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THE MIDDLE EASTERN GAMBLE

A civil war in Syria with no solution in sight and that has recently, since the arrival of both Russian and Iranian troops, become more and more international. Another conflict in Yemen has degenerated from internal strife to all-out war after the Saudi military intervention and has now the menacing traits of a religious – Zaydis vs Sunni – and political – Iran vs Saudi Arabia – struggle.

The presence of Islamic militias in Syria and Iraq whose declared intention is that of installing a caliphate that goes well beyond the present borders of both countries. A silent conflict between the Sunni monarchies in the Gulf and the Shia of Iran for the hegemony over the entire region.

A so-called “Arab Spring” that has not produced any progress or result in terms of democracy (with the exception of the pale Tunisian example), but that has instead favored repression and restoration, as in Egypt. And, as the Libyan case shows, any power void generates social chaos and the growth of radical Islam.

The Kurdish issue is now also back in the spotlight after Turkey decided to change its approach with regard to the ISIS and has balanced its fight against the caliphate with a renewed resort to crush the PKK following years of truce and under the table peace negotiations. The Kurds have benefited from their fight against the ISIS both in Iraq with the Peshmerga and in Syria with the YPG. This circumstance has led them to insist in their demand for greater autonomy, whether in terms of statehood or not. The PKK is labeled a terrorist organization by both the United States and Turkey, but it had become a meaningless detail during their struggle to hold onto the city of Kobane or while they saved thousands of Yazidis from the siege put in place by al Baghdadi's militias. The Turkish attempt to demonize a community of 30 million people scattered across Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran will unlikely succeed.

The ambiguity of Turkish foreign policy, one of the most influential countries in the entire region, has also had an impact on events. It is still unclear how much Ankara is willing to fight the spread of Islamic extremism. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has been clear on two aspects: the support to the Muslim Brotherhood (the AKP is its Turkish version) and its opposition to Bashar al Assad's regime. The struggle against the ISIS should diminish the destabilization that has followed a series of terrorist attacks on Turkish soil. On the other hand, this also weakens the armed rebellion against Damascus.

The circumstance has also been exploited by Ankara that has yes bombed the ISIS (although sporadically and on a limited scale), but also the PKK's safe havens in Iraq (systematically and continuously) following two years of truce. The renewal of the fight against the Kurdish Workers Party is dictated by domestic political needs. Nationalism is necessary to counter the rise of the pro-Kurdish HDP party that entered Parliament for the first time during the last elections. And a new vote is due in November.

The Palestinian issue is also lagging behind after decades of failures. A new Intifada is at the door given Israel's intransigence. The case for Palestine is influenced by a series of factors: the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza, the contrast between Israel and the Hezbollah, the Palestinian refugee camps disseminated across the region that risk to explode if nothing is done. The recent Israeli bombardments of Ahmed Jibril's Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine camps will not improve the situation. After all, the war between Israel and the Hezbollah or Hamas has never ended. It's a silent conflict, but still a war.

The Muslim Brotherhood is yet another open wound, them being one of the most widespread Islamic organizations in the Middle East. Now marginalized, they are deemed a terrorist group in Egypt and Saudi Arabia, but are very close to Hamas and benefit from the support of both Turkey and Qatar. The Confraternity is at a crossroads. They have to decide whether to fight their way legally or go once again underground, as the recent events in Egypt would suggest.

Overall, there is a very low degree of democracy in the Middle East. This is a characteristic that we find across the entire region, with the exception of Israel, whose nationalist governments are instead pushing towards a theocratic agenda. Democracy per se is not part of the aspirations of many Arabs, given its a product they hardly have ever tasted and whose meaning they cannot fully grasp. And when they did experience the fall of totalitarian regimes, the end result was social anarchy. With or without democracy, the Arab citizen suffers from the hardships of life, is against inequality when he is deprived of his wealth, nurses resentment and grief, fears repression. This is what basically happens in all Arab nations. Such a combination of elements could well become central in future developments in the Middle East.

