



www.invisible-dog.com

invisibledog@email.com

WHERE GOES THE DISPUTE BETWEEN IRAN AND SAUDI ARABIA?

There are currently two main wars being fought in the Middle East: the one against the ISIS and the one between Sunni and Shiite Islam. While the former war is fought directly, the latter has been fought, until today, by proxy nations. The two wars are, of course, interconnected, because the ISIS is a Sunni organization that fights, among others, the Shiites.

In addition to the two conflicts mentioned above, there are a number of collateral situations such as the civil war in Syria, the Kurdish problem, the political repositioning of the Muslim Brothers, the long-standing Palestinian issue, the survival of religious minorities that are being persecuted and the various hegemonic attempts, both endogenous and external. Nevertheless, the most pressing problem are the two above-mentioned ongoing wars, and the most dangerous of the two – due to its more enveloping ideological/religious catalysts – is the one between Sunnis and Shiites, with superimposing interests by the main regional and international players involved.

This superimposition of interests implies the risk that the battlefield, which presently encompasses only a few countries, could spread to other territories. Today we see the first warning signs of a war that could well spread like wildfire.

A subtle war

Presently, the confrontation between Riyadh and Tehran is indirect and is being played out in other nations like Syria (where Iran supports Assad's Alawite minority – about 13% - against the Sunni rebellion that is in turn supported by Saudi Arabia and other neighboring nations), Iraq (where there is a Shiite government and a Sunni rebellion – Shiites in Iraq account for 60% of the population, while Sunnis are only 30/35%), and Yemen (where the Saudis have decided to fight, with scarce success, against the Shiite Zayidis – whom, together with the Ismailis, account for 47% of the population – to support a deposed-then-reinstated Sunni president).

Iraq – perhaps the most emblematic case – finds it difficult to regulate its infra-religious relationships (which are seldom distinct from the political and military ones) because the two forces at play are both demographically-speaking consistent. To make things worse, Iraq was long governed by a Sunni dictatorship and the Iraqi Sunnis, unlike their Shiite fellow nationals, actually know how to fight a war. The civil war in Iraq is developing from these premises and the ISIS, a terrorist movement that is Sunni nonetheless, is exploiting the conflict's potential to destabilize the region and win consensus.

To better understand how dangerous the “religious” war between Sunnis and Shiites is, we should look at the numbers of the two religious communities.

Sunnis represent roughly 85/90% of the one-and-a-half billion Muslims in the world. But this can be a misleading figure because, apart from the numerical disproportion between

the parts, the conflict between the two branches is essentially sparked by two reasons: the fight over political/religious hegemony and the struggle to inhabit the same land.

This subtle war creates contradictions among its contenders. Iran is the more coherent of the two contenders: they support Shiite regimes (Syria and Iran) and fight the ISIS, which is Sunni. As for Saudi Arabia, the various emirates of the Gulf and Turkey, it is a different story altogether: by fighting Shiite regimes, they find themselves in the uncomfortable circumstance of aiding the ISIS directly or indirectly. Their well-known ambiguity in fighting Islamic terrorism stems from this very circumstance.

Shiite Iran against Sunni Saudi Arabia

In the past weeks, the tension between Saudi Arabia, who wants to be the guiding light of the Sunni world, and Iran, has reached a new high.

The execution, on January 2, of 47 individuals – 43 Sunnis and 4 Shiites – accused of terrorism, among whom was the Shiite Imam Nimr Bakr al Nimr, who is himself accused of inspiring the Shiite opposition in the Eastern Province (main oil region in the country inhabited by a Shiite majority) was a premeditated provocation by Saudi Arabia.

The reasons for the Saudi escalation are not just theological, but tied to other circumstances as well: the fear of Iranian expansion in Syria and Iraq, the internal problems with the succession on the Saudi throne, the US military disengagement, the commercial and oil war which, after the Iranian nuclear accord, places the economic weight of Iran back onto the international balance.

