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THE DILEMMAS FACED BY US FOREIGN POLICY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The Middle East is a geographical entity in perennial transformation. The status quo is long gone, ideologies have been wiped out, while conflicts and wars break out and intersect continuously. US Foreign policy is faced with a tremendous task when asked on what the best reply to each evolving scenario is given the volatility of the regional picture.

In the past, and especially during the Cold War, everything was much easier: there were two blocks, each country had picked which side to play on and each superpower knew who to help and who to fight. Now the situation is totally different. Given the lack of any ideological background dictating the choices of those on the ground, each and everyone basically acts on the basis of their individual convenience. This is the biggest problem the US is faced with because they are incapable of drawing a line between what is good or bad in the Middle East. It is unclear who's a friend or a foe and whether my foe's foes can become my friends and, if so, for how long.

Supporting democracy?

Should we stand by democracy? Well, it is pretty difficult to find one in the region. Washington's historical allies, like Saudi Arabia and the Emirates, are not democratic regimes. They were allowed to behave undemocratically several times in the past and not a word of condemnation was pronounced. It is pretty clumsy how the United States initially supported the Arab Spring and the first cries of a nascent democracy in the region. And then made a u-turn.

Are those ideals gone? Not necessarily, at least on paper, but security and national interests are more important. In Egypt, for instance, Washington initially stood by the Muslim Brotherhood when it toppled Hosni Mubarak's military regime, but then approved the restoration of the *ancien regime* when General Abdel Fattah al Sisi took over. The United States realized that democracy produces instability and that terrorism thrives and spreads during unstable times. It is thus better to cooperate with an undemocratic and authoritarian regime rather than to allow terrorism to spread.

The historical ally?

Should we stand by those regimes that fight terrorism? Yes, in theory. But it's more difficult in practice when it comes to assessing which countries are reliable and which are not. Can the US count on its historical ally in the region, i.e. Israel? Yes, in theory. But apart from a lack of chemistry between Barack Obama and Benjamin Netanyahu, is it always a wise choice to stand by a man who stated during his electoral campaign that he is against a

two-states-solution for the Palestinians? And if this is the same guy who, in November 2014, passed a law that defines Israel as the land of the Jewish people, thus spelling out the preparations for a potential future discrimination against the 20% of Israelis that are not Jewish, is this still the best thing to do? The Israeli Prime Minister is also the same man that proposed a bill allowing the Israelis to withdraw the residence permits of any Palestinian and their families involved in acts of terrorism in Eastern Jerusalem. There are about 300 thousand people that could be evicted from their properties if found to protest against the Israelis.

Never a Palestinian State?

The clash between Obama and Netanyahu is also over the negotiations with the Palestinians. The issue has been dragging on for over 60 years and just as any unresolved issue it is a potential vehicle for unrest. The Palestinian diaspora could soon decide to opt for an armed struggle instead of waiting endlessly for a useless negotiation. Palestinian terrorism could resurface once again under the banner of Hamas, the Islamic Jihad or of other radical PLO factions that could join forces with other regional extremist movements. Will the United States be capable of continuing to block the UN Security Council from condemning Israeli colonies?

For or against Assad?

Apart from the historical low in the US-Israel ties, the headaches for the Americans lie elsewhere. Since the beginning of the civil war in Syria, the United States stood by the rebels and against Bashar al Assad's regime. Four years later, Assad is still at the helm and he is not the real enemy anymore, Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi's ISIS is. His menace is fought both by Iran, allied to Syria, and by Syria itself. And here lies the first American dilemma: should we continue to fight the Syrian regime or should we somehow cooperate with it to defeat the Caliphate?

John Kerry, the US Secretary of State, indirectly replied to this question when, during an interview on the CBS, stated that the US should negotiate with Assad a political transition in the country, possibly by returning to the Geneva negotiations that were halted in 2012. In other words, what Kerry is trying to say is that it is time to negotiate with Syria, not to wage a war against it. Such a pragmatic change of strategy is dictated by the fact that the ISIS is now the biggest threat.

Iran, a rogue State?

"Rogue States" were those countries part of the Axis of Evil as defined by Anthony Lake, then US National Security Advisor, in 1994. Iran was one of them. But now Teheran stands by Damascus, is fighting the ISIS and is politically and militarily supporting the Iraqi regime. This makes for two pros and one con. The reason the US are talking to Iran is based on the fact that the war against the ISIS cannot be won with aerial bombardments alone, but with ground troops. The United States are not willing to get their boots on the ground again after the negative experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan. This means someone else will have to carry out the dirty work against the ISIS. During the operations to retake

Tikrit, the Americans bombed and supplied intelligence to the Iraqis while they advanced on the ground together with Shia militias, Iranian volunteers and the advice of Iranian General Soleimani.