The negotiations that have led to a deal on the Iranian nuclear programme have ignited a chain of events whose impact will have to be verified with time. Iran without sanctions has the strength to return to become an economic power in the region. Iran not ostracized on the political front will play a better military role on the chessboard of the Middle East. All these circumstances will alter the geo-strategic balance in the region and will accentuate the clash between Sunnis and Shia. A first tangible consequence has been an arms race in Sunni countries, some of which may soon also seek nuclear weapons, as some news coming from Saudi Arabia would suggest.

Caliphates are also spreading on the path shown by the ISIS: Sinai, Sirte, Derna, areas in the south of Tunisia, the north of Mali. These are all potential hotbeds for tensions and further social destabilization. Will they be eliminated or will they continue to spread?

There is then a country like Bahrein where a Sunni minority rules despotically over a Shia majority. This has been possible thanks to the military support from both the Saudis and the Emirates. Can they continue to hold on to power? Then there is a country ruled by an Ibadi sultan. It's Oman, capable of keeping at large from Middle Eastern turbulences. But Sultan Qaboos is 75 years old and has no heirs. Will the country proceed smoothly towards a handover of power without a war between those aspiring to the throne?

The different civil wars across the region have also highlighted the persecution of religious minorities. Communities that have peacefully coexisted for centuries in the Middle East have taken the role of victim or oppressor according to the circumstances. It was the Shia in Sunni lands, then the opposite, and then the Christians, the Yazidis, the Druses, the Alevites, the Sabeans, the Alawites... Such a climate of religious intolerance will have long term effects. How long before a religious dialogue is restored?

There are several countries in the region that are too small, such as Jordan, or historically too unstable, like Lebanon, to prevent the danger from the spread of military-guided Islamic radicalism. Beirut in particular, where institutions are assigned on the basis of religious affiliations, is extremely sensible to what happens in Syria. The ties between Damascus and Beirut are part of recent history. Will Lebanon survive in the future if a different political or territorial configuration takes form in Damascus?

The Middle East has always been the object of the aims of international powers both for its geographic position and for its energy reserves. In the past, and especially during the Cold War, events were dictated from outside the region. Every country fell under the respective sphere of influence. Every quarrel was resolved at a higher level, by the two superpowers. The fall of the Soviet empire has created a void. Many countries were left without international tutelage and new conflicts arose.

Presently, both the United States and Russia, although asymmetrically, have the tendency to influence Middle Eastern affairs not in search of oil (both Moscow and Washington are self-sufficient in terms of supplies), but of geo-strategic positioning. The control over the Hormuz Strait, the Bab el Mandeb Strait, the control of the Red Sea and the access to the Suez Canal, the possibility of maintaining a military presence in the Mediterranean.

The United States being the sole superpower still in service have lately adopted a disengagement policy to put a remedy to the previous Administration's war mongering attitude. By doing so, the US have created yet more void and have not resolved a series of open issues, like Iraq or Afghanistan. US foreign policy has also paid the price of indecision when it came to putting a halt to conflicts. Some decisions were simply wrong (like the unconditioned support for the Arab Spring in Egypt or the military defenestration of Muammar Gaddafi) and this has generated yet more hesitation. Overall, the uncritical support of Israel has put the United States in a tight spot. And, if until now, the United States operated in a regime of monopoly in the region, now things are changing. The

Iranian nuclear deal and their role in Syrian affairs has brought the Russians back under the spotlight. The circumstance may well fuel more tensions between the two powers. Will there be room for synergy in the fight against Islamic extremism? Probably yes when each actor's interests will converge.

Given such an intricate connection between political, religious or military controversies across the Middle East, all variables have to be taken into account when a solution to any issue is sought. Its much like a domino effect whose outcome is unknown. There are several question marks that are still unanswered. At the same time, each time a chain of events whose consequences are unpredictable is put in motion. Not everything is lost. It could well be that some of the negative circumstances that we've mentioned could produce a positive outcome if only a good synergy was put in place. It's not a matter of being optimistic or pessimistic, both irrational feelings, but of being realistic. After all, in the Middle East every time a card is played it's like sitting at a poker table. Each player gambles, bluffs or raises the bid.

BEHIND THE NUCLEAR DEAL: GREAT SATAN OR ROGUE NATION?

