



# INVISIBLE DOG

*INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM*

ISSUE #24 DECEMBER 2013



[www.invisible-dog.com](http://www.invisible-dog.com)

[invisibledog@email.com](mailto:invisibledog@email.com)

---

## SINAI, NO MAN'S LAND

61.000 square Kilometers, a population of roughly 6 or 7 hundred thousand Bedouins divided into a dozen nomad tribes, an inhospitable land without resources, an economy based on contraband and drugs, on the traffic of arms and of human beings, a business with a net worth of 3 to 5 million dollars per year. This was the Sinai yesterday. Today there are additional ingredients to the cocktail: the growing diffusion of the Salafite creed, Islamic extremism and terrorism.

All of this is a result of the explosive social context of Egypt, where we have seen – in just two years' time – the popular revolt, the fall of Hosni Mubarak, the rise to power of the Muslim Brothers, their successive ousting and the re-inauguration of a military regime. During these years, the Sinai went from being a lawless territory in the framework of the preservation of a fragile peace with Israel (the Bedouins were left alone as they carried on their illegal activities) to becoming a frontier land where all those looking to feed disorder and war are provided with access to a 200 Km-long border with Israel and a 12-13 Km-long border with the Gaza strip.

The popular uprising of 2011 had initially forced the military authorities to release all the individuals that had been found guilty of crimes connected to Islamic fanaticism. These were followed by mass break-outs from prison of common criminals. The majority of these settled in the Sinai, where control by the central government had become weaker and where the possibility of moving freely allowed for both acts of terror and other illegal activities.

What happens today in the Sinai is not caused by the nomad and Bedouin populations that inhabit the territory. These have never cultivated Salafite ideals (Islamic extremism has never been a part of the Bedouin culture) or terrorist tendencies. The responsibility for the Sinai becoming a no man's land lies with the new professionals of terrorism that scour the world looking for a geographical collocation that will allow them to carry out their acts of terror. Today this opportunity is made available by the geographical location of the Sinai and by the weakness of Cairo's military authority. A situation that has progressively deteriorated after the ousting and arrest of Mohamed Morsi. Now even the Bedouins, whom had voted for Morsi during the last elections, have coloured their illegal activities with political meaning, sometimes even by joining the extremist fringes.

## **Terrorism**

In August 2011, after an attack against a police station in Al Arish, there were rumors about a group with a destructive name and agenda: “Al Qaeda in the Sinai peninsula”. A tag that seemed similar to “Al Qaeda in the Arab peninsula”, a group active in Yemen.

A few months after the attack, another group surfaced, the “Ansar al Jihad” (Partisans of the Jihad). The group announced its adhesion to the present leader of Al Qaeda, Ayman al Zawahiri whom, we should never forget, is an Egyptian national. From that moment on, groups and factions have proliferated in the entire country: “Gamaat Ansar al Sharia” (The organization of the partisans of the Shaaria), founded in October 2012, then “Al Taliah al Salafyah al Mujahedyah Ansar al Shaaria” (The fighting Salafite Avant-guard of the partisans of the Shaaria), founded in January 2013.

These last groups have the common “Ansar al Sharia” suffix in their name, the same that became widely used in every north African country and which symbolizes the affiliation to Al Qaeda and to the defunct Osama bin Laden. In Libya this organization has been responsible for the murder of the US ambassador in Benghazi. However, most of the Egyptian terrorist organizations have their origin in the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, a terrorist group that has existed for several years in Egypt and which has gained strength from the recent internal political turmoil. It is not by chance that one of the rising stars of Egyptian Islamic extremism – which is slowly mutating into terrorism – is Mohamed al Zawahiri, brother of the more famous Ayman and who was released from Egyptian prisons in March 2012.