This strange alliance between the US and Iran poses a problem to the Saudis and the countries of the Gulf, but also to the Israelis. The threat posed by the Iranian nuclear program was at the heart of Netanyahu's electoral campaign. The now Israeli Prime Minister used words such as holocaust to emphasize the dangers of having another nuclear power in the region. This is one of the reasons why Obama and Netanyahu are not getting along.

Definitely such an unholy alliance is dictated by the current conflict against the ISIS. Foreign policy has no room for ethics when problems have to be solved, and especially those of a military nature. If we were to take a picture of the alliances or synergies that the US have recently developed in the Middle East, we would see that the entire picture has changed if compared to a few years ago.

Any move on the checkerboard causes a reaction. If the relationship with Iran improves and the fight against the Syrian regime is not a priority anymore, how does this affect the behaviour of other actors in the region?

Turkey, a key member of the NATO?

Turkey wanted the fall of Bashar al Assad and still believes this is the top priority, not the fight against the ISIS. Ankara is a member of NATO, but did not grant the use of its bases to US bombers to strike the ISIS. Turkey is also hostile to al Sisi's Egyptian military regime, while the US are now supporting it to fight Islamic extremists in the region and especially in Libya. Ankara still fails to accept its historical responsibilities on the Armenian genocide, while the US Senate has recently approved a resolution on the matter. Turkey refuses a solution to the Kurdish issue, while the Kurds are overtly supported by the US. Lastly, Ankara supplies weapons to the radical anti-Assad factions.

It is probably too early to assess where this will lead to: a collision between Ankara and Washington or a redefinition of the Turkish role in the NATO, although Turkey will always maintain its strategic role in the Middle East. Yet, we cannot ignore Ankara's ambiguity in dealing with the ISIS, since it allows flocks of volunteers to transit on its territory and allows illegal shipments of oil to support Al Baghdadi's finances.

Always with the Saudis?

Saudi Arabia, just like several other countries in the Gulf, is worried about the ISIS, but not as much as it fears the rise of Iran. They support the military synergies against al Baghdadi, but, at the same time, they have a problem with fighting alongside Iran. The Ayatollah's regime is an historical enemy of the Saudis, both for religious and political reasons. What is giving the Saudis a headache is the fact that if Iran is welcomed back on the international scene, if the relationship between Teheran and Washington improves, the United States could decide in the future to shift their allegiance and pick a different key ally in the region.

Without the privileged relationship with the United States, the Saudi kingdom would not survive. The Saudis know that their oil is not as crucial as it was in the past and cannot be used to pressurize the West anymore. Even the US are now self sufficient when it comes to their energy supplies.

The United States are faced with a series of difficult choices, events are dictating their foreign policy, not the other way around. Each choice will have its pros and cons, while one choice is made, another one will turn up. What is more difficult to assess at present is whether what may seem as a good choice today could turn out to have been a bad one tomorrow.

JORDAN'S FEAR OF THE ISIS

There are two countries that fear more than others the spread of the ISIS, their military conquests and their destabilizing effect: Lebanon and Jordan. This is due in part to the presence of extremists and terrorists on their territory. Lebanon is a country that has always coped with institutional instability and which is, at least in part, used to facing risky social, political and military circumstances and to finding solutions through internal mediation. Jordan, on the other hand, belongs to that part of the world that thrives from its belonging to a well-defined international context; a country that has its own, non-negotiable, internal and foreign policy; and which has a monarchy which, after the death of king Hussein, is in need of reaffirming its role and prestige. This exposes Amman to the risk that derives from the spreading Islamic extremism in the region, which the Jordanian monarchy is trying to oppose.

Collateral effects

The Syrian civil war, the rise of the ISIS and its spread throughout the Iraqi territories are elements which undermine the stability, if not the survival, of the Hashemite regime. The 179 Km border with Iraq and the 379 Km border with Syria are an ominous reminder of this. The first, tangible, side effect of this situation on Jordanian society is the presence of over 680.000 Syrian refugees in the country. The real figure is probably rounded down substantially, since it is based on the UN's data. Analysts speak of over 1.5 million Syrians scattered across Jordan, to which one must add at least 1 million Iraqis and about 600.000 Egyptians. For a country that has a total population of roughly 7.5 millions, this incredible mass of refugees represents not only an economic burden, but a social threat as well. Especially since it is reasonable to assume that among these million visitors, some may actually be involved in Islamic terrorism.

