



www.invisible-dog.com

invisibledog@email.com

WHY THE QATAR-SAUDI CRISIS

To understand what goes on in the Persian Gulf we must take the latest, significant, events and connect them. It is not an easy task because there are intersecting interests, overlapping circumstances and much external interference. Convenience and negative side-effects cancel each other out and choices often produce advantages and disadvantages at the same time. This is due to the presence of multiple ongoing conflicts in the Middle East; there is much uncertainty about the future and there is a very concrete danger that some of the Middle Eastern States will be dismembered in the near future.

What triggered the crisis between Qatar and Saudi Arabia?

Saudi Arabia and Qatar are both members of the Gulf Cooperation Council and signatories of agreements for mutual defense. Both are Sunni monarchies and this should put them on the same side against the Iranian Shiite hegemony.

However, Qatar has recently developed a foreign policy that is in contrast with Saudi policy. Qatar has a television station, Al Jazeera, that broadcasts programs – sometimes frowned upon by the Saudis – independently. In other words, Qatar overshadows the Saudi leadership over the Sunni communities of the Gulf. If that weren't enough, Qatar supports the Muslim Brothers, whose leadership is based in the small emirate. And the Saudi monarchy has never had a good relationship with the political/religious movement of the Brothers.

On top of that, Qatar and Saudi Arabia have adopted conflicting policies in many other Middle Eastern regional contexts. In Egypt, Qatar backed President Morsi, who was later deposed by General Al Sisi's military coup, while Saudi Arabia supported the military regime from the start. Qatar supports Hamas in Gaza, since it is a Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brothers, while Saudi Arabia and Egypt are sworn enemies of Palestinian extremism. In Libya, Qatar backs the Islamic government in Tripoli while the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Egypt support the military ambitions of General Haftar. Qatar and Saudi Arabia are at odds on the Syrian front as well, where Qatar and Saudi Arabia support separate armed factions against Bashar al Assad's regime.

But the aspect that exacerbates the Saudi position against emir Al Thani is his scarce inclination to take part in the fight against Iran. Teheran is one of the other 'superpowers' in the region, in direct competition with Riyadh on the political, military and even religious level. Qatar's reluctance to join the fight against Iran is therefore interpreted as a betrayal.

All of the elements above pushed Saudi Arabia to accuse Qatar of financing terrorism (it is not clear when and where they would have done such thing; while it is certain that Sunni extremism – such as Al Qaeda and ISIS – received both their ideology and money from Saudi Wahhabi groups). But the truthfulness of the accusation is not so important after all; it's real aim is to demonize and oppose Qatar.

Qatar cannot afford to adopt a hostile stance with regards to Iran because most of its gas fields are located in the Persian Gulf, where the Iranian military is all powerful. The South Pars fields are administered by both Qatar and Iran. A conflicting relationship with Iran would hamper Qatar's financial interests.

After all, the Qatari emir can afford a measure of ambiguity in his behavior since he provides the US with their biggest military base in the Persian Gulf. Qatar thus compensates the Iranian hostility against US presence in the Gulf with a more friendly relationship with the Ayatollahs.

The problem within Saudi Arabia

The Saudi-Qatari crisis was sparked by the Saudi monarchy's intention to solve regional crises in an interventionist manner. They did so with the Sunni emir Al Khalifa of Bahrein, who reigns over a largely Shiite population. The same happened in Yemen, where the Saudis stepped in to defeat the Shiite/Zaidi Houthis. Last but not least, the Saudis are attempting to create an Islamic NATO in juxtaposition with Iran.

This same approach determined the closure of the borders and the embargo against Qatar. The new Saudi policy of force and scarce diplomacy is sponsored by the king's son, Mohammed bin Salman, who used his position to increase his power among the ranks of the dynasty and of the Royal court. The practical results of this policy were the recent designation of bin Salman as crown prince and the exclusion of his cousin, Mohammed bin Nayef, from the line of pretenders to the throne. With the help of his father, Mohammed bin Salman wants to become the protector of the Sunni; the champion in the fight against terrorism; and the great reformist at home.

It is not yet clear whether this will be enough to legitimize his future rise to the Saudi throne and whether his father's nepotistic manners will be sufficient to silence the perplexity of the many aspirant kings present within the Royal court. All of these circumstances are destabilizing a monarchy where geriatric power has been the norm (Mohammed bin Salman is but 32), where succession was stipulated through precise rules and where foreign policy was always based on a very prudent approach, mediation and compromise.

