

# NATO Rapid Deployable Corps - Italy

## "ASSESSING THE CRISIS ON NATO'S SOUTHERN FLANK"



# SPECIAL INSERT



*Photo credit : NRDC-ITA PAO*

**NRDC-ITA flags parade**

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# PREFACE

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## Major General Maurizio Boni

### NRDC-ITA Chief of Staff

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At the Wales Summit in September 2014, NATO's Heads of State and Government agreed on a Readiness Action Plan (RAP) which, among other mandates, included a task to analyze the adaptation requirements needed to face the growing challenges and threats emanating from NATO's Southern Flank. Arriving in Rome at the start of a two day visit to Italy on February 2015, Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg underscored that NATO was adapting to defend all Allies against threats from any direction, east or south. He added that the Alliance was implementing the biggest reinforcement of NATO's collective defense since the end of the Cold War, in order to respond to emerging challenges, including ISIL and instability in the Middle East and North Africa. In meetings with President Sergio Mattarella and Prime Minister Matteo Renzi, the Secretary General discussed NATO's adaptation to new security challenges, including the improvement of the Alliance's situational awareness on its southern borders. Allies, therefore, have realized that the growing instability and mounting transnational and multi-dimensional threats on NATO's Southern Flank, coupled with the risk of a belt of failing states emerging in the region, pose a serious threat to the countries of the region as well as to NATO's own security, and Italy stands at the forefront of the most concerned Alliance countries. In this context, NRDC-ITA remains a key NATO



asset that has relevance and purpose both at home in Italy and more widely in NATO. The dramatic developments in the international geopolitical framework found our Headquarters fully engaged in the implementation of the JTF HQ concept, and preparing to take our place as one of the two NATO Force Structure's HQs on stand-by from July 2015-July 2016, capable of exercising operational level command and control over a Land Heavy Small Joint Operation . As we were approaching the end of our validation journey, at the end of January 2015, the requirement of "Horizon Scanning" as a key part of our work during the stand-by clearly emerged, and NRDC-ITA would be ideally located among the NATO's Community to develop a collaborative effort with NATO political and military capabilities at all levels. Crisis identification, in cooperation with SHAPE-CCOMC and in close collaboration with the Intel Community, would constitute the initial step in this work, with the view of monitoring an

Area of interest to both the Alliance and the Framework Nation, precisely the Southern Flank. In practical terms, this would serve to ensure that we were “situationally aware” of the nature, complexity and pace of evolution of the challenges affecting that Area, but in full respect of the principle that in case of crisis a “28 for 28” approach would eventually apply, and that the “Regionalization” of the Alliance was not sought. The opportunity to offer the Italian-led NATO Rapid Deployable Corps as a credible contributor to a better understanding of the key threats to security and stability in North Africa and Middle East for the development of an appropriate collective strategy was therefore taken into consideration, and become one of the milestones of the horizon scanning workstreams.

In this context, the implementation of the Knowledge Development (KD) concept, including an analysis of the Human Domain, was a pillar of the stand-by operational design. Whichever of the tasks we were fulfilling from our mission, the HQ would require as the starting point of its planning a comprehensive understanding of the crisis and the environment in which we would expect to operate. Working within J2 as part of the Joint Intelligence Center (JIC), the KD team was established in order to deliver this and to support the decision-making process by: 1) contributing to the development of a holistic situational understanding of the relevant crisis area, covering all Political, Military, Economic, Social, Infrastructure and Information (PMESII) domains (including the relationships and interactions between systems and actors); 2) forecasting the possible effects of Military, Political, Economic and Civil actions over the different PMESII systems. Moreover, in order to understand that Human factors are pro-

perly reflected, the KD team carried out a study of our potential “engagement space”, drawing, amongst other sources, on information coming from selected Non NATO Entities (NNEs) - IOs, NGOs, institutions, universities, and other civilian SMEs – that were involved in the PMESII analysis. Today, NRDC-ITA’s stand-by delivery is guaranteed by a robust crisis network and analysis capability, that allows continuous Comprehensive Preparation of the Operational Environment (CPOE) work, concept development, appropriate LNO deployment and readiness processes, and it remains at the forefront of intellectual debate as NATO evolves to address emerging challenges.




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About the question over the nomenclature of “Flank” and “Strategic Direction”: the former is a geographic description, while the latter indicates the characteristics of the particular strategic problem set itself (South being quite different from East) which is manifest in , but not restricted to, the geographical “Flank”. However, it doesn’t matter much at the Operational level as the two coincide within the same operational Joint Operational Area (JOA). The terms also seem to be used rather interchangeably within the Alliance.



## Professor Vittorio Emanuele Parsi

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Among his works: *Democrazia e mercato* [TN: Democracy and the market], *Interesse nazionale e globalizzazione* [TN: National interest and globalization], *La virtù dei migliori* [TN: The quality of the best](with L. Ornaghi), *The Inevitable Alliance*, *La fine dell'uguaglianza* [TN: The end of equality]



# To resolve the war in the Levant, end the ‘Great Game’

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It is the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran for dominance of the Middle East that drives the civil war in Syria, accelerating sectarian strife and transforming a revolt against Assad’s authoritarian and kleptocratic regime into a religious conflict between Sunni and Shia. The struggle between the conservative Saudi monarchy and the Islamic Republic of Iran is, after all, only the most recent bid for hegemony in the region, all of which have until now been thwarted largely thanks to Saudi activism. The first and most important was led by Nasser’s Egypt, in the decade between the ‘50s and ‘60s: the United Arab Republic was formed, uniting Egypt and Syria, and Cairo’s troops fought in Yemen until 1967, in the uprising against the governing imams, who were supported by the Saudis. It was the defeat against Israel that quashed the ambitions of the Egyptian strongman. In the ‘80s, the power play was attempted by Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, whose aggression against the newborn Iran of Khomeini, financed and supported by Arab petro-dollars, led him to believe that he had accrued sufficient credentials to make a bid for leadership of the Middle East and Persian Gulf. In 1990 the miscalculation involving Kuwait would cost the dictator dearly, condemning his regime and his people to a prolonged agony, which came to an end for Saddam in 2003, but which is still tearing the country apart today. What we are seeing today is the third attempt at regional dominance, this time involving two rivals who have been enemies for almost forty years, but whose acrimony has decidedly increased in the past few years. Friction between the Saudis and Iran goes back to 1978, to the origin of the Isla-

mic revolution inspired by Khomeini, and is centered on the use of Islam by both nations as the factor legitimizing power and the regime that wields it. To Iran, the political aspect of Islam has revolutionary connotations (redemption of the oppressed and radical replacement of the political class), while in Saudi Arabia Islam is invoked to justify maintaining the status quo, which translates into retaining the power and wealth acquired by the Saud royal clan and exercised over most of the Arabian Peninsula. It is not, therefore, a conflict based on Shia and Sunni Islam, and in fact when the Shah was in power, relations between the two countries were cordial. But evidently, the opposition between Shia and Sunni serves to house this ideological rivalry, and in many ways fuels it as well. Mostly on the part of the Saudis, it should be said, the sectarian, anti-Shia hostility is driven by a consistent internal strategy, whose intent is to obfuscate the ultra-conservative position of its monarchy by actively promoting its own version of Islam (Wahhabism or Salafism) throughout the Sunni world. And it is this manipulation of the thousand year old schism between Sunnis and Shia that has inflamed the political climate in a region – the Middle East and the Gulf states – in which almost every country has citizens of both credos. If the rivalry between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran is indeed ancient, we should ask ourselves why it has flared up just now. The answer, in my view, can be found in two factors: the universal ostracism towards Iran and the simultaneous increase in the regional influence of both Tehran and Riyadh. The ostracism towards Iran became generalized in the ‘90s,