Any negotiation generally seeks a compromise that will satisfy all parties around the table. A negotiated solution that will keep into account personal interests, intentions, whether open or underlying. When, finally, a document is drafted, words are weighed carefully, sometimes they are intentionally ambiguous, seldom the formulas used can mean everything and the exact opposite. This is the art of diplomacy: appeasing just about everyone. So, in the end, there are no winners, although everyone claims they have won or, at least, not lost. This is what happened during the negotiations over Iran's nuclear program after a mere 20 months of "official" talks managed to land a deal.

Did the Great Satan prevail or did a Rogue State? Neither of them. Common sense did over the sole alternative left – as US President Barack Obama publicly declared – that is war. And this is the one thing the Middle East doesn't really need today, yet another conflict.

The treaty, officially called Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, is a mixture of trust, controls and pragmatism. Iran will maintain its nuclear infrastructure (and thus, according to the opponents of the deal, its potential ability to generate nuclear weapons) in exchange for inspections and controls. Tehran will receive a series of incentives if it behaves well, such as the removal of the economic sanctions, but could be targeted once more, both economically and militarily, if it derails.

Overall, it's pretty clear that a good dose of mutual trust is needed to carry out any negotiation. Furthermore, all prejudices must be dropped and one has to believe in the good faith of the counterpart. It's not an easy thing to do when you come, as in this specific case, from 35 years of distrust and enmity between the United States and Iran. It all began in 1979 when Ayatollah Khomeini rose to power, the US embassy was assaulted and a number of US citizens were held hostage for 444 days while rescue attempts failed. It was then the turn of the Iran/Contras scandal, the shooting down of an Iranian civilian airplane by a missile launched by the USS Vincennes in July 1988 and so on.

Following the signature of the deal the battle has shifted on the respective home fronts. In the US Jewish and Pro-Israel lobbies fear the rise of Iran, while in Tehran the clash is between reformists and conservatives.

On the US (and Israeli) side

As far as the United States are concerned, despite the opposition of a Republican-held Congress, President Obama has made sure the deal with Iran was not blocked, rejected nor hampered. The Jewish lobby is particularly influential in Washington and especially the AIPAC (American Israel Public Affairs Committee), an association that has financed the electoral campaigns of several American congressmen. The AIPAC has spent some 40 million dollars to campaign against the deal.

The man that incarnated the fight against the negotiations was Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu. It was a dangerous game that ended in a sound defeat because the idea of interfering in the decisions of a Sovereign State, albeit a friendly one, backfired big time.

Regardless of the lack of feeling between Obama and Netanyahu, the fact that the majority of the American Jewish votes Democratic was not taken into account.

The result was that the Jewish community was split. A recent opinion poll published by the Los Angeles Jewish Journal has shown how 49% of Jewish Americans are in favor of a deal with Iran, while only 31% are against. It's pretty astounding to see how similar polls carried out on a wider American audience showed a higher degree of skepticism on the outcomes of the deal.

The Israeli Nukes

Israel's insistence in depicting the future potential Iranian nuclear program as a catastrophe could shift the attention of the international community on Tel Aviv's atomic arsenal. Although it has never been officially declared, and is not subject to any international treaty or control, Israel has developed its nuclear program since the 1950s. Today the Israelis own some 80 nuclear warheads, far more than North Korea, that can be launched by air (F-15s and F-16s), by land (Jericho missiles) or by sea (the 5 Dolphin submarines recently sold by Germany). This means a nuclear attack can be carried out at a great distance from the home land.

The nuclear supremacy in the region has become absolute as all attempts by neighboring countries to develop similar capacities were immediately thwarted. It's what happened with the attacks against the Iraqi structure in Osirak in 1981, then against the ones in Deir er Zor in Syria in 2007. But what matters the most is the fact that Israel has put in place an anti-missile system that will make any attack, whether nuclear or not, against its territory totally harmless.

Furthermore, the Israelis can count on the US financial support to its defense sector. The amount is well beyond the publicized 3 billion dollars annually as a number of bilateral technical collaborations are carried out at the same time. In the light of these circumstances, Netanyahu's paranoia of a deal with Iran appears unjustified. What is more striking is the lack of a Plan B by the Israeli PM, a strategy to obtain strategic gains from the political stand-off with the US and not just "compensations".

