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ISRAEL AND THE IRANIAN SYNDROME

The development of the Iranian nuclear program has Israel and its political leader Netanyahu greatly worried. The Israeli PM had ostracized the nuclear accord of 2015 signed by President Obama to the extent of speaking in Congress against the former American president himself.

Netanyahu had activated the Hebrew lobby of A.I.P.A.C. and the weapons lobby in conjunction with Saudi interests; something which he continues to do today with the Trump administration.

In 2011, even before the signing of the nuclear treaty between Teheran, the USA, Russia, China and the EU, Netanyahu had ordered the army's chief of staff Benny Gantz to draw up a strategy to strike Iran on a very short executive notice. A choice that was frowned upon by the Mossad in the person of Tamir Pardo, who had resigned from his post. Even Pardo's predecessor, Meir Degan, was against such initiative.

But Netanyahu continued nonetheless to pursue the goal of blocking the Iranian nuclear program, even when – with the Comprehensive Plan of Action of 2015 – he had for the first time the advantage of realistically checking on the advancement of Iranian nuclear structures and of being able to discover any violation of the agreement by Teheran.

The advent of Trump

With the end of Obama's administration – which was responsible for the accord – and the advent of Trump's, the controversy between the USA and Iran was rekindled. Trump put an end to the traditional foreign policy of the United States which saw them equidistant from opposing parties in the region and decided to side openly with Israel.

The US approach in bilateral relations has changed radically into a strategy based on threats, contrasts, retaliations and impositions. In other words, Trump chose to be the bully rather than the silent diplomat.

This change prompted Israel to also rethink its strategy and to try to scale back the regional power of Iran without ruling out the extreme option of an all out war against them.

An unnatural coalition

Apart from Trump's verbal aggressiveness, Israel can count on the favor of other countries in the region that are bothered by Iran's hegemony.

It is the case of Saudi Arabia, which is the other Arab contender for hegemony in the Gulf. And of the United Arab Emirates, faithful allies of the Saudis in the Yemeni war, who share Saudi fears that Iranian power put an end to their reign.

The Persian Gulf has the world's greatest traffic of hydrocarbons in the world. The strait of Hormuz is a geographical bottleneck that is 50 km wide with one shore controlled by Iran. The Emirates have three little isles in the strait that have been occupied by Iran since the days of the Shah.

The Gulf Cooperation Council, to which these countries adhere together with other countries – and which opposes Iran – has been practically dismembered: Qatar quarreled with Saudi Arabia and sought the protection of Turkey and Iran; Oman, a country with a strong Ibadite tradition (a sect halfway between the Sunni and the Shiites), has always been against the stiffening of political stances between Arab countries; Kuwait is torn between its loyalty to the Saudi cause and the imminent danger of having its oil fields right next to the Iranian ones; Bahrein, for what it's worth, is more interested in sedating the dissident Shiite majority within its borders that continuously endangers the stability of its' Sunni Emir's power.

This unnatural convergence of interests sees potential allies in countries that were traditionally on opposing fronts of the various conflicts in the region. Today, the rule that my enemy's enemy is my friend could have a practical value, but it is blind to the possible reactions of regional Arab communities that have been held together for decades by the demonisation of the Hebrew State. And Saudi Arabia's Wahabism – which fueled the growth of Al Qaida and the ISIS – remains the main element of social cohesion and legitimization of the Saudi dynasty.

That Israel could find its political and military ally among the Arab countries is a distant possibility. Yes, there were visits of Saudi emissaries in Israel and Israeli messengers in Riyadh. There are rumors that these contacts were handled directly by the heir to the Saudi throne, Mohammed bin Salman. But holding talks and sharing strategies is one thing, while fighting side by side is an entirely different ball game. As was demonstrated during the war against Saddam Hussein, US presence on Saudi ground is always met by recurrent popular protests.

Why the nuclear accord was scrapped

One reason why the accord was cast aside was without doubt Trump's intention of contrasting president Obama's doing with a striking gesture.

The accord was canceled by the US but is still considered to be valid by other signatories such as the European Union, China and Russia. It was an agreement – not the best – that had the merit of allowing controls to be carried out on Iranian nuclear structures. But Israel was always against the accord, especially for one reason: it gave Iran the possibility of learning how to build a nuclear weapon without having to seek foreign assistance in doing so and the mere idea that another country in the region could scratch the Israeli nuclear supremacy was reason for much preoccupation.

But doing away with the deal brings up another problem: if the 2015 accord is canceled and there is no other form of deterrence against Iran, it could incite the development of nuclear weapons rather than halting it. In such case, Iran would have to be stopped militarily, which is what Netanyahu and Trump are perhaps envisaging as an option.

The religious factor

The controversy between Iran and the other monarchies in the Gulf is not solely a matter of political-military hegemony or of economic interests. The line dividing the two parties is religious as well: the same old Shiites against Sunnis problem.