In addition to the Islamic Jihad, we have the same old names and brands: Tawhid wal Jihad (Unicity and Jihad) and Takhir wal Hijra (Expiation and Pilgrimage, whose leader in the Sinai, Abdul Fattah Hassan Hussein, was recently arrested). These groups have historical ties to the Muslim Brothers. In addition to them, there are the various militias present in the Sinai, like that of Salem Abu Lafi, which is more like a gang of criminals rather than a group of terrorists. As with Algeria, Mali and other north African and sub-Saharan countries, the operative groups are called “Kataeb” (battalions), the various chieftains are self-proclaimed “Emirs” (a hybrid between a military and a religious leader) and the final goal is that of creating an independent Islamic emirate in the Sinai.

There is no certain data available on the numbers of members in these armed groups. The Egyptian authorities say that they are roughly 1 thousand, but in reality they are probably twice that many, even though it is sometimes difficult to distinguish the criminal activity from the claims of the Bedouin and from the actual terrorist activity. The data on their weaponry are more punctual: GRAD missiles, anti-tank weapons, mortars and anti-aircraft machine guns.

The return to power of the army in Cairo – yes, it's a fact, they are in power – has produced an escalation of terrorist attacks in the Sinai, both against the Egyptian army, the police (the last being a car-bomb that killed 10 soldiers and wounded another 35 in Al Arish on November 20, 2013. In August of the same year, 28 soldiers had been kidnapped and beheaded in Rafah), against the UN and of course against Israel (suffices to remember the penetration and attack of August 2011 that caused the death of 6 civilians and 2 soldiers).

The Sinai is presently a full-blown battlefield. The Israelis use drones, incursions and targeted attacks in the area while the Egyptian army also carries out raids and anti-terror operations – sometimes alone and sometimes with the help of the Bedouin – as a response to the terrorist attacks.

### **First problem: The Gaza strip.**

The border between the Sinai and the Gaza strip was a hot spot in the past and is even hotter today. Some tribes that inhabit the area near Gaza (especially the Tarabin and the Sawarka) have recently announced the formation of a “Council of War” together with a number of Jihad militias. Under the rule of Hosni Mubarak, the relationships and commerce with Gaza were always subordinated to the control of the army. Some traffics were unofficially allowed thanks to the high level of corruption of the police forces, but there was the clear will to keep the minimum social and sanitary assistance within acceptable levels in Gaza. With the advent of Hamas in 2007, Cairo's supervision had become more stringent. Then, Morsi's election turned the tables, due to the strong tie between Hamas and the Muslim Brothers, traffics and contraband to and from the Palestinian enclave had begun growing again. Morsi's downfall and the resurgence of the military regime are, commercially speaking, a negative event for the Bedouin.

One of the first initiatives by General Mohamed Fareed Al Tohami, sworn enemy of the Muslim Brothers (he was accused of corruption by Morsi) and now leader of the General Intelligence Service (Gihaz al-Mukhabarat al Amma), was that of shutting down a good part of the tunnels that connect Egypt to Gaza. Some were inundated with mud, others were destroyed and others yet were left operative to provide the Palestinians with medicines, car fuel and foodstuffs. The traffic in arms, including the Iranian missiles, was blocked. The Egyptian military is especially afraid of an alliance between the Palestinian extremist groups and the Egyptian Islamic ones.

### **Second problem: The Suez canal**

The control of the Sinai put the Cairo authorities face to face with an ulterior problem: that of providing security for navigation of the Suez canal. In August 2013 a Chinese ship was targeted by a rocket from the shore that fortunately left the ship and crew unscathed. Responsibility for the attack was claimed by a group that called itself “Kataeb al Forqan”. This organization had announced that they would follow up with further destruction. According to their statement, their targets were the “aircraft carriers of the crusaders that strike our Muslim brothers” that navigated the Suez canal, which they described as a “commercial route of the infidels”. After Morsi's ousting, more attacks have followed: one against the oil installations in Suez (with anti-tank rockets) and another against the free-commerce area at the entrance of the canal.