It is therefore on the internal security level that the Jordanian reign runs the greater risk. There are presently over 2.000 Jordanian volunteers that fight among the ranks of the ISIS and of Jabhat al Nusra, both in Syria and in Iraq. Also, according to polls carried out by the University of Amman, a rough 10% of the population allegedly sympathizes with Islamic extremism. Demonstrations that took place in June 2014 in Ma'an, in the south of the country - a region which has been the theater of numerous uprisings and Salafite infiltration and where many volunteers have traveled to join Jabhat al Nusra - seem to confirm this statistic. Another hint is the recent discovery and arrest of about 30 alleged terrorists that were preparing and/or organizing terrorist attacks within the Jordanian realm.

The Jordanian Muslim Brothers

The potential support for extremism becomes even more worrisome if it is coupled with the activism and social rooting of the Muslim Brothers in Jordan. Politically speaking, the Brotherhood is the opposition, and operates within the bounds of a legal context with respect to the Islamic Action Front (IAF). In more real terms, the group is constantly fueling disorder and trying to ride the social resentment of the local population. Lately, the (re)banishing of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the shunning on the part of Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries and the marginalization of Hamas have created much tension

within the Jordanian branch of the Brotherhood and have widened the gap between those who wish to operate within set rules and those who would rather adopt radical initiatives.

The internal clash within the Muslim Brothers found its apex on February 14, 2015, when the organization was split into two separate groups. The council of the Shura, the uppermost governing body of the Brotherhood, expelled 10 members of the organization whom, in turn, demanded and obtained the legalization of a new political party. In practice this new faction of the Muslim Brothers, headed by Abdul Majid Thuneibat – which is sometimes described as being a “reformist”, but who is actually just pro-government – wants to sever the ties with their Egyptian counterpart and with Hamas, a choice which is strongly criticized by the hawks within the movement.

This confrontation sees the Council of the Shura, which approved the ousting of the dissidents, against the Council of the Students of the Muslim Brothers, which supports Thuneibat. The operation serves to draw a net distinction between the hawks, who want to continue supporting the claims and the uprisings of the Middle Eastern brothers, and the doves, who want to operate legally in the Jordanian context alone.

The internal clash within the Jordanian Brotherhood has drawn Hamas in as well. The organization was instrumentally accused by Abdul Majid Thuneibat of creating a secret branch within Jordan. The circumstance was, of course, denied by the leaders of Hamas, but has nonetheless threatened the long years of negotiations carried forth by Khaled Meshal, the head of Hamas' political office, in his attempt to rekindle relationships with King Abdullah II; Hamas was banished from Jordan in 1999.

The risk of fragmentation

Accepting the request by Thuneibat to legalize its branch of the Muslim Brothers is aimed mostly at making the opposite faction, which is still numerically prevalent, illegal. The Jordanian government is acquiescent, or at least favorable, to the break-up which, initially, seems to weaken the Brotherhood. Yet they too fear the consequences of forcing a part of the movement into clandestine activity and the security issues that could derive from such a move. The Muslim Brothers in Jordan count on an active militia of 6 to 7 thousand men and could easily blend in with the militias of the Sheikh of the ISIS, Al Baghdadi. This is the reason why the Jordanian Brotherhood, despite the mounting pressure of the Gulf countries and of Egypt, was never included in Amman's list of terrorist organizations.

In order to launch his initiative, Abdul Majid Thuneibat emphasized the added value of his belonging to a Bedouin tribe which is juxtaposed to the majority of the Council of the Shura; the latter being more supportive of Palestinian claims, with all that this implies in the region. We shall not forget that, despite the fact that Palestinians account roughly for half of Jordan's population, the Hashemite monarchy bases its force and consensus on the Bedouins. In order to see the full picture, we must add that the Islamic Action Front (IAF) is not currently represented in the Jordanian parliament – they boycotted the latest general elections – and they therefore act both politically and socially on the margins of legality.

The ties with terrorism

The relation between Islamic extremism and the internal situation of the Muslim Brothers constitutes, on the internal level, one of the main threats for the stability of Jordan's monarchy. The leader of the IAF, Sheikh Hamza Mansour, has recently stated that the Caliphate can include Jordan, albeit with the consent of the population, and a similar view is shared by the Jordanian Salafites, headed by Mohammed Shalabi (aka Abu Sayyaf).