It is not by chance that the crisis against Qatar worsened after the visit of US President Donald Trump in Riyadh. During said visit, not only did the sides sign a contract for the sale of weapons, but the monarchy finally felt legitimized by the US friendship after the cooler stretch with Obama at the helm. Trump's hostility towards Iran is notorious, as is his will to renegotiate the nuclear deal with Iran. The above elements have given the Saudis

the courage to stand first in line against Iran. If anyone, like Qatar, shows reluctance in siding with the Saudis, they must be sanctioned, punished and marginalized.

The consequences of the crisis

The first, direct, consequence of the crisis is that Iran declared its support of Qatar's emir Al Thani. This choice reflects the direct interests of Iran in the region, because it puts Qatar, a Sunni country, directly under its protective wing.

The second consequence was Turkey siding with Qatar. After all, Turkey is headed by an Islamic Party, the AKP, which is affiliated to the Muslim Brothers. Turkey is the strongest 'superpower' in the region and President Erdogan just issued legislation aimed at allowing Turkish troops to be stationed in a Qatar base and to train the local Qatari army. Turkey's choice is also dictated by economics: almost 70% of the oil and gas used by Turkey comes from Qatar.

Then there are other countries like Sudan, which receive large sums from Qatar and are thus reluctant to side with Saudi Arabia. Sudan has lent their territory to the Muslim Brothers for years, has recently participated in a joint air force training mission with Saudi Arabia and is in the midst of a struggle that they would much rather ignore. Thus they try to mediate: in fact, Sudan has recently cooled their historical relationship with Iran but still need the financial support of the wealthy Gulf monarchies, especially after the secession of South Sudan, which caused Sudan's oil revenues to be axed by 75%.

Kuwait is also in an uncomfortable position. They, like Qatar, need to be allies of Iran, both because Kuwait borders Shiite Iraq and because, like Doha, they have their oil fields in the Persian Gulf. Also, about 30% of Kuwait's population is Shiite.

Oman, although a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council, has a traditionally neutral stance in regional matters. They refused to send their troops to Yemen; they didn't support the emir of Bahrain and have good relationships with Iran. Sultan Qaboos' policy is both religiously motivated and guided by the need to give continuity to the country after his death: Omanis are mostly Ibadis, a sect that sits somewhere between Sunni and Shiite Muslims.

Clearly, there are countries that found it convenient to share in the Saudi militaristic ambitions. The United Arab Emirates, for one, have always been close to the Saudis; Yemen (where reigns a regime which is internationally recognized, albeit in place solely by virtue of Saudi military support); Bahrain (they joined in exchange for survival, granted by Saudi Arabia and UAE); Jordan and Egypt (convinced by the money that the Saudis pour in both countries at regular intervals); the Maldives (which have become a Saudi financial fief); the government of Benghazi, Libya, of which General Haftar is a part. After all, the Arab and Muslim support for Saudi's aims is well below expectations.

Internationally speaking, while the US sides with Saudi Arabia, there is a clear Russian interest in siding with Iran. And then there is another, great, country, which is generally silent on Middle Eastern policy, but which is lately trying to find a placement on the

regional chessboard. On that note, a series of joint military exercises by the Chinese and Iranian navies have been held in the strait of Hormuz during the past weeks.

The Saudi choice

The choice of the Saudis to end relationships with Qatar seems foolhardy. If they hoped to reinforce the anti-Iran axis and “punish” reluctant allies, the effect obtained by the sanctions did not reflect Saudi intentions. What they produced was instead a fracture in the Sunni communities and a reinforcing of the Iranian stance.

If in the past Saudi Arabia was unsettled by the Shiite axis between Iran, Iraq and Syria (and would have thus liked to put an end to Assad’s regime), now the Syrian dictator has yet another chance to survive because Qatar is accepting the idea – as is Iran – that Bashar al Assad can stay in place and that financing other rebel militias to topple the dictator could be counterproductive.

So has Qatar bowed to the Saudi ultimatum as king Salman and his son Mohammed wished? In fact, no. They conceded that they will not give refuge to representatives of Hamas anymore but, rather than please the Saudis, they did Israel a favor. All of the other requests, which were blatantly detrimental to Qatar’s sovereignty (like the request to shut down Al Jazeera) were, of course, rejected. In addition, Qatar pulled its troops, which were fighting alongside the Saudis, out of Yemen and re-deployed them on the border with Saudi Arabia.