Just like in all the other controversies originating from religious motives, differences become more difficult to iron out and extremism becomes a central issue. It is also historically demonstrated that these controversies tend to be the most bloody and ferocious.

Comparing two theocracies

But it is not just a religious matter. There is a second element that pits the Israeli theocracy against the Iranian one.

Israel has recently approved legislation that defines the nation a "State of the Hebrew people". It is a law that ratifies the legitimization of Israeli settlements (while disregarding Palestinian protests and international bans). The Hebrew language is now the official tongue of Israel while the other languages (Arab – spoken by roughly 18% of the population – Druse, Christians and Muslims) will have a "special" status, which seems just a prelude to social and political marginalization.

And then there is the Iranian theocracy, which upholds the country's destiny, both politically and socially speaking.

The divergence between the religious connotations of the two parties is such that there is little room left for a negotiated coexistence.

The hypothesis of a war

Iran has a population of roughly 80 million, making it a giant in the region. Defeating such a nation in a war calls for an enormous military effort, about 4 times what it took to defeat Saddam Hussein.

Iran is also a country that knows how to fight a war: they demonstrated as much against the then-Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein, in the Syrian theater and in the fight against the ISIS.

Could Iran survive a war against a coalition formed by the US and Sunni Arab countries? The answer is that Iran would surely succumb.

But to put together such a heterogeneous coalition would take much time and preparation. One could object that the war would not be a conventional conflict (which calls for a long technical preparation) but rather a series of missile strikes, perhaps against nuclear structures, centers of power and infrastructures that would bring Iran to its knees. Such hypothesis would appear more realistic and would be comforted by Trump's words, inciting the population to rise against the Ayatollah.

However, it is widely demonstrated that wars can only be won by occupying militarily the adversary's territory. If such occupation fails to come into effect, the enemy is not defeated but rather temporarily weakened. Such a scenario would leave room for retaliation, rancor and revenge.

In Iran's case, it could be argued that the regime is non-liberal and that human rights are systematically violated, as is the case in most theocracies, but the Iranian people have already shown that, when faced with a foreign peril, they can put aside social discontent and fight as one.

Iran's strength

The strength of Iran is not measurable on the military level alone: if such were the only valid parameter, the other monarchies in the Gulf – Saudi Arabia and the UAE above all others – would have been wiped out after the recurrent debacles in Yemen.

Iran has designed and produced missile systems that can easily strike Israel. This deterrent has kept the Hebrew State from striking Iran this far. Netanyahu would have already destroyed Iran's nuclear plants if he could have gotten away with it. It is an option that has already been implemented in the past.

Also, Iran has many enemies but also plenty of friends. Iran's friends are brought together by religion and include the countries inhabited by Shiite majorities or ruled by Shiites, such as Syria, ruled by an Alawite minority, and Iraq. Iran can also count on Russia and on the interests that it shares with Turkey.

Most of all, it can rely on Shiite volunteer militias that have acquired much military experience while fighting in Syria and in Iraq; on the Hezbollah which are the only direct enemy of Israel; on their friendship with Hamas (they could stir up another Palestinian Intifada); it can instigate the 20% Shiite minority that occupies the oil-rich regions of Saudi Arabia and could incite the Shiite opposition in Bahrain. Lastly, it could offer support – as it already does – to the Houthi Zaidis in Yemen who are busy fighting the Saudis.

If the war between Iran and its enemies failed to develop into a conventional conflict or if it didn't entail an occupation of the Iranian territory; if it were an asymmetrical war fought by proxy militias; then Iran's power would be by far superior to that of any other Arab country in the region and even to that of Israel.

In other words, to strike Iran without destroying it fully would mean exposing oneself to endless forms of retaliation.

THE ROLE OF THE SHABIHA IN SYRIA

Syria's battlefield has seen the continuous fighting between regular armies, militias and terrorist groups from different countries, ranging from the Turks to the French, from the Chinese to the US and the decisive support of the Russians. A conflict that has left on the ground over half a million victims, mostly civilians.

The Shabiha militias

One of the most ruthless actors that carried out the dirty work for the regime are the Shabiha, irregular military units from the Alawite minority.

They spread at the beginning of the conflict to support the government's security apparatus under the name of Popular Mobilization Forces to counter the opposition's street protests and later evolved into a paramilitary force under the command of the Syrian army. They are a force that is paid, trained and armed by the regime's domestic intelligence agencies, but also by businessmen, wealthy merchants and rich families close to Bashar al Assad.

Their transformation was the direct consequence of the drifting of the civil war towards a sectarian conflict and it was a reply to the political opposition turning into an armed opposition. The majority of the Shabiha are Alawites, but they also include Sunnis and Christians colluded with the regime.