The recent decision to create a so-called Islamic NATO headed by Saudi Arabia is part of the same scheme.

Now we are faced with new dilemmas. The first is to verify whether the rise in tension between Saudis and Iranians (with the due interference of other nations) will subside and give way to a more moderate diplomacy.

Since the execution of the Saudi Shiite Imam was a deliberate provocation (in the midst of one of the worst mass executions of the past 30 years), it is in the interest of Iran to avoid falling into the Saudi trap, which would jeopardize the positive results of the nuclear deal (by condemning the assault against the Saudi embassy in Tehran without mentioning the mass executions in Saudi Arabia, the UN security council recently gave a clear indication of how precarious Iran's reputation is).

However, to keep fueling the fire of dissent with Iran could cause problems to Saudi Arabia's internal stability, seen that the Shiites represent roughly 15/20% of the overall population and since the decreasing financial resources from the sale of petrol have downsized the welfare system on which the regime's consensus is largely based. The same considerations could be made for the Iranian theocracy, where two currents – a reformist and a conservative one – have been fighting it out for quite some time. Therefore a direct confrontation between the two countries is unlikely, unless there occur more provocations or incidents within a short period of time.

The fire spreads

But the second option (which is more likely) remains open: that the proxy war that is now being fought in other nations (i.e. Syria, Iraq and Yemen) spread to more countries yet. If this happens, it will be because of the presence of the Shiite community – as a vehicle for the protests – in those countries.

As for Iran, it has a population of over 80 million of which roughly 95% are Shiites. It is therefore less vulnerable compared to Saudi Arabia, where nearly one-fifth of the population is Shiite and resides mostly in the heart of the energy-producing area of Al Qatif, in the Eastern Province, where about 80% of the country's oil comes from.

And since the war between the two main 'branches' of Islam is essentially a regional war, similar regions in other countries could be effected by it. The countries where there is a consistent presence of Shiites are mainly Bahrain (where Shiites comprise about 70% of the population), Kuwait (with 30%), the United Arab Emirates (with 15%, especially in Dubai), Qatar (10%), Lebanon (with roughly 50%, reinforced by the military presence of Hezbollah).

Turkey (where the Alevite sect and the Shiites make up about 20/25% of the population) is excluded from this list because the country cannot be destabilized by Iran without incurring in a military reaction that would prove unsustainable for the Iranian armed forces. Oman, which is governed by an Ibadite Sultan (a sect closer to Sunnism) is also excluded: despite its 10% Shiite population, the country has always followed a policy of neutrality (and mediation) in all of the regional issues, including the juxtaposition between Shiites and Sunnis.

Iran to rock the boat

In short, if Iran were to fuel Shiite terrorism in an attempt to weaken the various monarchies of the Gulf, they would have a number of valid options at their disposal.

The first choice would probably be the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia itself, as it would allow Iran to strike in the same place where Imam al Nimr was executed and to land a blow at the heart of the economic and financial system on which the Saudi monarchy prospers.

The second option, the easier one technically speaking, would be to destabilize Bahrain. It is a country that is demographically small (1,3 million inhabitants) and governed by an oppressive Sunni dictatorship. In 2011, during the so-called Arab Springs, a rebellion by the Shiite population in Bahrain had to be defused by a military strike by some members of the Gulf Cooperation Council. Presently, about 5000 soldiers and policemen from Saudi Arabia and the UAE are still stationed in the country to keep the Emir Khalifa steady on his throne. The only drawback for a subversive attempt by Iran in Bahrain is the presence of a US naval base with about 7000 troops in its territory (the same is true of Qatar).

Both Bahrain and the Eastern Province have already been targeted by Iran. Weapon caches and ships loaded with Iranian arms have been found and seized before the cargo could be handed over to the Shiite communities there.

Surely the present crisis will tend to increase the scope of these subversive initiatives.