*Photo credit : NRDC-ITA PAQ*

#### **Italian-Afghan joint patrol**

following the discovery of its secret program to develop nuclear power. As is known, the fact that the program was based on a dual technology (which could lead to both civil and military uses of nuclear energy), together with the manifest unwillingness of Tehran to collaborate openly with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) led to the adoption of increasingly harsh sanctions against Iran on the part of the entire international community. We speak of universal ostracism because, by definition, every violation of the Additional Protocol to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty threatens the stability of the entire international system. While Iran was seriously damaged by the harsh sanctions, applied with a far broader interpretation than usual, Saudi Arabia found itself in an enviable position. The fall of the Shah had already made it a prime candidate to serve as first partner to the American superpower in the stabilization of the Persian Gulf; the universal ostracism of Iran made vigilance over the Islamic Republic a “global” issue, and not just a Saudi problem that could be ascribed to a regional rivalry of geopolitical nature. It should not be overlooked that Iran’s virulent polemic against Israel, along with its support of the Lebanese political party-militia Hezbollah, isolated it even further, particularly with respect to Western nations. The second factor in the escalation of the

rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, as we mentioned above, is their rapid and simultaneous increase in regional influence. Iran has benefited from the wars in the region, though paradoxically, it was not directly involved in any of them: its principal adversary, the United States, defeated the Taliban in 2001, securing Iran’s eastern border against forces hostile to the ayatollahs and financed and protected by the Saudis and Pakistanis. In 2003, Washington repeated the favor, this time to the west, by deposing Saddam Hussein. The outcome was the replacement of a hostile, mostly Sunni regime with a friendly, mostly Shia (and partly Kurd) government. Then, in July 2006, the “33 day war”, the third Israeli invasion of Lebanon, permitted a gravely weakened Hezbollah – following the assassination of Rafik Hariri, the Syrian pullout from the land of the cedars, the formation of an International Tribunal for Lebanon and the ascent of a pro-Western government – to return to prominence on the wings of a political-military victory gained at the expense of Tel Aviv’s forces. From the Saudi standpoint, in addition to the benefits gained from the sterilization of Iran following the sanctions indicated above, the fall of Saddam Hussein eliminated another unwanted protagonist, while the negative consequences of the formation of a Shia regime in Baghdad were neutralized by systematically financing the Sunni



insurgency and the militias that would later become al-Qaeda in Iraq and, subsequently, the Islamic State, or ISIS. But it was a third, unexpected factor that opened the way for the realization of the most incredible ambitions of the house of Saud: the outcomes of the Arab Spring uprisings. The revolts were certainly viewed with diffidence, and in fact the Saudis not only granted asylum to the fugitive Ben Ali (the deposed Tunisian dictator), but also supported Mubarak to the very end, even attempting to replace the United States in financing his regime, and thus incurring Washington's wrath. The initial developments in the most important of the revolts, in Egypt, with the rise to power of the Islamic Brotherhood and the election of Mohamed Morsi to the presidency, seemed to represent a political fiasco and an ideological threat to Riyadh. But in fact, the naiveté, corruption and ambiguity of the Brotherhood's government created the conditions for a military coup against Morsi, led by General al-Sisi, who was later elected President. From that moment on, Egypt was mainly supported financially by the Saudis, this time with Washington's blessing. This transformed the bitter rival of Nasser's time into a loyal client, as later shown by the paradoxical Egyptian support of Saudi Arabia's war against the Hutu in Yemen. Subsequently, the wave of revolt swept across Libya and Syria: while in the first case it was the western intervention, led by the British and French, that left the country in chaos, in the second it was the increasing involvement of Saudi Arabia and Iran that transformed a revolution against a corrupt, authoritarian regime into a civil war and a battlefield pitting the two aspiring regional powers against one another. Thus, while the first decade of the new millennium closed with Iran in front, creating a Shia crescent that from the shores of the Gulf crosses Iraq, Syria and Leba-

non, reaching the Mediterranean, the present decade sees Saudi Arabia catching up, now unencumbered by any possible Arab competitor and able to alter its traditional strategy. In the past, Riyadh could try to extend its hegemony beyond the Arabian Peninsula and foil the recurring attempts at regional domination by others (Egypt, Iraq, Iran or whomever); now it can advance its own bid for dominance over the Gulf and the Middle East, affirming its power by ensuring the destruction of Assad's regime and the systematic destabilization of Iraq. This is the background against which ISIS emerged, waging not so much a proxy war for the Saudis in Syria and Iraq, but one whose objectives (insofar as the toppling of Assad and the destabilization of Iraq) coincide with the strategic goals of Saudi Arabia. After all, the culture medium in which their hyper-puritanical version of Islam was grown and the open hatred for Shias has been fortified by decades of Salafite preaching, and the parabola of the movement's relationship with Saudi Arabia is not unlike the one followed by al-Qaeda. But when the contest between Riyadh and Tehran seemed to have been settled in favor of the first, the balance was changed by the stipulation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) between the 5+1 (the five permanent members of the Security Council plus Germany) and Iran on its nuclear program (*vedere italiano*). While the document signed in Vienna on 14 July



*Photo credit : NRDC-ITA PAO*  
**Artillery Exercise with PzH 2000 in Capo Teulada**  
**(Sardinia- Italy)**

specifies a long and laborious implementation process, based on technical inspections (the first within this coming January, by the IAEA) and subject to political obstacles (the position of the new American administration, which will take office in February 2017, is far from certain), the accord will permit Iran to return to playing an important role in the region in the next few years. It is no coincidence that the accord caused considerable friction in the ironclad relationship between Washington and Riyadh, and between Washington and Tel Aviv as well. Another outcome is the convergence between Saudi Arabia and Israel with regard to the civil war in Syria. To both powers, in fact, the end of Iran's "pariah" status is highly worrisome, and the risk that this will lead to greater ascendancy of the Islamic Republic is unacceptable. After having tried in every possible way to block the signing of the JCPOA— whose ratification posed an existential threat to Israel (the sole nuclear power in the region, with a number of warheads estimated at more than France and Great Britain) — the focus was shifted to the "unreliability" of the Iranians. Thus far, the western signatory powers have opposed every attempt to invalidate the contents of the accord by attacking the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic, despite the fact that the ayatollahs' repressive and authoritarian regime is very easily criticized. But Russia's intervention in the Syrian conflict could complicate the picture. Putin has shown himself to be the quickest to take advantage of Iran's new status. In this he anticipated the ill-concealed aims of the Obama administration: to stimulate change within the regime through the progressive easing of the sanctions and the consequent improvement in living conditions of the populace, which President Hassan Rouhani could utilize to his political advantage. After all, in the Syrian (*vedere italiano*) conflict,

Moscow and Tehran not only have the same enemies (ISIS and Jabat al Nusra), but also the same friends (the Assad regime). How the incoming American administration will decide and will be able to position itself with respect to an Iran that is "too close to Moscow" remains to be seen. Meanwhile, unfortunately, the Syrian civil war threatens to overflow into neighboring Lebanon, destabilizing an increasingly precarious equilibrium. The suicide bombings of 12 November in a Shia suburb of Beirut, Bourj al Barajneh, which left 43 dead and 239 wounded, were only the most tragic warning of a new escalation of the Syrian conflict. A criminal act that can only strengthen the Iranian resolve to support its allies in Lebanon and Syria, naturally engendering an analogous reaction from their adversaries, the Saudis. The bombing, for which ISIS claimed responsibility, was justified as revenge against the growing (and decisive for the fate of the Syrian regime) intervention of Hezbollah in Syria, and occurred just a few days prior to the start of the second round of talks in Vienna, in which Tehran was invited to participate for the first time. Given the confusion about the possible exit strategies for a resolution of the Syrian conflict, with vetoes from all sides, secret maneuvers and reciprocal diffidence, it is (*vedere italiano*) highly unlikely that this new version of the "Great Game", with Iran and Saudi Arabia as the prime movers, will come to a conclusion in the near future. The only certainty I can offer is that no stability can be achieved without including Iran and its ambitions of security — as legitimate as those of any other state in the region. It will not be sufficient to defuse the conflict between Tehran and Riyadh, based first of all on ideology, then on strategic and economic concerns, but it is a necessary realpolitik move that can no longer be postponed.