The Suez canal is one of the most important sources of income for Egypt: roughly 5 billion dollars are raked in from the over 17 thousand (in 2012) ships that cross the canal every year. Losing control of the canal would mean losing huge amounts of money and international shine. Yet without proper control of the shore on the peninsular side of the canal, the Egyptian military have a hard time ensuring safe passage to ships transiting

through. The canal is 193 Km long, with a maximum width of 250 meters, and ships must travel through it slowly, making for easy target practice.

Without security along the canal, there is also a decrease in the international tourism that has concentrated its resources in the area for many years: the second largest source of income for the Egyptian state. Tourism makes/made up for 10% of the country's economic activity. Today hotels have closed down and the presence of foreign tourists is risible. All of this happens in a country with a strong balance deficit, where over half of the population lives with less than 2 dollars per day, with the very concrete risk that any loss of resources or labour could cause serious social repercussions.

### **Third problem: the border with Israel**

Aside from the difficulty of exercising control over a large and arid strip of land where only the local population has the capacity to travel, the other problem of the Sinai is that its fate is regulated by the 1978 Camp David accords. The Sinai was first occupied by Israel in 1967 during the six-day war and returned to Egypt in 1978. Since 1982 the peace accord with Israel dictates that a UN contingent will be deployed along the common border. The Multinational Force of Observers (MFO), with a contingent of 1600 men (among these are US soldiers) are tasked with the creation of a demilitarized buffer zone. The rest of the Sinai is regulated and administered as follows:

- "A" zone, (distant from the border and along the canal) where the presence of an Egyptian mechanized division of 22 thousand men was authorized.
- "B" zone, (Intermediate) where only 4 border battalions operate with up to 3 thousand men.
- "C" zone, (closer to the border with Israel) where, next to the UN troops, only the Egyptian police can station, not the army.
- "D" zone regulates Israel's military presence on the other side of the border.

There exist limitations with regards to military air planes and other similar circumstances, but what really makes the difference is the fact that for 30 years the Sinai was administered by the Egyptian Interior Ministry, not its Armed Forces. The army has always been kept distant from the illicit activities of the Bedouin, without being able to prevent or contrast them. That is why today the army doesn't know how to stop such activities. Their role is merely to assist police forces in their task.

Now that the situation has changed for the worse there is an urgent need for the army to really control the territories of the Sinai. Lately Israel has authorized a waiver of the Camp David accords in order to allow for a more consistent Egyptian military presence in the area. The deployment of another mechanized division has been authorized (about 3 thousand men and 20 tanks), as has the deployment of Apache helicopters from the air-base of Al Arish. As of today there are not enough informations to confirm the efficiency of this increase in troops. The aim of the terrorists is visibly that of boycotting the peace accord between Egypt and Israel, to which the Islamic extremists are strongly opposed. As long as the military will rule in Cairo, the accord will stand. In fact, the latest incidents

have produced the opposite result, that of reinforcing the ties between the Egyptian and Israeli intelligence agencies.

On the backdrop of all this is the recurrent discussion on the usefulness of the UN contingents stationed in the Sinai, which act solely as witnesses of what happens, as is the case of the MFO. Their task is one of peacekeeping (observed and guaranteed only if the two parties permit it) and not of peace enforcement (what the circumstances really call for). This to say that the security of the border with Israel is not guaranteed by the UN forces (or by the scanty Egyptian police forces) and acts of terrorism can easily be carried out there. That is why Israel is currently building a 5 meter tall wall along the entire length of the border with the Sinai.

Another important factor that influences the relationship with Israel is the gas-duct (Arab Gas Pipeline) that crosses the Sinai and provides Jerusalem with 1.7 billion cubic meters of gas every year. The commercial value of such gas supply is rather limited but has an enormous psychological impact because it provides for over half of Israel's energetic needs. It is one of the main triggers for sabotage and terrorist attacks.

### **Uncertainty for the future**

After Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria and Somalia, the Sinai runs the risk of becoming a land of conflict and a starting base for Islamic terrorism. The ingredients are all there already: The nearness to Israel, the connections with the Palestinian resistance (Hamas), the fight against a central military regime that has subverted the popular will, the impervious terrain that allows freedom of movement to those who inhabit it, the connection between terrorism and criminality, where the interests of one coincide with the economic convenience of the other. Many emblems for many conflicts.