The petrol war

Another "war" which has yet to be fought is the petrol war. All of the main regional powers live off of the profits from the sale of petrol. The first in line are, of course, Saudi Arabia and Iran. Until today, Saudi Arabia has conditioned the market with an overproduction of petrol to keep prices low and make US-produced schist oil unprofitable. With the Iranian oil hitting the market, Saudi Arabia will try to keep prices even lower in an attempt to damage their competitor. Yet at the same time it will be damaging its own finances. It is still not clear which of the two countries will take the most damage, especially to their national economies.

Also, the “war” will have an effect on the various diplomatic initiatives that are on the table, especially on the mediation for a solution to the Syrian crisis.

The positions of Russia and the USA

But Saudi Arabia and Iran are not alone in their fight. There are other countries that can throw their weight around in the region. There is Russia which, for various reasons – the fight against the ISIS and the support of Bashar al Assad's regime – is today siding with Iran. Then there is the United States, that prefer to use diplomacy for the time being to avert another conflict in the region. But if they were forced to pick a side, the US would definitely choose Saudi Arabia. Siding with the Saudis and the US one would surely find France (that has recently signed deals worth billions to supply both Saudi Arabia and the UAE with arms) and the UK, because of the long-standing historical and economic ties between them and the Saudis.

Currently, the “war” is just one of words, threats, accusations, shutting down of Embassies, freezing of diplomatic relationships and boycotting of each other's products. These initiatives see the involvement of other, minor, actors, such as the various emirates in the Gulf (which side with Saudi Arabia: if Saud's regime falls, theirs would fall shortly thereafter). On the Saudi side there are also other, “Islamic NATO”, countries that see a political and financial opportunity in their choice (Somalia, Sudan, Djibouti, etc.) On the opposite front, siding with Iran, we find Syria, Iraq and the various Shiite entities present in the region.

The “religious war” between Sunnis and Shiites is therefore fueled by much more prosaic reasons than a merely theological dispute from 1400 years back.

What about the ISIS?

Our final consideration is therefore aimed at the only regional actor that will reap benefits from this dispute: the ISIS. The division that exists between the various countries in the region is a guarantee for Al Baghdadi's military survival. The sectarian dispute further legitimizes the war of religion that the Caliphate is fighting. Much like in Libya, social chaos, divisions and bickering in the ranks of their enemies are the building blocks for the military conquests of the ISIS.

THE PROPAGANDIST APPARATUS OF THE ISIS

The ISIS is an organization that craves international recognition; the publication of its feats is largely due to this. Recognition is an indirect legitimization of its existence.

The organization strives for such an ambitious design - the constitution of an Islamic State and the destruction of existing nations in the Middle East – that it needs to turn everything into Islamic history, legends of its heroes, divine signs and messianic functions. When al Baghdadi waves an Islamic flag, his war immediately turns into a war of religion.

The media coverage that is ensured to all of the events regarding the ISIS is mere propaganda, part of which is aimed at spreading the messianic message that everything is inherent to Islam, a premonition of the Koran and the design of Allah.

For the ISIS, propaganda is also a way to attract new adepts, to make proselytism, to encourage the arrival of new foreign fighters and to provide the design of al Baghdadi with an international imprint that can ease its spread beyond the geographical borders of the Middle East.

Coupled with the above, there is also the propaganda aimed at the enemy, which is comprised of truculent images of beheadings and crucifixions that scare the enemy, intimidate the people that already live under the law of the Caliph and turns the path of the Islamic combatant into a one way street, where the mercy of the enemy is not expected in case of defeat.

It is important for the ISIS to portray itself in a dynamic way: a State that fights, wins, expands and consolidates itself in the name of Allah. The ISIS needs to publicize its progress, it needs to demonstrate that it is unstoppable. It is the narration of a military epic which, indirectly, also serves the purpose of hiding its defeats.

It is therefore easy to understand why the propagandist apparatus of the ISIS has become a central element in the survival and spread of the Islamic State.