The recruitment

The recruitment of the Shabiha initially targeted unemployed youths, members of the families loyal to the Assads and Alawite clerics. In time the selection process included former convicts, killers, smugglers and criminal gangs. Basically anyone willing to be part of their dirty war.

From time to time, also other paramilitary groups that were taking part in the Syrian civil war also joined the ranks of the Shabiha. This is the case for the Abu Fadl al Abbas Brigade, the Turkmen from the Iskenderun Popular Liberation Front/Syrian Resistance, a criminal group known as the Berri Mafia in Aleppo, the Palestinians from the Al Quds Brigade and the Palestinian Popular Liberation Front/General Command, the Alawites from the Baath Brigade with links to the Arab Social Baath Party, the Sunnis and Druses and their Commandos, the Desert Falcons, the militias from the National Socialist Syrian Party and the par-Arabs from the Arab Nationalist Guards.

The Shabiha have become an umbrella group for all those armed groups that, for one reason or another, fight for Bashar al Assad's regime, that has labelled them "National Defense Forces".

The organization and its modus operandi

Initially tasked with night patrolling and running road blocks in and around Latakia and other Alawite controlled areas, the Shabiha have been deployed by the Syrian army in other regions across the country. To refine their military capabilities, several volunteers have undergone special forces training in Iran.

The Shabiha operate under the command of a General from the Syrian Army that should coordinate their action from Damascus. Yet, in the provinces where they are present, they are not fully integrated into the army. It would be difficult to conform them to the discipline of a regular armed force. The end result is that local commanders still retain a certain degree of autonomy.

The absence of a consolidated hierarchy or knowledge of military discipline has a number of consequences on how these militias fight their enemies or treat their prisoners. After all, having a militia that does not abide to international war law is convenient for the Syrian army, as they can shift the blame to these paramilitary groups. During an offensive, the Shabiha carry out commando ops, infiltrate enemy lines and, once a territory has been seized, carry out sweeps.

A future problem

At least on paper, the Shabiha work in favor of the Syrian regime, but this does not mean Damascus is capable of controlling them. The creation of the National Defense Forces was an attempt to unify different paramilitary groups under a unified command. But the effort did not yield the expected results.

Their loyalty is guaranteed by it being convenient at this point in time. But once the civil war comes to an end, the motivations that led Palestinians, Druses, Turks, Kurds and Christians to fight for the regime will have to be addressed. The same goes for the criminal gangs that were unleashed and that will have to be either reigned in or sanctioned again. One should consider the possibility that some of these groups will enter in a collision course with the government in Damascus to satisfy their ambitions.

Iran's role

Lastly, and probably most importantly, most of these militias have direct links to Tehran rather than Damascus. As we've said earlier, some of these groups were trained and armed by the Iranians. Iran's hegemonic aims over Syria go well beyond the support provided to Bashar al Assad.

The Israelis told the UN Security Council that an estimated 80-85 thousand paramilitary or military units currently on the ground in Syria are under direct or indirect Iranian control. A figure that includes both the Iran-trained Shabiha, but also Hezbollah, Pasdaran and Shia volunteers from Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan.

In order to survive, the Syrian regime is in need of some form of coexistence with pro-Iranian military groups. On the other, Iran is interested in creating the conditions that will allow paramilitary groups to fight Israel from Syria in case of a direct attack against Tehran. This is the prelude of a potential confrontation between Syria and Iran. And in case of an Israel vs Iran conflict, chances are Bashar al Assad's regime will end up with the short end of the stick.

FRENCH WISHES AND AIMS IN LIBYA

Libya continues to be a non-State. The internationally recognized President Fayeze al Sarraj does not control Tripoli. The so called commander of the Libyan National Army in Benghazi, Khalifa Haftar, also has a number of issues controlling Cyrenaica: he can't get rid of the Islamic State in Derna and has recently lost the control of a number of oil fields and oil terminals.

The country is ruled by gangs and militias, including foreign entities with fighters from Darfour, Chad and Palestine that also act as mercenaries. The main sources of income Libyans rely on are oil smuggling and human trafficking.

Libya's sovereignty is under the influence of foreign State-actors: UAE, Saudi Arabia, France and Egypt in Cyrenaica, Turkey and Qatar in Tripolitania. While the French has special forces boots on the ground, the US bombs terrorists with its drones from time to time.

In light of these circumstances, when French President Emmanuel Macron organized a UN sponsored Conference on Libya in Paris on May 29, 2018 to seek a "common political path" for an end to the conflict he fueled the political narcissism that derives from French grandeur. Macron wanted to show that France could play a role in Libyan affairs, just like his predecessor Nicolas Sarkozy had done in arranging for the international military intervention that led to the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi.

The French initiative was favored by the absence of a government in Rome and gave Paris the opportunity to try to influence Libyan politics without one of the countries that are more involved in the peace process: Italy. Furthermore, French arrogance went as far as alienating other important actors, such as the UK, the USA and Russia. Macron decided to favor his own national interests over a multilateral approach to the crisis.