Recently, in order to lessen – on the religious level – the appeal of radical groups and to invalidate the brutality of the ISIS, the Jordanian authorities have released two theologians who are famous for their radical stance. The first, Abu Qatada, aka Omar Mahmoud Othman, is a Jordanian/Palestinian who was extradited to the UK in 2013 for terrorism and who has recently and, perhaps, not casually, been found not guilty. The second is Abu Mohammed al Maqdisi, aka Assem Mohammed Tahir al Barqawi, also a Jordanian/Palestinian, who was sentenced to 5 years in prison for recruiting mujaheddin in Afghanistan and who is well known to Jordanian prisons for having spent 16 years behind bars for his involvement in terrorism activities. His writings were a source of inspiration and legitimization for Abu Musab al Zarqawi in Iraq and for Ayman al Zawahiri in Afghanistan. The release of both extremists was part of a trade off where the two agreed to openly accuse the ISIS once outside.

Choosing a side

Apart from the endogenous threats, there are those coming from outside as well. Jordan is firmly opposed to the ISIS; this is due in part to the international context in which the country operates – of which the USA, Western countries and, in part, Israel, are the guarantors – and in part by the social and political beliefs of Jordan's monarchy. The country's military effort was evident when one of its fighter planes was downed over Raqqa on December 24, 2014. The pilot of the Jordanian airplane was captured and burned alive on January 3, 2015. The circumstance strengthened the Jordanian anti-ISIS stance in terms of their military involvement – see the “Martyr Muath” aerial retaliation and the deployment of armored vehicles along the borders with Syria and Iraq. The recent conquest of the passage between Jordan and Syria by Jabath al Nusra has further increased the threat of instability.

In the past few years, Jordan became first the center of the struggle against Bashar al Assad's regime, then the heart of the struggle against the ISIS. Amman harbors about 8.000 US soldiers on its territory, especially 'elite' groups, an aerial unit in Mafraq, where the CIA trains Syrian rebels (the US administration has recently allocated half a billion dollars for the training of at least 5.000 rebels in the coming year), and an Operative Military Command in Amman where Americans, Saudis and members of other Gulf countries coordinate operations in the region. Jordan allows rebels to cross its border and to travel back to Syria with weapons and money, therefore supporting their military activity.

The importance of Amman in the fight against the ISIS and against the Syrian regime was emphasized by the recent visit, on March 5, 2015, of the leader of Al Quds, the special units of the Revolutionary Guards: Iranian General Qasem Soleimani. The visit landed on the eve of operations to recapture Tikrit on the part of the Iraqi army with Teheran's support. Soleimani met with the director of the GID (General Intelligence Directorate),

General Faisal al Shoubaki; it is not clear whether the General met King Abdullah as well. The subject of the meeting was the presence of about 15.000 Shiite militiamen in Syria, a part of which are Iranian. The General was welcome with great enthusiasm, even in terms of protocol, which implies that, in the event of a rekindling of relationships between Iran and the Gulf countries, Jordan could play a central role – provided the Saudis agree to it. Amman has (re)started diplomatic exchanges with Teheran last September, with the designation of a new ambassador to Iran and, after Soleimani's visit, with the visit in Teheran of the Jordanian foreign minister Nassir Judeh.

The US Chief of Staff, General Martin Dempsey, travels often to Amman to speak with local authorities. The US have recently approved substantial military aid in favor of the Jordanian reign for the year 2016.

An imminent danger

Yet, as we mentioned, despite the military campaign and the international support, the Jordanian realm is not safe from imminent danger. Although some terrorist cells that were allegedly planning attacks in the country have been arrested, Jordan borders war zones, with the possibility of further terrorist infiltration, and there is a florid market for smuggled weapons.

The Hashemite dynasty has always had a bumpy relationship with the Saudi monarchy due to the competition between the two for legitimization in the control of the holy sites, where each of the parties claims to be a descendant of the Prophet. Nowadays, instead, due in part to the common enemy, ISIS, Amman and Riyadh have gotten closer. This nearness produces for Jordan, a country without resources and that lives off international donations, new financing which is rather useful in relieving poverty and social upheaval in a country with an unemployment rate between 25 and 30 percent.