Photo credit : NATO PAO

Amphibious assault during TRIDENT JUNCTURE Exercise





## **DR DOMENICO QUIRICO**

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Dr Domenico QUIRICO is a journalist at the daily newspaper La Stampa. He is in charge of Foreign Affairs and is the Paris correspondent.

He has closely followed the events of the last two decades in Africa - in Somalia, the Congo and Rwanda, to the Arab Spring, and he won journalism awards (Cutuli and Premiolo) and, in 2013, the prestigious Indro Montanelli award. He has authored four historical books for Mondadori: “Adua”, “Squadron Bianco” (The White Squadron\*), “Generali e Naja” (Generals and Draughts\*) and “Primavera Araba” (The Arab Spring\*) for Bollati Boringhieri. His most recent publications are with Neri Pozza, “La magnifica storia dei vinti” (The magnificent history of the vanquished\*), “Paese del male” (The land of evil\*, based on his 152 days spent as a prisoner of extremist groups in Syria) and “Grande Califfato”, (The Great Caliphate\*).

# The “Great Caliphate”

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Who are the jihadists, the young men who fight in the global holy war? It's a generational phenomenon, there are no older warriors in the Jihad. In part because it's not easy to age as a jihadist - being killed is far more likely - and in part because it is a decision about how to live, and how to die. I have had the singular good fortune, and I do not mean that ironically, the indisputably rare good fortune of having experienced this from the inside and to have the chance to tell my story. For a long period, an unpleasantly long period indeed, I lived in daily contact with the men of the Jihad, sharing their daily routines and habits, fleeing, hiding and discussing God and man. Because with the jihadists you discuss God: there is no other topic, it's the only thing they talk about.. In a certain sense I witnessed the anthropological nature of this new form of human, the jihadist. I was a prisoner of various groups, especially Al-Nusra - the Syrian Al-Qaeda, not because the CIA or the Pentagon say so, but because they say so themselves - and Al-Faouq, a group whose ethnic roots are more Syrian, both with a fairly radical Islamic stance, which is becoming increasingly extreme. There are three fundamental elements that make up a jihadist: total lack of fear of death; acceptance of living second by second, knowing that you may have to kill or be killed:

death dealt and death suffered. An experience that is in stark contrast with the human identity of our times: death as a choice, death as one's companion every moment of one's life. The foreign fighters of the international Islamic brigades that make up the Caliphate's forces come from various countries and have widely diverging backgrounds. But two things unite them, and that is their faith in Islam, of course, and the acceptance that they may die. Jihad is not, as one reads in the newspapers and books that have been issued in the West, a kind of generational trip, driven by the urge to go see what's going on in a certain place, to live a fascinating and exotic experience. It is the knowledge that one minute after one's arrival in Syria or Iraq, one can be killed, have one's throat slit, be blown to pieces in an American bombing or by the Syrian army. And that, in turn, one will have to kill. This makes them a special and extremely dangerous breed of fighter, because in addition to the acceptance of death on a permanent basis, many of them also boast highly specialized field training. Many of the Caliphate's fighters are veterans of other conflicts: Chechnya, Libya, Mali and the Maghreb, Yemen and the Sinai, and have thus developed a “technical” expertise in the field, which is extremely dangerous when coupled with a willingness to face death and personal hardship. A second element, which often does not

attract our attention, that we consider secondary or even a false front, utilized for other ends, is religion: the jihadists are not false Muslims who use the religion as a front, behind which to conceal their real aims: political power and wealth. They are genuine Muslims, and they believe that they are the physical instruments of God's will, that even their cruelest actions are part of a divine plan. God is part of them and all that they do and impose on others is the manifestation of the hand of God in history. Not a transcendental God, but one that pervades and inhabits historical events. The third element is their lack of a personal history. The stupidest question one can ask a jihadist is what he did before, who he was before; student, storekeeper, unemployed, criminal... The question makes no sense: their lives began with the first moment of jihad, and all that came before has been carefully and purposefully chiseled away from their identity. These men have no past, young men with no past: family ties, amorous relationships, studies, work, everything has been chiseled away because their lives began with jihad, like a blank slate on which a completely new identity is codified. That's who the jihadists are. It's not the first time in history that this has happened. If one reads a good account of the war in Spain, like "Homage to Catalonia", by Orwell, who fought with the anarchists in the ranks of the International Brigades, one finds biographies of the foreign fighters. For them as well, the past is wiped away, and their identities and lives begin from the moment in which they joined the revolution. Meaning the creation of a perfect world, in which class inequalities would be leveled: a global revolution, secular in name, but with aspects closely resembling religious faith. What are these men fighting for? When we speak of the Caliphate, a word often comes up that I believe to be extremely misleading:

terrorism. In agreement with the Greek philosophers who posited that things are the words with which we define them, I believe that things do not exist until we give them a *nomos*, and thus attribute an identity to them. Therefore, if we define the phenomenon of the Caliphate 'terrorism', we are making a glaring error, because the novelty of the Caliphate lies exactly in having gone beyond the phase of terrorism in the strategy of radical Islam, and having transformed it into something else. An example is their capacity to execute various kinds of actions, from legitimate and illegitimate warfare to diplomacy to the most sophisticated communication. The Caliphate applies various tactics, including traditional combat, the occupation of territories and their defense, the administration of a territory and also, evidently, the instrument of terrorism, but as one of the aspects of their overall strategy, whereas for Al-Qaeda it was the only aspect. Al-Qaeda never administered anything, it never ruled a village or a valley. Its activities were exclusively focused on inflicting



Sharpshooter of 6<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri Regiment (ITA ARMY) in action



the most damage possible on its adversaries and exponentially increasing levels of fear and insecurity. But that was as far as it went. The Caliphate uses terrorism, but combines it with traditional or guerrilla warfare. In recent years, the West has always thought of its adversaries in terms of asymmetrical war: dozens of volumes have been written on the difficulties of fighting an asymmetrical war. A fluid, mobile conflict that refused to present a front or particular locations where overwhelming force could be brought to bear. But now the tables have been turned, and we are fighting asymmetrically, using drones and fighter planes while the jihadists act symmetrically, conquering territories and holding them for extended periods. This new model of global Islamic challenge has old roots. It first appeared in the '90s, during the Algerian civil war. That marked the first attempt by radical Islamists to take control of a country, first by political means, that is, by winning the elections. Then, when the military/business establishment reacted with a preventive attack, by armed combat.