On the Iranian side

As far as the Iranian political context is concerned, the deal has brought reformists and conservatives face to face once more. The first are in favor of a civilized, open and democratic society. The latter, instead, believe in a devout and centralizing theocratic system whose ideology is in contrast with the rest of the world. Such a clash is more resounding now that the February 2016 elections of the Consultative Islamic Assembly and of the Assembly of the Experts are approaching. These organisms will have a say in the choice of Khamenei's successor; the Ayatollah is presently 74 years old.

What is currently helping the reformists are the advantages that the deal on the nuclear program has generated: the removal of the financial sanctions (and the recovery of around 100 billion dollars that were frozen in foreign banks), the sale of oil and the revenues thereof, the return on the political and military scene in the region.

This last aspect is important not because of the fears that the circumstance generates in both the Sunni monarchies of the Gulf and in Israel, but because the United States needs Iranian support in a number of crisis: in the fight against the ISIS, in seeking a political solution for Syria, in finding an exit to the turmoil in Yemen. Iran has thus become part of the solution, not the problem.

Who fears the deal?

The hostility in the region comes mainly from those country that feel menaced by the return of Iran on the political scene. It's not just Israel, but all those Sunni-led regimes that don't believe in the US reassurances, nor in their military compensations.

In the background is the role played by the other actors around the negotiation's table. Russia for instance was dying to play a role in Middle Eastern affairs and the Iranian deal has paved their way. Germany and the EU were looking at the economic gains deriving from the opening of Iranian markets, while France played the tough guy to secure its defense contracts with the countries of the Gulf. While the UK just stood by the States, China thought it wise, given its problem with the Uiguri militancy, to side with Iran.

The validity of the deal will be put to test, as will the diffidence that still pervades the two main actors. Now it is a mere war of words. Ayatollah Khamenei has prophetized the disappearance of the "zionist entity" within 25 years. Netanyahu refers to Iran as a "terrorist regime". The US have been considering Tehran a "State Sponsor of Terrorism" since January 1984, together with Sudan and Syria.

It is one of those twists of history that has led the United States to seek the help of the "terrorist" State like Iran to fight the ISIS or to help resolve the intricate political and military riddle that grips yet another Rogue State such as Syria.

HOW THE ISIS TELLS ITS SYRIAN STORY: PROPAGANDA AND MYSTICISM

Among the myriad of publications that the ISIS circulates on the net, there is one that tells the story of the Syrian state, starting with its civil war. The publication bears an eloquent title: "Miracles in Syria".

The story emphasizes the rebellion against Alawite oppression and the mysticism of a religious war that's quoted in the ancient Islamic scriptures, its epic combatants and the certainty of victory. "al Sham" (the Great Syria) is mentioned by Mohammed whom, when asked by one of his followers, says "I see the angels of Allah covering al Sham with their wings" (quotations are recurrent in other ISIS documents as well, because they inspired the caliph al Baghdadi in his idea of fulfilling the mission suggested by the prophet).

Our booklet begins with the image of a boy writing on a wall: "the people want the regime to collapse" (in Arab "al Sha'ab yureed, iskaat ul nidhaam"). The boy is then arrested and tortured like many others before him during the 40 years of Alawite reign because – this is the thesis of the publication – half of the Syrian population is made up of spies; the secret police rapes women and kills men; the hired assassins of the Shabiya (Alawite paramilitary militias) will hunt you down and, once captured, will treat you ruthlessly; the Americans will send terrorism suspects back to Syria although they know that they will be tortured upon arrival.

But now, states the publication, after years of oppression, the people are reacting; the Sunni majority rebels against the Alawite tyranny by marching in street demonstrations. It is a crowd that demands change, like the "brothers" in Libya and Egypt; a crowd that chants "We have no other God but Allah". And it is the truth – underlines the publication – because people are defenseless and disarmed as they risk their lives under the fire of snipers; only Allah is protecting them. These statements are coupled with an attached video showing a protester who is beaten to death during a demonstration.