Unlike his father Hussein, king Abdullah still has to consolidate his role of monarch in the eyes of the local population. The death of the pilot Muath al Kassabeh and the king's participation in the funeral function have bettered the image of the king and especially that of his wife Rania, of Palestinian origin, who is often criticized for the lavishness which she flaunts. The choice of siding against the ISIS is not a popular one among Jordanians, who would have preferred a more neutral approach in the nearby crisis zones. The Muslim Brothers are not the only ones to feel this way.

But a choice had to be made because, apart from the threat of the ISIS, the Syrian civil war, the exponential spread of political and terrorist Islamic radicalism, the Hashemite reign is also involved in another dispute: that of Palestine. The confirmation of Benjamin Netanyahu, who claims that he will never allow the formation of a Palestinian state, in the recent Israeli elections is creating the basis for a new Intifada. In Jordan, where roughly half of the population is of Palestinian origin, such circumstance could be very dangerous for the stability of the reign.

Then there is the problem of the Houthi and of the Saudi military attack in Yemen. Jordan supports the initiative publicly, but they fear that this new crisis could draw attention from

the country's absolute priority: the fight against the ISIS. From the start of the Saudi Yemenite campaign, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain have removed their aerial military support from the international coalition that fights the ISIS to use it in Yemen.

Presently, Jordanian foreign policy tends to distinguish itself from that of many other regional actors: they are against the isolation of Iran; in the Syrian war, they'd rather see the fall of the ISIS than that of Assad's regime; they are prudently critical of US disengagement in the region; they have welcome General Haftar from Libya, offering him arms and training. Only time will tell if the choices of king Abdullah have been wise ones. Yet one must never forget that, in the Middle Eastern context, Jordan is one of the weakest players, both in demographically, financially and militarily.

THE COUNTER-NEGOTIATIONS ON THE IRANIAN NUCLEAR PROGRAM: THREATS AND RACE TO ARMS

While on one hand international diplomacy debates over the usefulness of a deal over Iran's nuclear programme, weighing the pros and the cons of an agreement, on the other hand the negotiations have taken a different twist, one that is not generally associated with the cocoon-like atmosphere of a gathering of diplomats. The tone of the counter-negotiations has been one of menaces and threats.

In fact, as soon as the first deal between Iran and the rest of the world, based on a series of guidelines to be approved in the coming weeks, was reached, a news war broke out. In other words, each actor involved in the negotiations and any other State that feels will be influenced by the outcomes of the agreement, started to emphasize its military might. The hidden message is pretty straight forward: if the terms of the deal are not respected I, meaning the United States and Israel, have the capability to strike. Iran replied that they would know how to defend themselves. Russia, instead, suggested that, since it is a superpower, it was willing to play its role in support of the Iranians.

It is against this geopolitical landscape that we should put a number of recent news into context.

Counter-negotiating escalation

The US began when they stated that they own a bomb, a super bomb as matter of fact, capable of destroying any underground nuclear facility. It's called "Massive Ordnance Penetrator" and it is the most powerful bunker buster out there, with a warhead of 30 thousand pounds that can go as deep as 61 meters below ground level. The message itself is pretty clear and refers to the underground structures part of the Iranian nuclear programme, namely the Fordo central, near Qom, where uranium is enriched. It was the US Secretary of Defense, Ashton Carter, who broke the news as soon as the Geneva deal was struck.

Iran replied with a statement by General Abdul Rahim Mousavi that claimed that he could operate and employ in attacks thousands of kamikaze drones. That is, drones capable of hitting and exploding on a target. This specific type of drone was supplied to both Hezbollah and Hamas, it is equipped with explosives on board and has a long flight autonomy. In this case the recipient of the message was Israel, in case Tel Aviv decides to attack Iran's nuclear facilities.

In this game of threats Russia joined the choir when it stated, on April 12, 2015, that it had given the green light, after years of embargo, to the sale of S-300 missiles, used for long distance aerial defense, to Iran. A similar supply was also granted to Egypt a few weeks later. The move has provided Iran a vital defense tool in case of an Israeli raid. At the same time Russia sent out a clear and loud message over it's role in Middle Eastern affairs: Moscow is also a key actor.

US President Barack Obama made his move and tried to reply to the growing Israeli concerns. Obama announced that that United States are capable of penetrating the

Russian S-300 missile system provided by Moscow to Teheran. This statement does not take into account the different S-300 models on the market, some of which are old, while others are highly sophisticated. Vladimir Putin kept quiet on what he supplied the Iranians with.