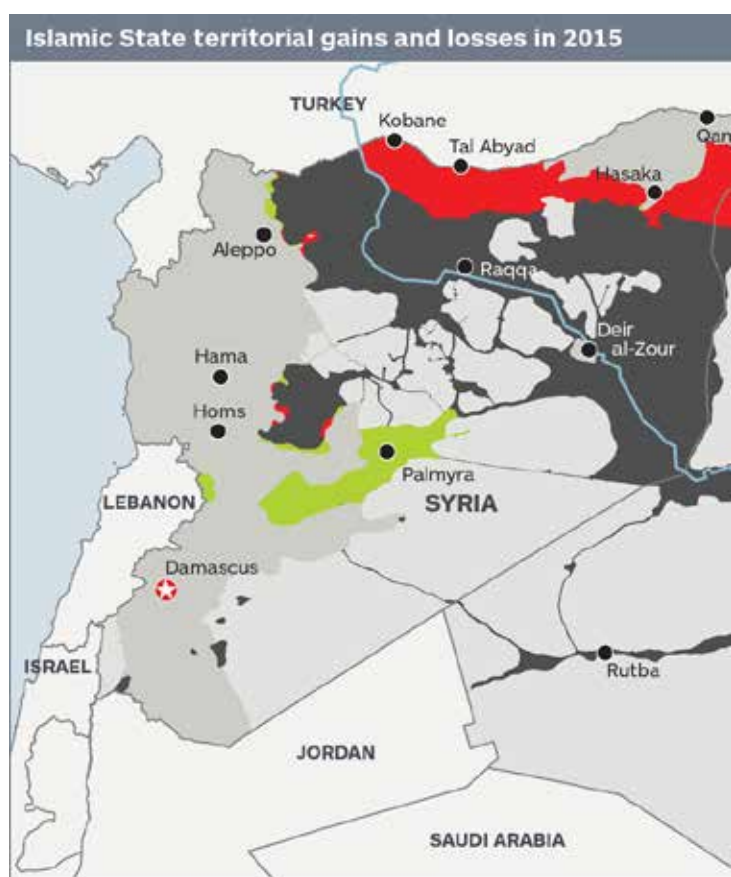
*Photo credit : 6<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri Regiment*



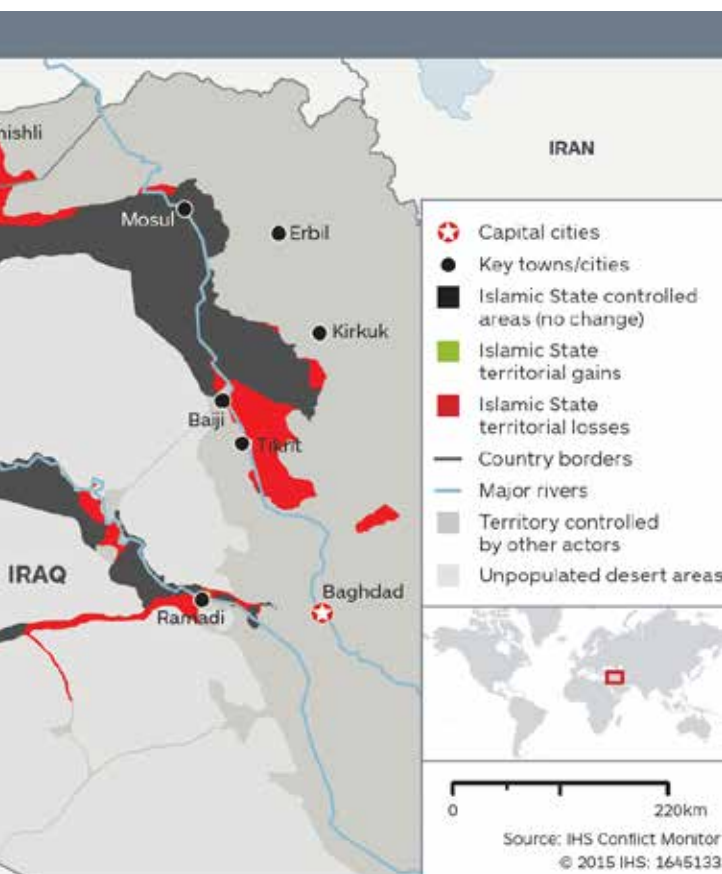
In Mali there was an initial experiment in administering a territory: an enormous area, very sparsely inhabited except for the large cities. For the first time, the movement found out what it means to govern a territory and a populace, providing services and security. As we can see, it's a long and very old story.

The plan is to re-form the Caliphate with the territorial extension it had under the Abbasids in 700 to 900 A.D.. The projected extension of the new 'Caliphate is indicated in all the Daesh documents: it runs from Central Asia to Spain. From an ideological standpoint, the plan is to form a totalitarian state, quite unlike a return to medieval times invoked by a group of demented fanatics. Obama's unfortunate jibe; "They're playing in the minor leagues, we are the majors, the jihadists have no place in the third millennium, and we are the third millennium.", misses the mark entirely. It is exactly the opposite: the Caliphate is the dark side of the third millennium. What is a totalitarian state? It's more than just a dictatorship. This can be illustrated by two classic examples from European history: the Social Democrats in Germany and Stalin's Communism. The lynchpin of the totalitarian strategy is the separation of men into pure and impure, based on a perfectly straight line. On one side, the pure, whose survival must be guaranteed, and on the other the impure, who must be physically eliminated. An artificial concept becomes the criterion for the division between purity and contamination. In the case of the Nazis, for example, it was race. What could be more artificial than race? There is no such thing as the Aryan race. But it's a perfect concept for division: we, the pure are over here, and you're over there, with everybody else: the Jews, the Slavs, the Gypsies, all of whom must be eliminated. With Stalin, it was social class: the proletariat – farmers and factory workers – were the pure ones, and the bourgeois, the kulaks and the aristocrats were the impure who had to be eliminated. The totalitarian model often refers to metaphors of health and medicine: the germs that contaminate the health and purity of the social organism must be eliminated, or the illness will spread, the

infection will fester. 'This is the Caliphate's plan: to separate men between pure and impure, first and foremost within the Muslim world. The impure are the Shia "heretics", and within the Sunni world, those who my captors called the "sly" Muslims: the false believers who pay lip service to the rules of Islam but who are contaminated by temptation or other identities, who are attracted by Western ways and have contact with unbelievers. All of them must be physically eliminated to create a society of the pure. And what are the frontiers of this land of the pure? Evidently, the lands that were ruled by Islam in the past, even briefly. The Caliphate is the state that destroys states, asserting that the existing frontiers are merely a fragmentation imposed by the western powers on the unified dominion of the true God. As such, they must be erased: the bulldozers that leveled the barrier separating Iraq and Syria were founding the new Caliphate. We should consider two concepts here: time and space. In 2013, when I was still a prisoner of the Islamic forces, none of this existed. Talking about the Caliphate meant discussing ancient history. My captors spoke incessantly about how their only purpose in life, the only reason they fought, was the formation, in Syria and in the lands once known as the fertile crescent, of the first nucleus of the Caliphate. The concept of time is not the same in the west and in the Islamic world. Though it should be kept in mind that there are one billion and three hundred million Muslims in the world: a "world" that extends from Malaysia and Indonesia, the most populous Muslim countries in the world, to the Atlantic and the cities of the Western powers. Because today, numerically and from a theological standpoint as well, there is a European Islam, a western Islam that has its own power and standing. There are, therefore, innumerable Islams: the Asian version, the African version, the



Wahabi, the Sufi, the Moroccan... and they are often quite different, but they all share the same concept of time, inverted with respect to the Western formulation. We see history in terms of ongoing progress, with some important milestones along the way. Starting from medieval times, the Dark Ages (not coincidentally, the same centuries in which the original Caliphate arose). Then, through a series of passages – the Renaissance, the age of exploration, the industrial revolution, the Enlightenment – we draw a continuous line to the present day. To Muslims, the poles are inverted, and the story proceeds in exactly the opposite direction. This is the age of misery and humiliation. Hard to contradict this view: the Muslim world is poor, despite oil, and is politically, economically and military subjugated by the West. It hasn't been long since a British officer with a



riding crop tucked under his arm peremptorily ordered millions of Egyptians about. The age of humiliation is marked by the invasions of Iraq: the “secular despots” imposed and supported by the West are responsible for having looted and impoverished numerous Islamic countries, leading to the revolts of the Arab Spring. History is thus moving backwards: from the humiliations of the present back to the Golden Age, which coincides with the time of the Caliphate. When Islam was not one of the civilizations, but the civilization. While the West was slogging along in a subsistence economy, with its culture secreted away in the monasteries, where illiterate monks copied manuscripts salvaged from the glorious classical Greco-Roman era. A violent world, where in the absence of a state, brute force prevailed. The Caliphate, which stretched from the south of France to the Silk Road, was by