The Beduin of the Sinai have always kept their identity and their lifestyle without borders or imposed regulations. Their tribal bonds have always won over the sense of belonging to a central state. The situation of peril regarding the Sinai is something that Cairo authorities are familiar with, so much that the defunct President Anwar Sadat was planning the urbanization of the Sinai with the transfer into the peninsula by 2018 (within a 20 year span) of 3 million Egyptians that would have put an end to the interdependence claims of the Bedouin. The violent death of Sadat (eliminated after the Accords of Camp David) has put an end to such project.

Today the virus of terrorism threatens to bond with the traditional interdependence claims of the Bedouin in a no man's land that has escaped the control of the central government. International Islamic terrorism operates on a long term basis. It settles in areas where it can operate undisturbed, it is happy with feeding local conflicts for tactical means and with strategic aims. It takes advantage of every social opportunity to reaffirm the legitimacy of its actions. Such opportunities are not hard to come by in a Middle East that is scarred by rebellions and social conflicts.

## **THE PROBLEMS WITH USA INTELLIGENCE**

The United States' intelligence community is one of the most widespread and articulated in the world. In popular culture, everyone immediately thinks of the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency), when there are several other organizations charged with collecting vital information to achieve the key strategic goal of national security. The CIA is different because it is the sole "independent" agency, meaning it only answers to the President of the United States and not to a government body. Several people mistake the Secret Service for a spying agency, when it is charged with the physical protection of the President during his trips. Let us look in detail to how the U.S. informative system is structured.

### **The commander in-chief**

The President of the United States is at the political and strategic head of the intelligence. He is advised and assisted by political bodies (the House and Senate Intelligence Commissions who have oversight powers) and by a Director of National Intelligence (DNI), currently James Clapper. The President assigns the post of DNI, whose role is to coordinate the presidential orders to the intelligence community. The post of DNI was introduced in 2004 when the issue of the fight on terrorism and the role of the intelligence became one of the country's priorities. Before then, it was the chief of the CIA that fulfilled this task. Clapper is one of the President's top advisers when it comes to national security. He presides over the elaboration of the National Intelligence Program and oversees its application. The DNI also defines the informative targets to achieve, the way of obtaining them and then provides the information to those entitled to receive them. The DNI obviously doesn't have any authority within the single intelligence agencies, whose management is left to their respective directors.

The National Security Council is another advisory body to the President when it comes to national security and therefore intelligence gathering. The U.S. President presides over this consultative organism where the most important decisions affecting the nation's security are taken. Those participating in its sessions are among the most influential officials in the country including: the Vice President, the Secretaries of State, Defense, Energy, of the Treasury and the Chiefs of the armed forces and, of course, the DNI. Other members can also be added to the discussions depending on the topic. Within the Council, the intelligence agencies are not preeminent, but contribute to the President's decision-making.

There are also other bodies when it comes to intelligence abroad, such as the Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, who's been recently renamed Intelligence Advisory Board meaning its scope has been widened to include all intelligence activities. The President appoints its members and they include not only professionals, but also political advisors. The Board does not evaluate the technical or operational aspects of intelligence, but its political implications. Following the creation of the DNI, the Board has lost several of its original functions, but was not dissolved.

Then come the intelligence agencies properly said.