A big contradiction

On the one side, it is the ISIS that calls upon traditional Islam, the immutable literal value of its sacred scriptures, without ever leaving any room for historical contextualization of their precepts. There is a world where modernity is excluded. On the other side – and here lies the paradox – the ISIS is an organization that uses bleeding edge technology to spread its verb.

And this is why the propagandist apparatus of the ISIS, the Council of the Mass Media (or “Institution for public information of the Islamic State”), has become a structure that rivals in importance with the other central structures of the organization. The fact that the Council of the Mass Media has a direct line with all the other main structures of the ISIS (The Military Council, the Council of the Sharia, the Council of the Shura, The Defense, etc.) makes it capable of applying its propaganda/advertisement message to every significant event regarding the organization.

The Council of the Mass Media and its offshoots

The Council of the Mass Media is headed by Abu al Athir Abbassi, while the most important figure therein is the famous spokesman of the ISIS, Taha Subhi Falaha, who also goes by the name of Abu Mohammed Adnani, whose death was hypothesized following a US air strike in the province of Anbar in November 2014. He also has a 5 million dollar prize on his head offered by the US department of Justice since last May.

Adnani is a Syrian born 38-year-old who has also lived in Iraq and who is known to Coalition prisons since 2005 (he was then using other aliases) because of his militancy in al Zaraqawi's group. The man is said to be the head of the foreign activity of the ISIS and is therefore thought to be involved in the recent attacks in Paris and Beirut.

Inside the Council of the Mass Media, there is also a special structure dedicated to religious aspects. The structure is headed by Abdullah al Janabi, who already headed the Council of the Shura in Falluja.

Hierarchy left aside, there are a number of young men within the ISIS that are gifted with a predisposition for the use of the net, computers, video and audio production, publications, and who are able to use social networks such as facebook, twitter, youtube, instagram, etc, to spread the Caliph's message.

These men operate within the Council of the Mass Media, where they form a series of sub-structures that produce films, record music, write documents, statements and articles which they translate into several languages and post clips and docs over the internet. Each one of these sub-structures is specialized in one or more of these tasks.

Al Hayat Media Center, one of the most important among the above-mentioned sub-structures, is dedicated to the propagandist aspects of the campaign (it strives to exalt the actions of the ISIS and to promote the recruiting of new combatants and volunteers). It also takes care of translations and of the production and diffusion of such material through a thick web-work of contacts and internet accounts. Such materials target the young, therefore the language of Al Hayat is easily understandable and recurs to suggestion and to the youth's infatuation with epic and brotherly tones.

On the opposite front we find Massassat Furqan (or the "Institute of criteria". It is the title of one of the Shura in the Koran which sets the rules for what is right and what is not) whose messages are addressed to the people who oppose the ISIS. This sub-structure produces threats, intimidation (largely through the use of truculent videos with beheadings, crucifixions, etc.), strives to promote anti-Western feelings and produces films portraying battles and conquests. The target here is the enemy, the West, the apostate and the miscreant.

Next we have the Anjad Media Foundation (the word Anjad in Arabic is an expression meaning "really" or "truthfully"). It is the Foundation that produces music. They broadcast and share religious songs, the "nasheed", which are comprised of choirs, melodies and monotonous repeated tunes. Their role is to provide the epic of the ISIS with a soundtrack which is often featured in the organization's videos. These songs are often chanted by the militia during battle and are used as an instrument of religious propaganda for the recruitment of new adepts. One of the most famous of these "nasheed", which is the so-called ISIS national anthem, is entitled "Dawlat al Islam Qamat". The song, as prescribed by pure Salafite orthodoxy, is not accompanied by music but rather by sounds: firing guns or cannons, marching soldiers, the sound of scimitars colliding. Words and sounds that exalt martyrdom, battle, the death of a hero, the contempt for and mockery of the enemy, the exaltation of religion. The nasheed were used by the Muslim Brothers in their fight against the military regimes in Syria and Egypt; even Osama bin Laden had founded and promoted a group of nasheed singers.