contrast a splendid civilization, dynamic and expansive: stupendous cities, great works of art and a daily life that was orderly and opulent. It was a time of great pilgrimages, when the caravans departing from the sands of Timbuktu left trails of gold dust in their wake as they made their way to Mecca without crossing a single frontier. That was the Caliphate, the land of Islam. The great inspiration, the terrible inspiration of the Caliphate, the idea Bin Laden never had, was to capitalize on this word. Revolutions aren’t founded on books, nor ideologies: revolutions are founded on slogans. “The land belongs to the farmers!” How many historical uprisings have been based on these words; or “justice”, a meaningless word that has moved millions of people to act, pick up their sickles, staves and rifles... to fight and to die for the realization of this word. The Caliphate is that word: they eyes of my captors shone when they uttered it. Simply put, across the sea, someone has decided to rotate the axis of world history 360°. Until today, it has been us westerners who decided the inclination and velocity of this movement. But in the Islamic world there are people, and they not fanatics outside the third millennium, who have understood that this is the right time to reverse the tide and bring things back to the point of departure, where it is they who decide the inclination and speed of the movement, and we who suffer the imposition. What gave rise to this decision? Political assessments that I find difficult to contest: first of all, the extreme weakness of the Western powers. The West has never been so weak, and not for the reasons we complain of: the stock exchanges that fail to prosper, the absence of growth, recessionary trends... These are secondary phenomena; the West is weak in its soul, in its capacity to respond to its enemies’ threats. As of today, there is still no Western lea-





*Photo credit : "Friuli" Brigade*

**Lebanese Armed Forces and Italian Army VTLM "Lince" (deployed under UNIFIL) in a combined motorized patrol (Lebanon)**

der, not even the President of the United States, the only true superpower, who is able to decide upon and conduct a war like the one that would be necessary to uproot the Caliphate from the places it holds, not only in the Middle East, but in Africa as well. No leader is willing to pay the economic and political price of such a decision, and no leader could survive, politically, the opening of television news shows featuring the deaths of soldiers on the battlefields of the Tigris and the Euphrates. That's why they decided to launch the Jihad now. Now let us examine the spatial element. We think in terms of separate areas of crisis. Today, we are worried about Syria, which we had mostly ignored since 2011. This has made us forget what is going on in the north of Nigeria, where Boko Haram, radical Islamic fighters are trying to create an extension of the global Caliphate. We pay attention to Libya because the migrants come from there. But in Libya, there in

an Emirate in Sirte, which is progressively extending its control over the surrounding area. And what about the Sinai, the link between Asia and Africa? It is controlled by Islamic fighters that the Egyptian government forces find impossible to dislodge. Fifteen years ago, you could go up the Niger, rent a Jeep and cross the entire Sahara desert: east, or north to Algeria, or to Libya and Chad. Today, you would immediately be captured by Islamic militias, which the French temporarily repulsed in 2013 but which were not eliminated, making the desert areas of Mauritania and Sudan insecure. They are now theaters of drug and gun smuggling, both very profitable endeavors. The case of the migrants is different. In fact, the jihadists have no time for the migrants, for they consider them to be betraying God's cause: these young men should remain in their home countries instead of going to beg for a few crumbs from the infidels in Europe. Islamic militias kill migrants: first

they take their possessions and then they kill them. One of the migration trails leading northward across Mali and Mauritania is now closed: that area is now controlled by armed Islamic bands, so the route followed by the migrants now goes from Mali to Burkina Faso and Niger, and then Libya, to the shores of the Mediterranean Sea. It is the global nature of the plan that we haven't grasped. The Caliphate operates and strikes in countries thousands of miles from Mosul. In their strategy, a village burned to the ground in northern Nigeria, a massacre in the Sinai and a strike in Central Asia have exactly the same importance, and we are mistaken in thinking of them as separate scenarios when they are part of one and the same war. But there is no command headquarters, with orders issued in Mosul to the other, distant militias. The diabolical ability of the Caliphate lies in having created a mechanism that continues on by itself, and each blow, each victory in any of these places automatically contributes to swelling

the critical mass of the global Caliphate. Certainly, for now it is also a war between Muslims. The aim is to unify the Islamic world and purify it, eliminating the false Muslims, who are in power partly thanks to us Westerners. Later, when the power of this structure will have become enormous, with an immense territory and strategic resources like uranium and oil, it will be the West's turn. One of my captors, a leader of Al-Nusra, showed me a book that had been written by a professor at the university of Damascus in the '70s, a Palestinian who served as Bin Laden's leading ideologue when he was creating Al-Qaeda. He was assassinated, together with his two sons, in the late eighties in Peshawar (it was never clear whether those responsible were from the Pakistani secret services or a feuding faction of the Islamic movement). He was a meticulous, maniacal student of the literature of the Marxist revolution. Although he considered it atheist, and therefore unacceptable, he considered it to offer precious advice

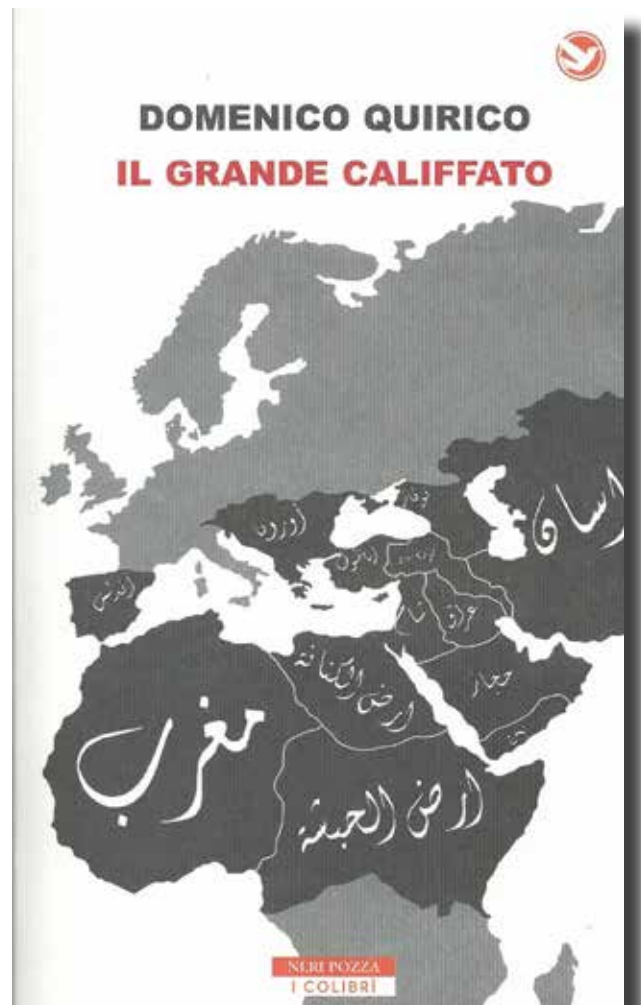
*Photo credit : 17<sup>th</sup> Anti-Aircraft Artillery Regiment "Sforzesca"*



Italian soldiers from the "Sforzesca" Artillery Regiment training on air defense systems



and suggestions of a tactical-strategic nature, which could be extremely useful to the Islamic cause. In particular, the idea of the Comintern, the organizational web that connected the international revolutions to the central command, in Moscow. The Caliphate is similar: a tangle of insurrections linked by the idea of Islam, with a central mind. But the most brilliant inspiration was the re-creation of Mao Tse-Tung's red bases. And this underscores the cultural malleability of these totalitarian rebels, these presumed medieval wild men. The Caliphate's wars are cultural conflicts, like Vietnam, more than just guerrilla wars. After the Long March, Mao devised a new strategy to avoid another defeat. He decided to take control of marginal areas in the great Chinese empire, places difficult to reach and particularly poor. The aim was to conquer them militarily, defend them and administer them, showing the population what China would be like if the Communists won. When these bases were strong enough to stand off the enemy, he linked them territorially. Then, taking advantage of their combined strength, he seized the initiative and the enemy, surrounded and weakened, was defeated. That was the Chinese revolution of 1949. The Caliphate is simply applying Maoist theory to the letter: create bases where you can fly the black flag, occupy territories very distant from one another, apparently unimportant, settle in and administer them (this is the fundamental element, the Caliphate is governing a population of eight million between Syria and Iraq, directing and shaping their daily lives: it provides electricity, issues certificates and mints coins, builds madrasas and law courts that dispense the Sharia). Later, when all this has been consolidated, it will attempt to connect them territorially and move to attack the new enemy: us.