But the attempt was ill-conceived. While inviting to Paris the biggest political and military actors in the country, the French underestimated the absence of those armed groups and militias who often wield more power than those who attended the meeting.

Selective diplomacy

The May summit was similar to other previous meetings on Libya, and especially the one that took place in Paris in July 2017. Both cases lacked an adequate political and diplomatic preparation to the event. And both lacked method.

Macron's initiative overlapped with what the UN Representative for Libya, Ghassan Salamé, had been attempting throughout 2017: peace between the warring parties and elections to give Libya a new political framework. But with too many cooks, the soup risked getting xxxed.

Despite the presence of Libyan PM Fayeze al Sarraj and General Khalifa Haftar, this wasn't enough to bring forth a reconciliation process. The only outcome of the Paris meeting was to downgrade the legitimacy of the National Accord government, that was forced to negotiate with a peer that never recognized its legitimacy.

The negotiations brought around the table about 20 countries and international organizations with the aim of “facilitating” the talks. But this had more to do with form, than with substance. Once again the French grandeur played a role.

It made sense to invite Libya’s neighbors, the countries that have played some role in the conflict (Qatar, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Egypt) and some regional and international organizations (EU, Arab League, African Union, UN). But it is difficult to understand why Congo or the Netherlands were invited to attend.

Those who did not attend are even more relevant: the United States and Russia. Their shadow could not obfuscate the role of France and its President.

Militias on the counter-attack

There was an immediate reaction to the summit. 13 militias announced they did would not recognize the outcome of the Paris conference and denounced foreign interference in Libyan affairs. They stated they were willing to sit around a table and negotiate. But not in Paris.

They focused their hostility towards Khalifa Haftar, whom they believe wants to take over power and not share it via a reconciliation process. The man who participated in the coup that brought Gaddafi to power in 1969 is still attached to the habits of the old regime.

This is why labelling the Paris conference a “success” is ephemeral. And so is thinking that the country will vote in December. This is just wishful thinking and not an action plan. There was no planning on who would organize the vote, criteria on who could participate or not, which political parties would be allowed or excluded and, above all, which entity would guarantee the vote’s regularity against fraud and its security. There was a hint about some sort of international supervision on the elections. But then again: Who? How?

By calling for a vote by the end of 2018, Emmanuel Macron forgot about an insignificant detail for the future of Libya: its Constitutional framework. No one has drafted one just yet. And no one has voted in a referendum to accept or reject the new Constitution. And will Libya see a central government or a federal system? Who knows.

Forcing an election could bring upon a new polarization and lead to a renewed conflict between winners and losers in the vote. What if a contender rejects his defeat?

The chances of holding a vote in Libya after 7 years of civil war is not just unlikely. It is impossible. And the road map to elections is already behind schedule. A new electoral law had to be approved by all parties involved by September 16, 2018 and the vote had to be held on December 10. But there is no chance this will happen without some form of national reconciliation.

Libya is currently divided in two. And then there are several grey areas, no man’s lands ruled by militias or criminal gangs that run those territories as they wish. Hence, the issue is not finding a power sharing agreement between Fayeze al Sarraj and Khalifa Haftar. But rather understanding how a government plans to extend its authority in those areas that are not under its control.

If the domestic Libyan scenario is an intricate mess, so is the international one. Superpowers and regional actors want to have a say on Libya's future. Will they find a compromise?

Missing in action

France decided they wanted to go all-in on a deal between Sarraj and Haftar. But they totally forgot about the rest. While French political narcissism was satisfied, there were no practical results. The lack of inclusivity of all Libyan political actors played a decisive role in the failure of the conference.

Furthermore, the host's credibility as a super partes negotiator was never put in doubt. The French had none since they have clearly supported Khalifa Haftar – he was even in a hospital in Paris in April for a series of health problems – and they could not suddenly turn into a neutral mediator.

The balance of power in Libya nowadays is not dictated by political or social consensus, but by weapons. This is the only good argument in a country of 5 million flooded by over 20 million firearms and assault weapons. And the only way out of such a conflict is to call the guys with the guns to the table. And this was not done in Paris. Having Sarraj and Haftar was simply not enough.

The Libyans watch political developments with the typical apathy of a people that has been used to totalitarian regimes and to a lack of democratic rules. Seven years of conflict have consolidated a series of economic powerhouses, often profiting from illegal traffics, that will be hard to dismantle.

A document with 13 good wishes was signed – despite the fact that its text had been readied prior to the conference – including the unification of the Libyan Central Bank, the elimination of political duplicates and the formation of a unified army. Most of the points were cut and paste from the 2015 Skhirat agreement. And the Paris document could, and probably will, share a similar path to failure.