The other requests/ultimatums against Qatar were to put an end to diplomatic and commercial exchanges with Iran, to pay a settlement for unspecified damages endured by Saudi Arabia, to close the Turkish base, to hand over wanted individuals and put an end to Qatari support of terrorism in general (Truth be told, Qatar has ties with Hamas, Hezbollah and the Talibans. But Saudi Arabia, with the backing of Egypt, managed to convince the UN Security Council not to include the Saudi ISIS in the list of terrorist groups). The request to shut down Al Jazeera and to stop supporting other media (Qatar said it could shut down Al Jazeera if the same was done with Al Arabiya) were aimed at creating a ‘casus belli’ or, alternatively, at humiliating the emir of Qatar.

Has Saudi Arabia gained prestige among the Sunni community or internationally by attacking Qatar? Not really.

If Saudi Arabia was hoping to destabilize Qatar politically and financially by isolating the emirate, closing its air and maritime space and inflicting an embargo on all of its products, they failed miserably. Turkish support for Qatar changes the balance of powers in the fight for Sunni hegemony. Turkey was an ally of Saudi Arabia; now they are a competitor. And their competition will become more heated when the Turkish military base in Qatar is reinforced.

The Saudi initiatives have created problems for the US as well because, regardless of President Trump’s colorful statements, the Udeid base in Qatar harbors 10,000 US soldiers: these troops are needed to carry out operations in Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq. That is why the US Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, decided to try a mediation rather

than play along with Saudi ambitions. And perhaps that is why Qatar recently signed a contract to buy arms from the US.

IRAQ'S SECURITY SERVICES UNDER SADDAM HUSSEIN

On December 30, 2016 it was the tenth anniversary of the death of Saddam Hussein. The former Iraqi ruler was caught by the US in Tikrit on December 13, 2003, put on trial by a special tribunal, convicted for crimes against humanity and killed by hanging. Saddam had ruled over Iraq from 1979 until 2003. He was a US ally during the war with Iran in the 1980s, then turned arch-foe after the invasion of Kuwait in January 1991.

The first Gulf War led by US President George H. W. Bush failed to oust the Iraqi dictator when it stopped short of invading Baghdad. A decade later, his son, George W. Bush, would accomplish what his father had failed to do. Only for the wrong reasons: a non-existent program of WMDs and an unrealistic support to Islamic terrorism. And while, until then, Iraq had been a secular beacon in a region thorn by sectarian violence, the US invasion brought that chaos, terrorism and civil strife Saddam Hussein and his regime had been able to rein in.

The security apparatus

The Iraqi dictator counted on a heavy security apparatus to control and rid Iraq of any form of internal or external opposition. Furthermore, Saddam was at the helm of a Sunni minority ruling over a Shia majority, at war with Iran to the east and facing recurrent Kurdish uprisings in the north of Iraq. Many enemies, much security.

Saddam Hussein was both ruthless and cautious. He delegated overlapping tasks to different security agencies, putting them in competition with one another and making sure they would keep an eye on each other's doings. None could prevail over the other and every structure reported to him only. In most cases the responsibility over the security services was assigned to people Saddam could trust, either because they were family or belonged to his tribe. But this didn't make Saddam Hussein any less suspicious.

General Directorate of Intelligence (Jihaz al Mukhabarat al Amma)

It was the main intelligence agency in Iraq under Saddam Hussein and one of the most efficient intelligence agencies in the Middle East at the time. It was tasked with several different functions:

- The control of political opponents at home and abroad;
- The collection of information on enemy countries, traditional ones like the US, Israel and the UK and local neighbors such as Iran, Syria and the Gulf countries;
- The monitoring and repression of both the Kurds and the Shia;
- The infiltration of the Baath party to prevent enemies emerging from among the so-called friends.

The GDI was also the link with all the foreign groups that were either supported or financed by the regime. This was the case for the PKK that fought against Turkey, the

Mujaheddin al Khalq that opposed Iran, the Palestinian Liberation Front led by Abu Abbas that allowed the Iraqis to play a role in the Palestinian struggle and against Israel.

The Directorate was organized through a number of offices, all named with the letter M, from Maktab or Midiriyat or office. They were structured in branches and sections. Some of them had specific technical or logistical roles: M2, the administration; M3, archives and records office; M9, technical and scientific support including photo labs, IT, chemistry and equipment; M15 tasked with the training of the personnel.

Other offices had more operational tasks, as many as the potential targets, and all reported to M1, the Special Office, a sort of Chiefs of Staff that coordinated and controlled all the branches of the Directorate. It was based in Baghdad and had four regional offices. M4 focused on operations abroad; M5 on counterespionage and had men infiltrated in political parties and airlines, while a specific section was dedicated solely to the Kurds; M6 on industrial security and especially on defense industries; M7 was tasked with “investigations”, including the interrogation of prisoners. They were allowed to use torture and dedicated staffers were trained by a specific branch called “Special Psychology”.