"Il Grande Califfato" (TN :The great Caliphate) by D. Quirico





The AWACS: one of the NATO's Assurance Measures enforced



## **LT COL LUCA SEMERARO**

### **LIEUTENANT COLONEL ITALIAN AIR FORCE AT ITALIAN JOINT INTELLIGENCE CENTER**

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Lieutenant Colonel Luca SEMERARO is an Officer of the Italian Air Force on active duty. During his career he conducted several tasks related to information gathering and analysis concerning international scenarios or areas of crisis with a direct impact on National stability and security. Since January 1998 he has worked in a joint environment, specifically in the "Information and Security" Department of the Defence Central Staff. Here he has dealt with a variety of interest areas, each with increasing levels of responsibility. He currently holds the office of Chief of Evaluation, Analysis and Support to Operations at the Italian Joint Intelligence Centre. Together with experts from the academic world and think-tanks, Lt. Col. SEMERARO has participated in several panels to closely examine critical issues and information sharing amongst different knowledge bases. To promote information awareness, stimulate brainstorming among experts and to bring the Military closer to the outside world, he has organized several workshops on different geographical areas of interest or phenomena (Middle-East, North-Africa, Horn of Africa, East Europe and the so-called Islamic Caliphate).

Additionally, in recent years, Lt. Col. SEMERARO has been dealing with civilian firms developing dedicated information analysis softwares in order to achieve improved integration with the existing systems of Defence.

He currently teaches at the Warrant Officers' Academy of Viterbo as well as at the Joint Intelligence School and cooperates as speaker with different Masters of the International Society for the Organization of Intelligence in Geopolitics (SIOI).

# The arc of the crisis

## Overview

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Focusing the spotlight on NATO's "Southern Flank" is not just an option but a necessity. Recently, the national issues and the development of phenomena that originate in this area have been greatly neglected, or at least underestimated. The outbreak of war in Crimea and the subsequent tension in the Donbass area of Ukraine have furnished an alibi for this "justified disregard", on the part of NATO and public opinion, in favor of the events under way in Eastern Europe, which are believed to be more urgent and with a more direct impact on the security of the old continent. But in fact, this has revealed itself to be a glaring strategic error, and re-focusing attention on the Mediterranean basin thus proved inevitable.

A complete and exhaustive description of the entire "arc of instability" that originates from the Southern Flank is difficult to furnish. Compared to the past, current developments have shown that the geopolitical situation of the macro-area is in continual flux. Events, situations and phenomena continue to affect local areas or transnational regions, with direct impact on the stability of individual nations. Daily routines are often transformed by the emergence of new crises that undermine the development of the plan of reference, affecting decisions made previously or interventions planned by the principal international stakeholders. As we address the issue of how and where

the main crises affect local security conditions, other situations emerge, producing additional effects that make it even more difficult to understand the current status of a situation, and even more difficult to predict with any accuracy the consequences on the ground. The vulnerability of "weak" societies and the concomitant growth of the criticalities paint a picture of global risk that does not exclude – although to different degrees and with varying levels of involvement – any country on earth.

Before we begin our analysis of the Southern Flank, it is important to review recent events in Europe and the effects they have had, in various ways, on developments at the global level. 1989 is the year everyone points to, because of the fall of the Berlin wall, the start of a peaceful "revolution" in Europe, leading to the redefinition of the national interests of the single countries which, for years, had been trapped inside the East-West dichotomy. The years immediately following - '90 and '91 – witnessed the breakup of the Soviet Union and the emergence of different poles of attraction for the nations of the area. During that time, the European Union was gradually taking shape, first as a Common Market and later as the EU. The force expressed by the EU was sufficient to provide a more convincing and competitive alternative to Moscow, and was able to attract consensus and memberships previously hard to imagine. Russia's gradual return



to prominence brought the power balance to a more even level, with the Kremlin manifesting at the same time a more farsighted and less geographically selective strategic vision than the Western alliances. In fact, this is typical of Putin's strategy: as he fought a war in Eastern Europe, he did not overlook the ties and relations which, shortly thereafter, would take on fundamental, vital importance for the ambitions of his country. As if in premonition of what would happen in the wider and more complex Middle East scenario, the Kremlin exploited every single rift in the relations between the West and the Arab world in an attempt to gain room to maneuver diplomatically – to further economic or military ends – to reinforce bilateral relations. The decision to intervene in Syria, which entailed a logistical effort even greater than the operational one, is a demonstration of Russia's change of attitude and its willingness to shift its defense of the Syrian regime from the diplomatic table (UN Security Council and the exercise of its veto rights) to the operational level.

Actually, the Russian intervention conceals much more far-reaching interests, with ambitions to compete in the area in terms of both presence and influence. Russia's new presence in the Middle East also provided yet another opportunity to showcase the country's military might; the decision to diversify its interventions (with air, ground, naval and submarine forces all involved) and above all the overall management, in line with the true concept of "hybrid war" – that is, able to successfully control every aspect (from the military to the media to relations with other international institutions) – is convincing proof of this approach.

A concept of "war" that is certainly not innovative, but still remarkable, if one looks at it from the standpoint of the pervasive and

meticulous attention paid to every aspect of the operation.

Getting back to the topic at hand, the Southern Flank, we should first of all define the area of reference, which, as shown in Fig. 1

The Southern Flank - with reference to the Mediterranean and beyond



Fig.1

covers a much more vast geographic area than one might imagine. The term, in fact, does not only apply to the countries bordering on the Mediterranean Sea, but also all those states that, even indirectly, are involved with the area in various ways: from the countries of the Arabian Peninsula to those of the Near and Middle East, Sub-Saharan Africa and the Horn of Africa. All of the countries located in this macro area play a role and exercise important influence on the Mediterranean, through their involvement in various phenomena of a transnational nature.

To understand the dominant sentiment regarding the tense situations on the Southern Flank and understand the difficulty of defining their precise import, it is sufficient to read the words of Pope Francis or President Mattarella on the matter. In summary, both men draw parallels between the effects of global terrorism and those of a world war, although fought in a different way and in so many different places that its reach is seen as certifiably vast and its effects involve everyone.

**“...a piecemeal World War III may have already begun with the current spate of crimes, massacres, destruction...”  
(Pope Francis)**

**“...terrorism being fed by fanatical distortions of faith in God, is trying to introduce the seeds of World War III in the Mediterranean, Middle East and Africa. It is our responsibility to defuse the threat.” (Sergio Mattarella, Italian President)**

This view is contrasted by an equally authoritative opinion, advanced by a member of the US armed forces high command, which is stated in such pragmatic terms that it is as worrisome as the other two. The key point is the affirmation that it will take ten to twenty years to defeat ISIS, exactly the same time frame that was estimated in 2001, following the attack on the Twin Towers, to defeat Al-Qaida. It's as if no time had gone by, and no predictions had been made; an implicit admission that the strategy adopted to contrast a terrorist organization has failed.

The story has many chapters, and events both great and small: atom bomb, fall of the Berlin wall, 9/11 just to name a few. Each can be referred to a precise situation, a given period or a specific event: but there are many more events whose consequences cannot easily be ascribed to a specific time, as the effects they generate exert their influence over a much longer span of time.