### **The CIA and its sisters**

The CIA is the most important U.S. intelligence agency with 100 thousand employees, 20 thousand of whom are scattered on the ground all over the globe. Its annual budget surpasses 50 billion dollars. As stated above, it is the only independent intelligence agency answering only to the President of the United States (or through the DNI). Since January 2013, its director is John Brennan, who took over Gen. David Petraeus, who resigned following a sex scandal and the killing of U.S. Ambassador Chris Stevens in Benghazi. Brennan is in favor of “kill lists” and drone strikes, he is man of action with ties to former CIA director George Tenet (he was his chief of cabinet) who played a key role following 911 and during George W. Bush's campaign of disinformation on Iraqi WMDs. Brennan is also in favor of enhanced interrogation techniques, illegal practices such as waterboarding. He spent over 25 years working for The Firm before moving to the White House as an anti-terrorism consultant. Under John Brennan the CIA has become an agency strongly dedicated to dirty operations, and it is not a coincidence that among his first appointments was a new chief of clandestine operations, a former marine whose name has been kept secret.

Besides from the CIA, there are several other intelligence agencies who report to their respective government bodies.

The Department of Energy has an Office of Intelligence and Counter-Intelligence, dedicated to offensive (espionage) and defensive (counter-espionage) activities in the energy sector with regard to technology, copyright and some aspects of cyber warfare.

The Department of Treasury has, since 2004, both an Office of Intelligence and Analysis and an Office for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence, operating offensively and defensively in the financial and banking sectors. In such sectors its competences overlap with those of the CIA.

The U.S. Department of State has its own Bureau of Intelligence and Research, whose role is to support diplomatic activity. It was the Department of State that asked the NSA to tap the phone calls of foreign diplomats, chiefs of State and prime ministers.

The Department of Justice can rely on two operative branches:

- the DEA (Drug Enforcement Administration) fights its war on drugs and, since 2006, has joined the ranks of the intelligence community with an Office of Intelligence and National Security. The Office has both domestic and foreign bases.
- the FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation) is tasked with counter-espionage and was the one that unmasked the CIA director's extra-marital affair.

The Department of Homeland Security also runs an Office of Intelligence and Analysis and can utilize the Coast Guard's intelligence branch, a member of the intelligence community since december 2001.

Lastly, but probably one of the most relevant ones, is the Department of Defense with its DIA (Defense Intelligence Agency), in charge of military intelligence through both its military attachés abroad and the intelligence units within each of the armed force (the Air Force Intelligence Surveillance and Reconnaissance Agency; the Army's, Navy's and Marine's respective G-2s and other collateral units: the Office for Special Investigations and the now famous National Crime Investigation Service).

We had to add to these the now well-known National Security Agency (NSA), in charge of interception of communications around the world and of encryption and decryption activities, the National Geo-Spatial Intelligence Agency for satellite images, terrestrial mapping and espionage, and the National Reconnaissance Office, also in charge of satellite images.

### **The problem of abundance**

If you count them, there are at least 16 different organizations that, in one way or the other, carry out intelligence activities. A lot, possibly too many. Overlapping competences, probable waste of resources. Even though it may sound like a paradox, the biggest problem affecting U.S. intelligence is not only the proliferation of agencies, their lack of coordination and their spirit of competition regardless of the DNI's efforts. The true issue is the mass of information landing on the analysts' tables. We are talking SIGINT (interceptions), IMINT (satellite images), ELINT (electronic interceptions from the internet, computers etc.), HUMINT (classical spying) and OSINT (open source information from the press etc.). The problem of abundance makes analysis difficult and synthesis even more, with each report being different depending on the Department who is going to read it, hindering true informational goals. Can you possibly think about collecting millions of communications every day, filter them to obtain news that then turn them into valuable pieces of information? This is the first major problem the U.S. are facing.

The second one is the excessive recourse to technological intelligence. The United States, who have always played a lead role in this sector, thought at one point that technology could replace classic human spying. And this has caused great harm. Information coming from human contacts and from people working on the ground, has a different value is compared to the same information obtained with the aid of technology. The first information has a context, is colored with meanings, renders feelings and opinions visible. The same cannot be said for technological information, totally out of context and aseptic. The U.S. have decided to u-turn on their choice, even though the Datagate scandal confirms they are still collecting billions of bytes of technological information.

The United States have global strategic interests, and they are not only related to anti-terrorism, but span to a wider variety of subjects they need intelligence on. They need financial, industrial, military technology, foreign policy information and so on. The ultimate aim is the political, economic and military rule over the rest of the world. And a lot of interests also bring along a lot of enemies.