The Israelis are concerned almost as much as the States of the Arabian Gulf. They are worried both for the weapons sold to Iran and for the threat posed by a deal on the nuclear programme and the lifting of the sanctions against Teheran. Arab countries fear the Iranians will return to play an hegemonic role in the Arabian peninsula. The Gulf Cooperation Council members that met in Camp David with Barack Obama on May 14, 2015 were reassured that the US will come to their defense in case of an aggression. They were also promised more weapons.

Tel Aviv's message

Israel did not just sit and stare. On one side it dedicated its efforts to the publicizing of its defensive military capability in the event of a missile attack: a new defensive system, called "Magic Wand" or "David's Sling", has brilliantly passed all technical tests and will start working in a few months. This system is capable of intercepting and destroying hundreds of missiles in the hypothetical scenario seeing the Hezbollah, that have an Iranian furnished supply of about 120.000 missiles, shooting between 1.000 to 1.500 missiles per day. In the event of an asymmetric war the message to Iran is pretty evident: if you supply missiles to the Hezbollah you will not be able to hit us.

Presently Israel is capable of destroying any rocket or missile targeting its territory and shot from any distance. The core of the message is: "Iron Dome" (up to 70 km), "Magic Wand" or "David Sling" (from 70 to 300 km), "Arrow 2" (bigger distance), "Arrow 3" (beyond 2500 km). In military terms this means that there is no room for the Iranian Fajr-5 and BM-25 missiles, nor for the M-600 and Yakhont (or P-800 Oniks) in the hands of the Syrians.

But Israel did not just celebrate its defensive capabilities and, once again with the support of the US, it spelled out its offensive threat. On Israeli Independence day, on April 23, 2015, US Deputy President Joe Biden affirmed that the United States will sell 28 F-35 airplanes to Israel. This is a multi-role aircraft, long haul, with "stealth" capabilities that are unrivaled anywhere else in the Middle East. Only Turkey has a supply of similar, but not as up to date, models. This sale has been labeled as part of the ongoing US support to its Israeli ally. The supply allows the Jewish State to maintain its military edge in the region, namely as far as the control of the sky is concerned, based on the "qualitative military edge" doctrine.

In yet another show of force, the Israelis also successfully tested an intercontinental missile. It is called Jericho 3 and can strike targets as far as 10.000 km away. If a missile war were to be waged Teheran would know what to expect. The development of military technology goes hand in hand with increased defense spending. Israel has recently increased its military budget by 7%. The United States are debating whether to push their yearly military aid to the Israelis up to 3,6 billion dollars. It currently stands at 3 billion per

year. After all, war is a costly venture. Last year's conflict in Gaza costed the Israelis 8.6 billion dollars. Defending oneself from threats also has a cost.

The arms race

In other terms, the issue of Iran's nuclear programme has sparked a veritable arms race. France decided to profit on the growing tensions in the region in the name of its "grandeur" or, more prosaically, of business. French President François Hollande, together with his ministers of Defense and Foreign Affairs, has recently taken part at a meeting of the Gulf Cooperation Council. His first stop during his trip was in Qatar, where he signed a 6.3 billion contract to sell 24 Rafale fighter jets. The deal includes technical assistance, pilot training and intelligence support. He then moved to the United Arab Emirates for yet another sale of military gear. In both cases France stated it will stand by the Gulf States in case of an attack.

What is yet more worrying is that some Arab countries reacted to their fear of an Iranian bomb with the idea of fetching a nuclear bomb of their own. It is the case of Saudi Arabia, that has opened a negotiation with Pakistan to acquire a nuclear bomb before Iran becomes even capable of potentially producing one. It is a very likely scenario given the privileged relationship between Riyadh and Islamabad. It was the Saudis that financed Pakistan's nuclear program back in the days.

Faced with a Middle East ridden with nuclear bombs, Egypt proposed, together with a number of Arab countries, to host an international conference to ban all nuclear weapons in the region. The proposal was immediately turned down by the United States since it would have meant Israel would have had to relinquish its yet undeclared nuclear arsenal.

If there is a moral to this story it would be that there cannot be such an asymmetric distribution of power in the Middle East. There is a country that has the atomic bomb (Israel) and one that would want to have one (Iran). There are those who fear Israel for having one (Iran) and those fearing Iran could obtain one in the future (Israel and Saudi Arabia). In the background are the ongoing unresolved issues setting the entire region on fire: the Sunni vs Shia competition, the hegemonic role of the United States and Russia, the Palestinian issue, Islamic radicalism and terrorism, civil wars. It is in such a hot context that the best answer all the actors involved have come up with has been to increase their military strength and scare the others around them. A never ending perverse logic.