It was due to initiatives such as these that the natural and anthropological geography of the area of reference was shaken up, and even today we witness conflicts and crises based on the results.

In one of the many reference documents analyzing terrorism, the Country Reports on Terrorism, the phenomenon is analyzed on global terms, and what emerges, substantially, is this:

- the main criticalities derive precisely from the Southern Flank, which generates a significant number of Foreign Fighters;
- there is an increase in the presence of “Lone Offenders” in the West;
- “weak” or “failed” countries enable extremist radicalization;
- ISIS targets every religious affiliation for suppression, to underscore the fact that it's not the affiliation that counts, but the fact that they are different from the one they adhere to.

A second document, on the freedom of religious expression, condemns the role played by non-state actors, recognized as being in violation of religious freedom, and underscores the concept that the wave of terror launched by ISIS punishes all those who question its dogma.

The events of the “Arab Spring” uprisings will be remembered for a long time in the history of North Africa and the Middle East. Its consequences are well known, but few consider what still remains to be expressed in terms of frictions and power balances.

The revolts not only caused the removal of some Presidents, some regimes and some strongmen: it was also the cause of widespread instability, of a fresh outbreak of militant jihadism and of organized crime, as well as pressing humanitarian crises. Today, the contradictions of the African continent are met with general silence: the great development opportunities and immense economic resources have been stultified by human weakness, by vices like corruption, nepotism and unfair political competition, which reduce the possibility. Today, because of its po-

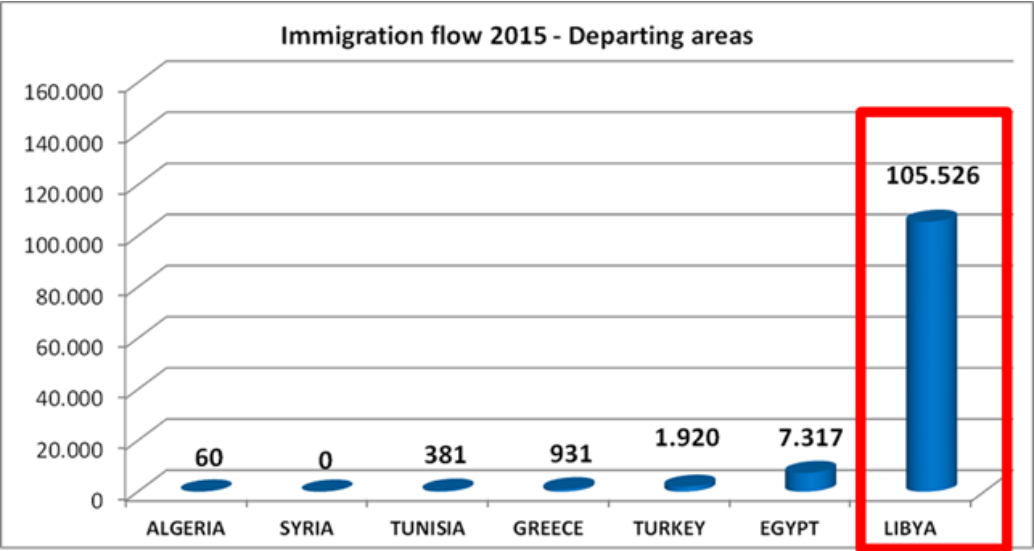


fig. 2

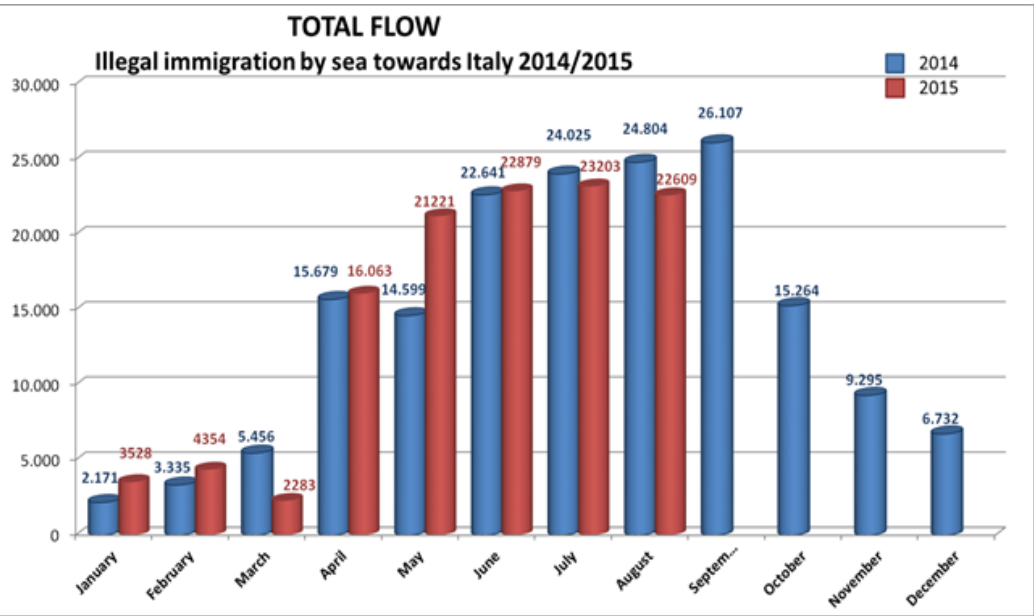


fig. 3

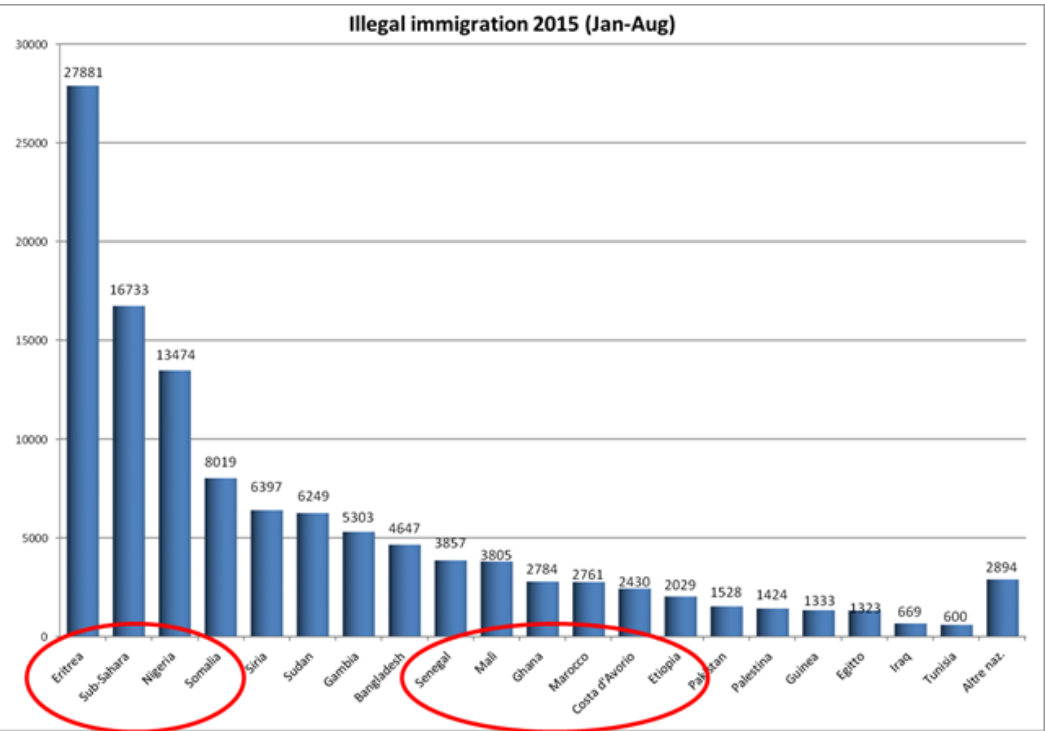


fig. 4



sition in the middle of the Mediterranean Basin, the access road to Europe for every criticality in the African continent. A highway providing direct and one-way access, with no chance of securing a reciprocally important role in formulating solutions to those problems. Europe and Africa remain, in practice, two separate worlds, unable to interact constructively, to create the conditions for a “planned” collaboration, with the objective of global cooperation in the short, medium and long term. (fig. 2-3-4 )