Another factor the critics of the Datagate scandal haven't fully metabolized is that intelligence agencies hardly ever pose themselves the question whether a certain initiative

is ethical or lawful. They do what they have to do, to know what they need to know. And when it comes to national security, there are no friends or foes, but only information needs. To this effect, the United States are not any different from what other countries do, with the exception that U.S. intelligence branches out everywhere in the world and can afford to spy on its enemies and also on its friends. The majority of the rest of the planet's intelligence agencies work on a regional basis or on the basis of historical ties such as former colonies. The fact that the U.S. has the technology, the resources and the means that others don't have makes their intelligence gathering more intrusive, capable and effective. And, therefore, more scary.

## **BEYOND THE DEAL ON THE IRANIAN NUCLEAR PROGRAM: CONCERNS AND REALPOLITIK**

The deal over the Iranian nuclear program sealed in Geneva on October 24, 2013 is valid only on a temporary basis and has to be completed in six months. It was preceded by a series of undercover encounters between American and Iranian representatives dating back as early as March. The U.S. negotiators were deputy Secretary of State, William Burns, the former director of policy planning at the Department of State, Jake Sullivan, several experts and Vice President, Joe Biden. The secret meetings were held in different Gulf countries (and especially in Oman thanks to the good offices of sultan Qaboos bin Said al Said) and possibly even in Switzerland. Only at a later stage, when the negotiations became official, did the United States involve the other four permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany.

### **The do ut des**

A positive acceleration in the development of the negotiations came from the election of Hassan Rouhani at the presidency of Iran in August 2013. Rouhani, deemed to be a moderate in the Iranian political landscape, had a greater inclination to mediation on Iran's nuclear program compared to his predecessor, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The talks also had the blessing of Supreme Guide Khamenei, without whom no deal could have ever been reached.

The negotiations were played over two contrasting, yet overlapping elements: the Iranian commitment to renounce to nuclear weapons and Tehran's right to obtain nuclear technology for peaceful purposes. A narrow path between two adjoining activities, whose only element making them compatible are international inspections (that should not affect sovereignty). Negotiators will have to resolve these issues over the next six months.

As it stands today, the deal is still more of a show of intentions and reciprocal promises, rather than facts. In the give and take required in any compromise, U.S. President Barack Obama has personally played his role in blocking a request for new sanctions against Iran in the Senate (the suspension will last for the six months needed to close off the deal) and in obtaining the authorization to loosen them up a bit. The economic effect of the U.S. intervention is estimated in 4.2 billion dollars of oil sales for Tehran. The agreement authorizes the exportation of one million oil barrels per day, while Iranian daily production is 2.5 million barrels. If financial and banking sanctions are unaffected, several trade restrictions have been removed for cars, jewels, maintenance and spare parts of civilian airplanes. A portion of an estimated 100 billion dollars of Iranian frozen funds abroad have also been released to pay for student tuitions and humanitarian transactions. Overall, the loosening up of U.S. sanctions will allow the Iranian State to cash in 7 billion dollars.

On the other hand, the Iranian counterpart has given up on a series of requests pertaining their nuclear production: the blocking of the enrichment of uranium above 5% and the dismantlement of the sites where this was possible, the disposal of the enriched uranium stocks, the blocking of the production and installation of new centrifuges (and the reduction to 50% of their activity in Natanz and to 75% in the Fordow nuclear facilities), the halt to

the building of new enrichment sites, the blocking of the production of plutonium at the Arak reactor and, above all, the unrestricted access to the nuclear sites by the IAEA, the international atomic energy agency, inspectors.

Besides from the negotiations' technical details, the deal over the Iranian nuclear program takes into account a series of concerns and, at the same time, leaves room for hope while keeping an eye on realpolitik.