The publication also describes in detail the ruthlessness of the Shiites (Alawites are Shiites) against the Sunnis: people are hung outside of their door; men are whipped, mothers are forced to chose which son will be thrown from a building's rooftop; fingernails are ripped from fingers during torture; pregnant women are raped and killed in a crescendo of sadism (it is notable that to abhor the use of violence by the enemy does not make the ISIS conscious of the violence which it also inflicts on its victims).

Finally, to complete this apocalyptic scenario that depicts the ruthlessness of others, there is a photograph of a tortured Sunni who lifts his index finger as if to point out what the Arabs call "taweed", the uniqueness of God. The circumstance is tagged as a martyrdom of faith. Then there is another photograph of a woman being buried who seems to smile. The caption to this photo is again a quote from the prophet: "the martyr sees his place in Paradise in the act of death".

Next, the booklet quotes the Bible: Moses asks that the tyrants of al Sham be attacked and destroyed. Faced with cowardly refusals, Allah's prophecy is dispensed: "This holy land will be precluded to them for 40 years".

In the mystical ramblings of the ISIS, the revolution in Syria started in 2011, exactly 40 years after the rise to power of Hafez Assad. This circumstance is underlined by the publication in order to associate the role of the Islamic militias with Allah's prophecy, with the addition of a quote from Mohammed who says that, once conquered, al Sham "will be justly guided by a Caliph in accordance with the prophecy". This last passage serves to legitimize the self proclamation of Abu Bakr al Baghdadi in his role of Caliph.

Once the religious legitimization of al Baghdadi has been ascertained, the text moves on to the epic of the civil war: Sunnis who defect from the army; their adhesion to the groups of demonstrators and protesters; the creation of the so-called "Free Syrian Army" ("al Jaish al Hurr").

However, states the booklet, it was an army too weak to fight the regime on its own, until the "migrants" ("Mujahereen") and the "supporters" ("Ansar"), joined its ranks. These were all Muslims, of course, coming from 50 different countries.

Their participation is explained by another quotation from the Koran ("Those that have believed and emigrated and fought for the cause of Allah and those that have provided help and refuge, they are the real believers. They will be pardoned and receive noble predicaments" - i.e. they will go to Paradise).

It is these men and women, the publication ironically states – that the world calls terrorists.

Next in the publication we find the diary of a "mujahereen", a volunteer of British nationality and his adventures during his journey to Syria; the difficulties in crossing the border; the attempts by various individuals to ask money for their assistance in crossing to the other side; the extenuating wait in a hotel; the ISIS organization that provides for the traveller; the joy felt upon arrival... This part of the publication dwells on the connivance of the Turkish police which, after intercepting the British mujahereen, lets him and other suspect terrorists pass. The booklet then discusses the difficult relationship with the Free Syrian Army and the good relationship with Ahrar al Sham; the practice of hiding one's identity while travelling through Syria. This part of the narration is literally riddled with Koranic references.

There follows a brief chapter entitled "the 5-star Jihad" where we see photographs of a number of Jihadists as they swim in a hotel's swimming pool (explains the title), as they have a snowball fight and then as they engage in real war.

Next, there is a chapter called "Miracle in battle". This chapter claims that, during the Syrian conflict, there have been miracles witnessed by the "slaves of God" (the concept introduces a basic principle of Islam: everything is chosen by God, man only follows his course in life according to the will of God. There exists no free will, as in Christianity).

There follow various stories that float on the verge of suggestion, exaltation and reality (a lot more of the former two than of the latter): a volunteer from Australia says that bombs were dropped by the regime but did not incur any damage on the nearby homes; that, although he was without water, the mujaheddin did not sweat or smell bad (neither him nor others who were near him, while in Turkey they smelled horrible); that the mujaheddin needed an off-road vehicle which, despite the meager family finances, was acquired by his parents; that he had seen the regime's troops advancing, then inexplicably falling back and retreating; that the MIG fighter planes from Damascus were bombing abandoned areas without any real targets (thus without damaging the ISIS structures); that the bodies of the martyrs did not decompose, even after burial; the case of a wounded mujaheddin who, unable to move, dug a hole and found water; or of other mujaheddins who knew they would die prior to the fight, so they decided to give their things to their comrades and face death with a smile; that the youths in the villages were the first to hear the sound of helicopters and to alert the population (note that the miracle is in the details: these youths were 2 years old and up); all the way to the plants which, in ISIS-controlled territories, bear abundant and tasty fruit without being watered.