Then there is the Daqib magazine (a name that recalls both one of the final battles of Islam against the miscreants and a location in Syria) which is published online in several different tongues. Once again the main theme is the holy war, the values of the Islamic

community, the search for religious truth, dissertation over Islamic themes and the quality of life in the Islamic State; which is, of course, made to look better than it really is.

The ISIS also has a radio that broadcasts via internet from Mosul: Al Bayan (“The message”).

Finally, as if it weren't enough, there are a series of minor structures that are also dedicated to information, propaganda and recruitment: the “Al I'tissan Media Foundation”, which focuses on the events in Syria and Iraq, the “Al Ghuraba Media” (“the foreigners”) which also spreads the message of the ISIS, the “Al Fursan al Balagh”, the “Al Malahem Media”, the Masada Media Foundation, the “al Asawirti Media” and so on. Over 30 internet websites are thought to be close to the ISIS and work actively to spread the word of the Caliph.

The bulk of this media production is packaged and distributed from the territories controlled by the Islamic state. Clearly enough, the numerous users that access such information over the internet help it in spreading and in multiplying its propagandist effect.

A highly efficient structure

This explains why over 30 thousand foreign fighters have traveled from the remotest corners of the globe to join the militias of al Baghdadi. The media productions of the Islamic State is high quality and produced by professionals who know how to use the issues at hand, how to give each event the right boost and how to turn an earthly circumstance into a religious one. They possess quality and promptness (that is why we know that they operate in conjunction with the leaders of the organization); they are well-trained professionals who use sophisticated structures to achieve their goals.

It is a huge bulk of work: the Syrian and Iraqi territory alone produces roughly 2000 messages/products/videos/photographs in a single month.

Lately it seems that the media production of the Islamic State has slightly decreased in both quality and quantity. This is probably due to the military defeats and to the probable death of some key players in ISIS' media sector. Yet this change does not seem to lessen the appeal of the Caliph's message in the world.

Aside from their propagandist aims, the ISIS media attempt to send out a cultural message. They propose a new world, which is told in their own words embellished by historical/religious connotations; they attempt to instruct and to reshape the society where they operate. This also explains the doggedness with which the ISIS forces all minors to attend Koranic schools and military training. It is the same doggedness that they use against those who dissent from their vision of the world. They demonize the enemy by attacking its religious and social characteristics, taking the message so far as to use iconoclastic forms that forcefully impress the world's public opinion. These include the deliberate distortion of the Western myths from which, according to the ISIS, stem the present times of frustration, coupled with a promise of a better future. In short, the propaganda serves the purpose of fueling a war of civilizations.

Behind this intricate network of propagandist web communications there is also an operative element: their use of the internet to exchange information, give commands, send out instructions. This aspect of the Caliphate's media was recently mentioned by the head of the FBI, James Coley. Thus computer technology is used not only for propaganda but also to exchange ciphered messages.

Currently, the ISIS' propaganda sector employs roughly a hundred individuals and, seen that their message is mainly addressed abroad, the majority of them are foreigners.

Although the ISIS recognizes the central role that information plays in spreading their creed, they do not allow journalists or information contrary to their interests to circulate in the territories that they administer. Those that do not share their views are killed.

One sad example of this is the murder of the 30-year-old Kurd Raqia Hassan Mohammed, who wanted to be an independent journalist in Raqqa (she was accused of being a spy and killed last September), another was the killing of Iman al Halabi (in August 2013), whose crime was to be a political activist.

This is the final hypocrisy: the ISIS exploits the freedom of the West to spread a message, or propaganda, while they do not allow the same to happen in 'their' own Caliphate.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE ISLAMIC “NATO”?

The Saudi initiative, launched on December 14, 2015, to create a joint military force that will include some Arab countries and exclusively muslim nations, and Sunni ones in particular, leaves several questions unanswered. There are a number of reasons why this plan was announced in the first place.