### **The concerns**

The first concern was from those countries wanting to eliminate the menace deriving from the Iranian nuclear program and that, at the same time, hoped to quell Tehran's aspirations with a military intervention that could have also, regardless of the nuclear issue, impacted Iran's strength.

This was Israel's expectation, the only country in the region in possession of atomic weapons, a military deterrent capable of preserving and emphasizing its security. It is for this reason that the first negative reaction to the Geneva deal came from Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu. Israel fears that the agreement between Tehran and the 5+1 Group (the five permanent UN Security Council members plus Germany) is more about diplomacy, rather than on effective means to verify whether the Iranians will actually put their nuclear activities to a halt. The Israeli diffidence and suspicion derives from their concern over the Shiites' typical art of dissimulation. The so-called "taqiya" allows the Shiites to conceal their religion and to show faithfulness to other creeds. Tel Aviv basically fears that short term political interests and goals have not taken into adequate account the possibility of an Iranian subterfuge.

It is evident Israel is also concerned about Iran's, whether nuclear or not, military power. It is not by coincidence that PM Netanyahu has recently often met the heads of security, intelligence and armed forces. The fact that Israel was not informed over the progress of the talks is a worrisome signal of a deteriorating bilateral relationship with the United States. It is no news that the Israeli Prime Minister and President Obama don't get along. This leads the Israelis to fear they could lose their status of irreplaceable pillar of U.S. foreign policy in the region. Benjamin Netanyahu has still managed to obtain something from the United States: his experts will be hidden in the delegations that will carry out the inspections.

As concerned is Saudi Arabia, and not only because of Iran's military might. The two countries are in the middle of a religious struggle for the supremacy over Islam. The Saudis host the sites and symbols of Sunnism, they are the country of Wahabism whose radicalism supports the Saud dynasty. On the other side, Iran is the cradle of Shiism. The fight for primacy between the two main currents of Islam goes well beyond disputes over doctrine or religious principles. The struggle is fought on the ground, in the balance of power and in the open or hidden threats both parties exchange. Tehran deters its foe by supporting the Shiite minorities living under Sunni monarchs in Saudi Arabia, Bahrein and in several other counties in the Arabian Gulf.

Also other international actors are concerned, especially the United States. As opposed to his warmongering predecessor, Barack Obama has always pursued a negotiated foreign policy approach during times of crisis. As is the case with Iran, his tools have been lengthy talks, wide use of diplomacy and sanctions. A necessary approach withstanding Obama's electoral promises that included a withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan and that could have not justified a direct conflict with Iran or a proxy war in Syria.

Along such a narrow and perilous path, Barack Obama has faced several hurdles in trying to play down Israeli aspirations. The U.S. President prized the lesson learnt from Libya, where the military intervention to oust Muammar Khadafi has done more harm (in terms of terrorism and social instability) than good. The fear of repeating, on a greater scale, the mistakes occurred in Libya is probably the main reason behind the Administration's support for the Arab Springs, even though – as in Egypt – it found itself on the wrong side of the barricade, and it's determined effort to avoid intervening in Syria (whose Geneva 2 talks will start off on January 22 2014). To wrap this up, Washington is interested in playing a role in the Middle East with more diplomacy and less weapons. Probably, as the Israelis fear, the U.S. are also turning a blind eye on the potential consequences of a deal that is far too wide and that does not guarantee an adequate control over Iran.

The Iranians are also concerned over a war that could see them on the losing side against the United States, Israel and Saudi Arabia. The regime is currently at the mercy of internal power struggles and of a growing social discontent. The risks associated with an involvement in the region's several crisis have also increased (take for instance the recent attack on the Iranian embassy in Beirut on November 20 2013).

Another concerned actor is Turkey, whose main energetic supplier is, together with Russia, Iran. The Turkish need the resources to support their rapidly expanding economy. Ankara fears the effects that a conflict with Tehran could determine in the region. And there are already too many crisis along the Turkish borders, from Syria to Iraq, from the Kurds to Islamic terrorists' expansionism. Ankara also has no interest in Tehran becoming a nuclear power.