M8 was dedicated to carrying out special ops, including the elimination or kidnapping of opponents. The members of this office were unknown to other staffers within the Directorate. The secrecy surrounding M8 made it a Secret Service on its own. They were trained in a camp in Salman Pak, south of Baghdad. They also managed the relations with the PLO, Abu Nidal, Abu Abbas and the Irish IRA.

This office was similar to another secret office in the Directorate: the M10. It was tasked with surveilling the staffers of the Directorate. And nobody knew where it was based and who worked for it.

Directorate of General Military Intelligence (Mudiriyyat al Istikhabarat)

It operated within the Armed Forces and was dedicated to: acquiring technologies to use in the military industry; military counterespionage (through a branch known as “Al Amn Askari”); the control of the members of the Republican Guard – Iraq’s elite unit that protected both the dictator and the other dignitaries of the regime. Although they were the regime’s pretorians, the Republican Guard was overseen by a dedicated structure called “Indhibat”.

The Directorate was organized in three departments: Military intelligence tasked with obtaining information abroad on a country basis – i.e. Turkey, Iran, Gulf countries etc.; Military Security entrusted with counterespionage; Technical/Logistics charged with supplies, maintenance and training schools. The Directorate thus operated both at home and abroad.

Loyal to the formula of overlapping competences, the DGMI’s counterespionage went beyond the military and included political parties, retired military officials and could rely on a network of secret prisons, archives and torture rooms.

Special Security Apparatus (Jihaz al Amn al Khas)

This organization was responsible for the security of the dictator and his family. Its members either came from Tikrit, where Saddam was born, or were members of his tribe. They were first trained by the Republican Guard and then moved into the Special Security Apparatus. It was led by Saddam's son Qusai. Its reach also extended to the killing of opponents abroad and for the acquisition of technology. There were different branches within the agency: research, communications, surveillance, security etc.

Directorate of General Security (al Amn al Amm)

This was the secret police tasked with counter-subversive activities and counterespionage. It was under the Ministry of Interior. A similar organization was created after the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2004 by then Prime Minister Ayad Allawi and with the support of the CIA.

National Security Service (Mudiriyyat al Amn al Kawni)

The organization reported to the Revolutionary Command Council, the ultimate decision making body headed by Saddam Hussein. It was thus led from the top. Its functions included the security of the president, in competition with the Special Security Apparatus.

Department of Industry and Industrial Production

It wasn't exactly an intelligence agency, but it still carried out operations abroad and research to acquire technology, equipment and materials. The Iraqi program of Weapons of Mass Destruction (nuclear, biological or chemical) was led by this department. And it reported to the Ministry of Industry.

Just like any other totalitarian regime, repression in Iraq played a key role in guaranteeing the security and survival of the regime. No democracy, no votes, only imposition, coercion and violence. Death penalty, torture, extra-judicial killings were the rule. Aggravated by the ruthlessness of the tyrants.

We should hence pose ourselves a question: now that Saddam Hussein has been deposed and his security apparatus dismantled and replaced by new intelligence agencies funded by the West, have human rights improved in Iraq? Have the tortures, killings and indiscriminate arrests ended? Unfortunately the answer is no.

THE SILENT GENOCIDE OF THE ROHINGYA

Some genocides occur while the media's attention is focusing somewhere else. It has happened in the past and it is happening now with the Rohingya. They live in a remote area of the planet, the Rakhine State at the border between Burma and Bangladesh. This predominantly muslim population of around two million people has been persecuted for years. Officially, they are not even citizens of Burma, but stateless aliens with no rights. Despite having lived in the country for centuries, they are still considered illegal immigrants from Bangladesh.

The Rohingya now mainly live in IDP camps within Burma, although the ongoing repression from both the Burmese army and the Buddhist extremists has pushed them to take refuge abroad, either in Bangladesh or in other neighboring countries. Humanitarian groups are barred from providing assistance to the refugees, and even the UN's work is hindered. Following allegations of crimes against humanity, Burmese authorities recently blocked a UN mission that wanted to investigate the human rights violations against the muslim minority.