The first circumstance refers to the internal power struggle within the Saudi monarchy. Following the rise to the throne of King Salman, his nephew Mohammed bin Nayef (57 years old) was named crown prince and Minister of Interior. At the same time, Salman's son, Mohammed bin Salman (31 years old) was appointed Minister of Defense and thus deputy crown prince. These decisions have unsettled the reign. In a short time span, the ambitious son of the king has accumulated more power becoming both the head of the Royal Court – and thus the person with direct access to the ruler – and President of the Council for Economic Affairs and Development – the organism that oversees Aramco's oil activities and the use of government investment funds. The excessive power of Salman's son with respect to his elder cousin, and future successor of his own father, is creating a growing conflict within the house of Saud.

The conflict in Yemen and the creation of an international coalition are part of Mohamed bin Salman's attempts to gain yet more power and international appeal. However, the Yemeni war did not have the expected positive impact on the image of the Minister of Defense due to the resistance of the Houthis. The internal power struggle in Saudi Arabia is not limited to these two actors. There are also a number of nephews of former king Abdul Aziz bin Saud that will fight back to climb up the succession line when the current ruler passes away.

The Saudi-led coalition announced on December 14, 2015 and that groups 34 countries saw the light to allegedly fight terrorism, although the definition of the latter is yet to come. According to the declaration of the Saudi Minister of Defense, terrorism is not solely the Sunni one – currently represented by the ISIS led by Al Baghdadi or Al Qaeda – but includes all those groups that destabilize the region. Such a wide approach to the fight against terrorists means that, from time to time, the coalition will tackle any group that, if need be, will be labeled as “terrorist”. It is not a coincidence that none of the countries with a Shia majority, such as Iraq or Iran, or led by loosely Shia sects, as the Alawites in Syria, are part of this coalition. Another nation not part of this group is Oman, due to Sultan Qaboos's neutral position in the Sunni-Shia struggle.

This element implies that, regardless of which definition of Islamic terrorism will be used, this alliance among Muslim countries will tackle the growing influence of the Shia in the region and the ongoing proxy war for supremacy between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Mohamed bin Salman stressed that the coalition will not move along sectarian lines. His words mean exactly the opposite: the Sunnis will have a key role in determining the future role of this organism. The Saudis want to strengthen their leadership of the Sunni galaxy especially now that Iran has returned on the international scene following the agreement on its nuclear programme.

It is also pretty evident that the focal point of operations of any intervention of this coalition will be the Middle East and its neighboring regions. In other terms, this means that most of the 34 countries that joined the initiative did so only to access the generous economic flows that Saudi Arabia will guarantee. This is definitely the case for almost all African countries (Benin, Comoros, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Guinea, Chad, Togo, Ivory Coast, Somalia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Gabon, Sudan, Mauritania) that have really nothing to do with Middle Eastern affairs. The same goes for Asian countries such as Bangladesh, Malaysia and the Maldives. Pakistan is instead a natural partner, as it already supplies its military manpower to several countries in the Gulf.

It is interesting to notice how also the Palestinian National Authority has decided to join the alliance. Apart from funding, the Palestinians are in desperate need of support to revive a peace process that has been blocked by Israeli intransigence and that could favor the rise of the radical factions in the diaspora. The contribution of the emirates in the Gulf, given their limited demographics, will be mainly financial. The United Arab Emirates had to hire Colombian and Australian mercenaries to support Saudi military operation in Yemen. This is not the case for Egypt and Turkey.

Egypt, with its 90 million inhabitants, will be one of the biggest contributors to the military alliance and could become extremely useful if and when it decides to help Saudi Arabia overcome its difficulties in Yemen. Cairo is also fundamental in determining the outcome of events in Libya due to its support of the internationally recognized government in Tobruk, which is also part of the coalition. It is quite evident that Egypt is attracted by the potential funding coming from the Gulf and by the possibilities offered by the initiative to clear General Al Sisi's international stature. Lastly, Cairo is facing a real threat from Islamic terrorism, both from the ISIS in the Sinai and in neighboring Libya.