### **The realpolitik**

Whether one likes it or not, Iran is a regional force to be accounted for. Its military is to be respected, it possess long range missiles, has money to spend (even to fuel Islamic terrorism), instils fear in the Arab world where it has gained a strong leverage and plays a key role in several of the Middle East's hot spots.

Iran is present in Syria, with whom it is bonded by a military pact, and no solution to the Syrian civil war will be obtained without the Iranians' approval. The deal over the nuclear program could pave the way to the Iranian participation in the negotiations between Bashar al Assad's regime and the opposition. If this were to happen, the chances of a success of the talks would rise exponentially. The downside would be the recognition of Tehran's preeminent role in the region (resulting in Ryad's and Tel Aviv's discontent).

The Iranians are also linked to the Hezbollah. The Lebanese faction is fighting alongside Assad's troops, they are at the warfront against Israel and are the main menace to the Jewish State's security, besides from playing a leading role in Lebanese affairs. For the transitive property, the stability of Lebanon, an escalation in the war on Israel and the fate of the conflict in Syria are all in the hands of Hezbollah, whose orders come from Tehran. Iran supplies the Lebanese Shiite movement with funds, weapons and anything else allowing them to prosper and strengthen themselves.

The same scenario renews itself with regard to the ties between Hamas and the Iranian leadership. Their common goals have lead to a supply of Iranian rockets and missiles, currently hampered by the reinstatement of a military rule in Egypt. The Iranians' long hand in the Palestinian issue postulates that a resolution to the conflict will not be possible without Iran's active participation.

Iran is also deeply involved in Iraq, where a new Shiite leadership has taken over in Baghdad following Saddam Hussein's defenestration. After ten years from the end of the war, the country is still ravaged by sectarian violence between Sunnis and Shiites. As an example, in October 2013 964 people were killed in attacks. A never ending bloodbath. Iraq is now a destabilized country, where social chaos reigns, at the mercy of feuds and terrorism. Also in this case, it will be difficult to find any solution without Iran's involvement. We should also keep in mind that the United States have decided to withdraw before social peace has been restored in Iraq. And this is yet another blatant example of a war waged for the wrong reasons and that has caused more harm than good. And yet another element in support of Barack Obama's negotiating choice.

With regard to Afghanistan, this is yet another country from where the United States will withdraw without having restored peace, installed an authority with real power and defeated terrorism. The U.S. will leave and they are in a hurry to do so. At least on the surface, Iran is not apparently involved in Afghanistan, even though it shares a 936 km common boundary, hosts on its territory 2.5 million Afghan refugees (800 thousand are officially registered) and looks upon the Shiite Hazara, who represent 20% of the entire Afghani population, with favor. Even though the Hazara have never played a preeminent part in Afghan politics regardless of their demographics, Iran has a potential role in Kabul's internal affairs if it decides to pull its weight.

Iran is also active with the Kurds, with a minority living on its national soil. The Kurdish galaxy is currently in great turmoil, with the Syrians pushing for autonomy, the Iraqis managing a State within the State and the Turkish split among those wishing to negotiate a deal with Ankara and those wanting a return to the armed struggle. The Kurdish issue still seeks a solution and could also become a source of increasing tensions.

Even though Iran has often been accused of fomenting a certain type of terrorism in the Middle East, an armed branch for wider political goals, we should also keep in mind Tehran is one of Al Qaeda's favorite targets and an archenemy in the feud between Sunnis and Shiites. A synergy with the West in the fight on terrorism could help defeat this menace.

Overall, having Iran on one's side and being able to exploit its influence over several crisis zones in the Middle East would today pay off far more than having them on opposite sides of the barricade. If we take this realpolitik approach, we can see how the nuclear program shifts from being a key issue, to being a mere collateral problem. This doesn't mean the United States and the rest of the world are not concerned about the possibility of Tehran obtaining nuclear weapons. On the contrary. But the opportunities offered by Iran's power and role are definitely important.