And while the abuses continue, it is surprising to hear a Nobel Peace Prize and recipient of several human rights awards worldwide such as Aung San Suu Kyi claim that the Rohingya are not Burmese. The State Counsellor – she cannot be part of government after having married a British citizen – could have said a word or two in favor of the Rohingya. Especially since her party, the National League for Democracy, is the ruling one. Instead, she turned her back to all those human rights organizations that had helped her while being detained by the Burmese junta. In a short period of time, Aung San Suu Kyi has become a supporter of the brutal and nationalistic violence of the Burmese military regime and Buddhist extremists. Not even a petition signed by fellow Nobel laureates was able to push her to support the Rohingya. This is bad news for the Nobel foundation.

The Rohingya led an uprising against the government in 2012 and thus became the object of systematic repression. The regime exploited both nationalism and religion to rally the Burmese people to its support. The fact that the Rohingya are muslims attracted the attention of the Organization of the Islamic Conference. Based in Malaysia, the OIC underlined the sectarian violence linked to this conflict where rapes, extra-judicial killing, beatings, destruction of villages have become a deadly routine for the Rohingya. An ethnic and religious cleansing that has been taking place before and after Aung San Suu Kyi rose to power. The Rohingya that haven't fled to Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia or Thailand live confined in 40 or so makeshift refugee camps, without adequate hygiene or protection. The camps are more like open air prison where the "guests" are not allowed to leave without a special permit.

The Rohingya were denied Burmese citizenship because during the 18th century the British colonial rulers favored the immigration of muslims into territories as north-western Burma with a pre-existing muslim population. When the British left, Buddhists and muslims didn't get along. And during World War II while the Buddhist supported the British, the muslims sided with the Japanese. The Burmese junta has continuously denied the existence of a "Rohingya issue" in the State of Rakhine. Actually, they never even refer to them as

“Rohingya”, but rather as “illegal immigrants”, “muslim people” or “Bengalese”. Their illegal status favors the confiscation of lands of a stateless people with no rights, who cannot vote and don’t have any political representation among the 135 ethnic groups officially recognized in Burma. There is only an exit sign, although even in neighboring countries the Rohingya are not welcomed with arms wide open. Burmese authorities don’t want any international interference on the issue, and while humanitarian organizations face an uphill task delivering aid, journalists are simply not allowed in. This makes the flow of information on the abuses only harder.

Burma claims that in order to preserve the integrity of a 90% majority of Buddhists it must crush the muslim minority and clamp down the expansion of Islam in Asia. The end-result is the exact opposite and is the recipe for Islamic terrorism. Saudi Wahabi charities and Pakistani radicals have been exploiting the persecution against the muslim minority. The financial support they have been providing is fueling, just as it did with the ISIS, Islamic radicalism among the Rohingya. It should come as no surprise that a garrison was attacked in the north of Rakhine on October 9, 2016 and a high ranking official was killed a month later. An Islamic armed group known as "Harakah al Yaqin" (The Faith Movement) claimed responsibility for the attacks. Allegedly funded by Rohingya living in Saudi Arabia, the group has showed off a good dose of military training (provided by some group or State) in guerrilla warfare. And the local population in Rakhine seems to appreciate the group’s taking up arms.

The show of support went even further with local and international religious leaders speaking in favor of Harakah al Yaqim through their fatwas. This is exactly what happened during the rise to power of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. And this is what is happening now in Burma. Back in 2015, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi had offered Rohingya refugees the possibility of fighting in Syria and Iraq. The caliph had understood the potential of a persecuted muslim minority in the heart of Asia.

Radical Islamic groups have emerged across the region and especially in neighboring Bangladesh. This could imply that there is a connection between Harakah al Yaqim and some Bengalese armed factions. Al Baghdadi has constantly focused his attention on instances of sectarian violence. And this is exactly the case with the nationalist Buddhist junta and its war on another group’s religion. Rakhine could become the ideal safe haven for all those Daesh fighters that will flee the Middle East once the Islamic State is defeated. The thousand or so Asian radicals will return home or head to where they can receive support and fetch fresh proselytes. Malay authorities recently apprehended an Indonesian man on his way to Burma to carry out an attack in the name of ISIS. The frustration, marginalization, despair and poverty of the Rohingya could provide the ideal breeding ground for a new generation of terrorists.

ISIS would be keen to relocating in Asia. Last year the caliphate published a new booklet, Al Fatihin (The Conqueror) in Indonesian. Over 60 groups across the continent have pledged their allegiance to al Baghdadi, who could count on a brigade of Asian volunteers know as Katibah al Muhajir (Brigade of the Migrants) back in Syria. The next showdown in Asia will see predominantly muslim countries as Indonesia, Malaysia, Bangladesh and

Pakistan come face to face with the Indian Hindu nationalists and their regional counterparts. Sectarian religious-based violence is rife. And Islamic terrorism is cheering.