Another country that has joined the coalition is Turkey. President Erdogan has never hidden his intention to play an ambitious leading role in regional affairs and this alliance with Saudi Arabia will help him to do so. Both Ankara and Riyadh are allied against the Syrian regime and, indirectly, in the fight against Iranian influence. This is probably the major cause of their ambiguous stance in the fight against the ISIS, as their priority has always been the downfall of Bashar al Assad and not that of the Islamic caliphate.

The recent rapprochement between Turkey and Saudi Arabia follows the rift on Egypt and, in particular, on the role of the Muslim Brotherhood, to which the Turkish ruling AKP party is affiliated. Riyadh has openly supported al Sisi, while the Turks opposed him. Despite their different opinions, both countries have recently signed economic deals worth some 10 billion dollars. Saudi Arabia has also taken another step to please their new Turkish friends: they have recently left the Kurdish factions out of the list of the opposition groups that will take part in the negotiations with the Syrian regime. This leads back to one of our first questions: the definition of terrorism. For Turkey, the ISIS is not top of the list, but rather the PKK and the Syrian YPG are.

Turkey's presence in the coalition – that some have labeled as the “Islamic NATO” – de facto creates a connection with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, of which Ankara is also a member. Does this circumstance imply, as some analysts have speculated, that the

two organizations will work together in the future? Hard to believe, if not in very specific circumstances and not necessarily in dealing with Middle Eastern affairs. And when such a convergence will not happen, it will be interesting to see which of the two NATO's Erdogan will pick.

In his public statements, Mohamed bin Salman has also mentioned that any military intervention will be coordinated with local "legal" national authorities (a subtle justification of the armed intervention in Yemen to restore President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi) and the "international community", whatever that means. Saudi Arabia refused to join the UN Security Council in 2013 claiming that the organization was incapable of carrying out "its duties and responsibilities" in dealing with the civil war in Syria and the Palestinian issue.

The Saudi initiative is also an implicit message to the United States, Riyadh's main ally, and to its controversial policy in the Middle East. Washington is accused by Saudi circles of lacking a clear strategy, of escaping a direct military intervention and of having signed a deal with Iran that goes against Saudi national interests. Does this mean that Saudi Arabia will go on a collision route with the US and will renounce its privileged bilateral relationship? Definitely not. Weapons, military assistance, sharing of intelligence and logistics supplied by the Americans are far too important for Riyadh. However, it is also pretty evident that the Saudis are seeking greater autonomy and creating a privileged axis with Turkey.

Very little is known about the operational details of this new coalition. We know that the command will be in Riyadh – it has been defined as a "Coordination Center", a term similar to the one used by Iran and Russia for their center in Baghdad – but we don't know when it will come into effect. There is no specific information on the contributions from each member country, on whether a rapid intervention force will be created, how the decision making process will be handled, how each single nation will behave and clear rules and strict duties similar to those that apply for NATO members will be defined for this new coalition. Above all, it is unclear who are the international authorities this group will liaise with. Will it be the UN? The Arab League? The Organization of the Islamic Conference? And will the coalition intervene to defend member countries or will they also envisage attacking third parties?

The questions over the future role of the "Islamic NATO" will be answered with time. The first test will be in Syria. Will the coalition intervene against the ISIS, as the US wishes, or will they continue undermining al Assad's regime by supporting the extremist factions that fight against Damascus? Will it deploy in Iraq, possibly to counter the Islamic State, but how will it deal with Baghdad's national sovereignty? And will they do the same in Afghanistan, a country at the mercy of terrorism but that is not a signatory of the coalition? Hence, who are the terrorists? The Houthis in Yemen? The Kurds in Syria? The Saudi Minister of Foreign Affairs, Adel al Jubeir, stated that "all options are open". We shall see whether the coalition, greeted by the United States as the long awaited Arab and Muslim force to fight extremism, will actually fight Islamic terrorism.