguisher filled with two kilos of gunpowder and a clockwork

system. It was placed in a trash-bin and injured 14 people. Three suspected anarchists were arrested and are awaiting trial. In February 2015 another bomb, formed of shrapnel, exploded in front of a church, again in the Las Condes district.

Triangulation with FARC and the Communist Party

The connection between Mapuche extremism and anarchist movement shall not be underestimated. The General Prosecutor of Colombia has recently declassified 300 emails of Raul Reyes, the guerrilla leader of FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia). Some of these emails concern a possible guerrilla-training for the Mapuche, supervised by the FARC, with the mediation of some members of the Chilean Communist Party (part of Bachelet's majority). Undersecretary Aleuy confirmed these contacts, nevertheless he stressed that the plan has always remained at a theoretical level.

The Palestinian community and the Islamist threat

We shall also consider the Palestinian community in Chile, the largest outside Arab countries, around 400 thousand people. Actually, the first Palestinian surge moved to Chile in the late Nineteenth century, coming from christian villages of the West Bank: Bethlehem, Beit Jala, Beit Sahur and Safafa. The first migrants, who professed Syriac-Orthodox faith, fled from the Ottoman oppression and had not so much in common with modern Palestinians. However, the Palestinian community in Chile is a powerful political lobby, in fact President Bachelet summoned the Israeli ambassador during the Gaza invasion. The Chilean football team 'Club Palestino' is very popular amongst the youth. The Federation of Palestinians in Chile asked the government to break the diplomatic relations with Israel. This organization often leads protests which turn out into slogans against the Jews and Israel. The Federation's leaders and the Palestinian ambassador in Santiago (Chile officially recognises Palestine) do not consider Hamas a terrorist organization. The Jewish community in Chile counts around 25 thousands people and it includes some MPs. According to a leaked US cable, in 2008 Israel was monitoring the growing number of Muslims immigrate to Chile and asked the Santiago administration to help in monitoring the Iranian ambassador and 37 Palestinian resettled in Chile by the UN programme.

Until today, only the young Bastián Alexis Vásquez Núñez, son of Chilean emigrants in Europe and converted in Barcelona, joined Isis and died fighting in Syria. The above-mentioned 2005 report of the US Embassy in Chile states: "Because Chile does not officially recognize Iran's Hizballah as a terrorist organization, Hizballah is

permitted to function as a charitable organization in northern Chile". Some evidences suggest there may be financing coming out of Iquique for radical MENA groups.

The Chilean intelligence

Since the end of the dictatorship, intelligence has been marginalized. This choice was due to the power of Dina, Pinochet's secret police. Nowadays, the National Intelligence Agency (ANI) is the only intelligence service in Chile, with 135 employees, compared with the 1200 of the Argentinian counterpart. Since its foundation in 2004, the Chilean agency was directed by Gustavo Villalobos, a lawyer close to the Socialist Party of President Bachelet. After a short and controversial mandate under Gonzalo Yusef, Villalobos was appointed back. Carabineros, Policia de Investigaciones (PDI) and military intelligence share informations only once a month, when the chiefs meet together. Interior Minister Peñailillo asked the Carabineros to merge the Intelligence division under the same general responsible for counter-terrorism. At the same time, ANI has started to cooperate with FBI and the agencies of France, Germany and Spain, in order to keep abreast. By now, the agency is only located in Santiago, but it is planning the opening of other regional branches. The main problem affects wiretapping, since ANI does not have its own technical equipment. Moreover, only the military intelligence and the police are authorized to deploy undercover agents.

The Chilean government has proposed a modest reform to increase the capabilities of the agency, however part of the majority is reluctant. The US is concerned about the Chinese intelligence collection activity in Chile, especially on trade and raw materials. In order to ensure an effective action in the fight against terrorism and to guarantee the regional security, it will be necessary to reform Chilean intelligence's jurisdiction and powers.

Originally published in Italian by Lookout News (February 2016)