In general, the miracles described in the Australian mujaheddin's story (his presumed nationality is mentioned in order to make him more credible) are such low-level miracles

that one can't help but wonder what kind of impact they can have in boosting proselytism and fanaticism. The answer is that, perhaps, the kind of person that the message is intended for is believed to be very naive and gullible.

But the tales of “Miracles” do not end here. There follow the so-called 'humorous' accounts. The tale of a group of mujaheddins who fight, advance and dig trenches only to later find that the enemy is stationed behind them; the reaction of two combatants when they see explosive barrels being launched over their heads (one chases the helicopter in an attempt to be martyred while the other jumps out of the trench and challenges the enemy face to face – no need to mention that both mujaheddins survive); the laughter of a brigade commander who says that the shots fired by an enemy impacted his Kalashnikov's charger, thus saving his life.

The publication then speaks of the courage of the Islamic combatants: it describes the attack by 5 brothers against the strongholds of the Syrian regime, with the sole survivor forcing the enemy's retreat; it depicts the enemy airplanes that bomb the mountains but always fail to target the rebels (and here we have a parallel with Afghanistan and Chechnya, where the Uzbek militiamen face the enemy shirtless and inevitably win the fight); the struggle against the Kurdish PKK militias (actually, it's the YPG) who, during a conversation on the radio, state: “how can we continue to fight against an enemy that has a thousand suicide bombers at its disposal”.

Then there is the tale of a “pyramid” (probably a mausoleum) in a strip of land confiscated from an “adorer of Satan” (possibly a Yazidi, since that's what the Sunnis call them) which was destroyed, putting a militiaman's life at risk (the incident is attributed to the intercession of a “jinn” - a supernatural evil spirit). The description of the findings inside the 'pyramid' seems to support the hypothesis that it was used in satanic rituals (hair, tied strings, bloody razors, pungent-smelling liquids).

A later chapter is dedicated to the Free Syrian Army that fights against the ISIS, killing its men and raping its women. “Why does this happen”, asks rhetorically the publication. “After we helped them fight a common enemy”. The answer is simple: “we want a global Caliphate to free Palestine and the rest of the Muslim worlds from tyrants, while they want secular national regimes that they hope to perpetuate by using money and support from the West and from the Arab regimes.

Here the publication speaks of the epic fight against the “sahwa” (Arab word that means “awakening”, but which is used to refer to militias that are financed and trained by the USA). I will let the reader guess who wins in the end. This part of the booklet is not merely a fight of firearms, but also a competition of epithets (“pigs”, “dogs”, “you don't have Osama Bin Laden helping you now”; Saudi Arabia is called a “lap-dog”).

When the ISIS fighters conquer a “sahwa” stronghold, the publication states, they find food rations and western equipment (while the ISIS militia have the sole protection of Allah). The cowardice of the sahwa is stigmatized: their flight when faced with the ISIS is described; their pleading when they are beaten is risible; their retreats that leave behind weapons and equipment; the fact that they had raped and killed Saudi women before escaping...

Next, the booklet speaks thoroughly of the military epic and of the religious mission amidst a holy war against the apostates (here the Turkish stance is criticized) and the unfaithful.

There follows a number of stories of martyrdom where the corpses smell like moss. There are photographs that depict smiling dead martyrs, while those of the unfaithful are

decomposing (another obvious divine message). Religious quotes are literally squandered in these pages.

Finally, the booklet publicizes a number of e-books that further support the literary epic of the ISIS.

Altogether, this publication matches the basic emphasis of all of the ISIS messages: a just cause in a just war; a message and a divine will to fulfill; the epic of the mujaheddin; the legitimization of the Caliph and of the Caliphate; martyrdom as a final goal with Paradise as a reward. Finally, perhaps in an attempt to impress and convince the low-level, highly-suggestible reader, there are a number of claims that transform this religious mysticism into popular credulity.

The publication aims at suggesting rather than convincing its reader. And perhaps the strength of al Baghdadi's militias lies in this mix of religion, fanaticism and suggestion that turns the lack of alternatives and the fear of death into an unimportant detail.