The ascent of the Caliphate of the Islamic State has introduced an important element in the already deteriorated scenario of regional instability. Its transnational character, especially its ability to diffuse its ideology and the numerous followers it is attracting, make it stand out from all the previous manifestations of jihadist militancy and thought. This in fact exposes all national interests to terrorist attacks, both domestically and internationally. Their grandstand per-

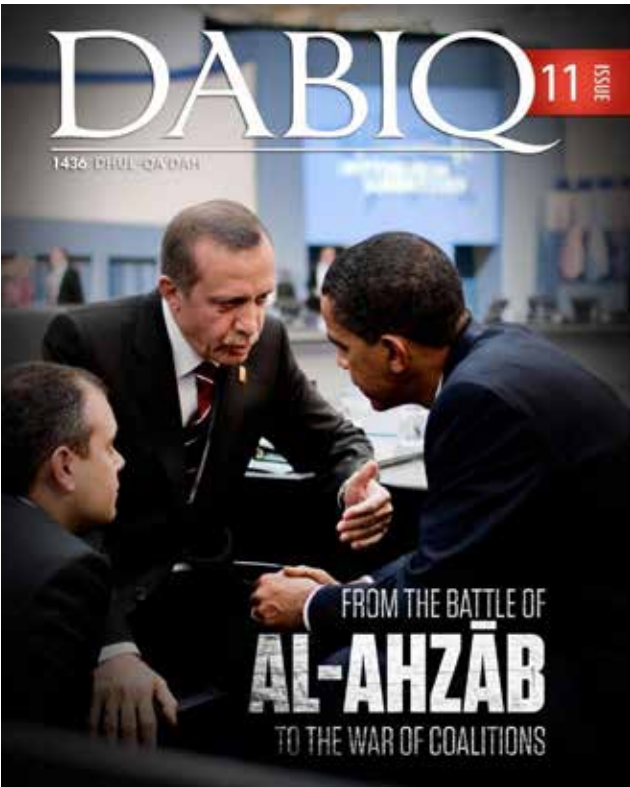


Fig.5

formances in the media, fruit of decidedly western experience, become the proof of

an added value in the strategy adopted by the Islamic State, whose global vision is able to: think in the long term (training of children and adolescents); recruit followers and militants all over the world (according to recent report on foreign fighters issued by the United Nations, their numbers come to at least 25,000 and they come from over 100 countries); and showcase the organization’s military valor. All this while reacting rapidly when it comes to manipulating events in order to discredit the image of the West . The reference to the battle of Al-Ahzab

### Foreign Fighters coming from the Balkans

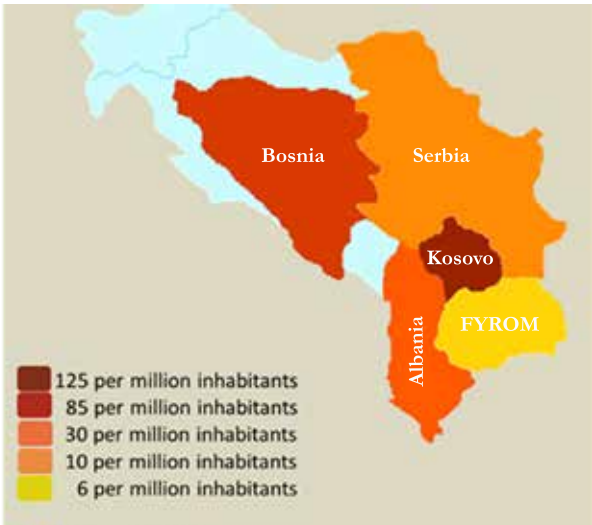


Fig.6

on the cover of issue n. 11 of the magazine Dabiq, published in September 2015 not only demonstrates the elevated cultural level of those who manage its publication, but is an example of how ISIS’ communication strategy leverages on the experiences and actions of the Prophet to convince religious Muslims of the justness of their cause. To get an idea of the multidirectionality of the menace represented by the Islamic State, in **Fig. 6** we see a representation of the scope of the problem of foreign fighters from the western Balkans, with a trend projected to increase in the future.

If instead we refer to the area nearest the current Caliphate stronghold in the Middle East, among the many existing criticalities it

is impossible to overlook that deriving from the Middle East Peace Process, in the hope that in the future this may still have a determining effect on the region's stability, or that it may instead be manipulated into an anti-Israeli interpretation, so as to increase tension and further fan the ideological flames in more extreme directions.

**“We shall not surrender, we shall not come to terms with Israel... and we will continue to believe and proclaim that Israel... must be erased from existence”**

(Hasan Nasr Allah, Hezbollah Secretary General)

Following the Russian military intervention in Syria, the likelihood of opening talks has on one hand diminished (as the Kremlin backs the current leadership), but on the other, the probable new stance is less conditioned by a focus on the prerequisites for talks. The addition of Iran to the essential negotiators at the table and the determination of who can and who cannot participate are only two aspects of a renewed dynamism and a greater impetus to find a negotiated solution. In any case, important issues remain to be resolved at the bargaining table, and the international community is obliged to pursue every possible avenue offered by diplomatic means to put pressure on the participants to come up with a vision for the country's future that can serve as the basis for finding a solution to the conflict.

At present, the problem is to define an effective way out of the Syrian-Iraqi crisis, a way that guarantees containment of the Islamic State, which will face the fact of the failures of previous policies and avoid nationalistic, shortsighted policies that would make every subsequent action futile.

It would thus appear fundamental to di-

versify decision-making. Each intervention (whether political, military, social or religious) must be planned in the short, medium and long run, according to the concept of global reconstruction of the human and institutional environment, developed over successive steps and with a long-term commitment.

With reference to the selection process currently under way to classify the nature of the various opposition groups and thus their eventual participation in the negotiations, I would like to cite an aphorism by the famous wit, L. Longanesi, “An idea that cannot find a place at the table can start a revolution”. This to underscore that the decisions we make today could have serious repercussions tomorrow; meaning that all those who are given an opportunity to make themselves heard today will insist on the resolution of the problems they indicate. Instead, those who are excluded from the nego-

tiations (and who probably coincide with those who are strongest militarily) will certainly not renounce their claims and will continue to act accordingly.

**“An idea that cannot find a place at the table can start a revolution”**

(L. Longanesi)





A combined patrol between Italian “Alpini” and French “Chasseurs des Alps” along the Italian-French borders





## **Dr. Nicola Pedde**

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### DIRECTOR INSTITUTE OF GLOBAL STUDIES

Dr Nicola PEDDE is the Director of the Institute of Global Studies and Director of Research and Analysis on Middle Eastern affairs at the Military Centre for Strategic Studies (Centro Militare Studi Strategici - Ce.Mi.S.S.), part of the Centre of Advanced Studies of the Italian Ministry of Defense. For over twenty years he has conducted research and analysis on the Persian Gulf and Iranian affairs and has written several related papers and articles.

In 2014, Dr PEDDE was nominated President of the Middle East and Africa Foundation, a Brussels-based organization actively involved in the promulgation of issues of major regional significance for European Union institutions.

# Iran in 2016

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Iran today shares only a name with the country where 36 years ago the revolution brought down a monarchy that had ruled for centuries.

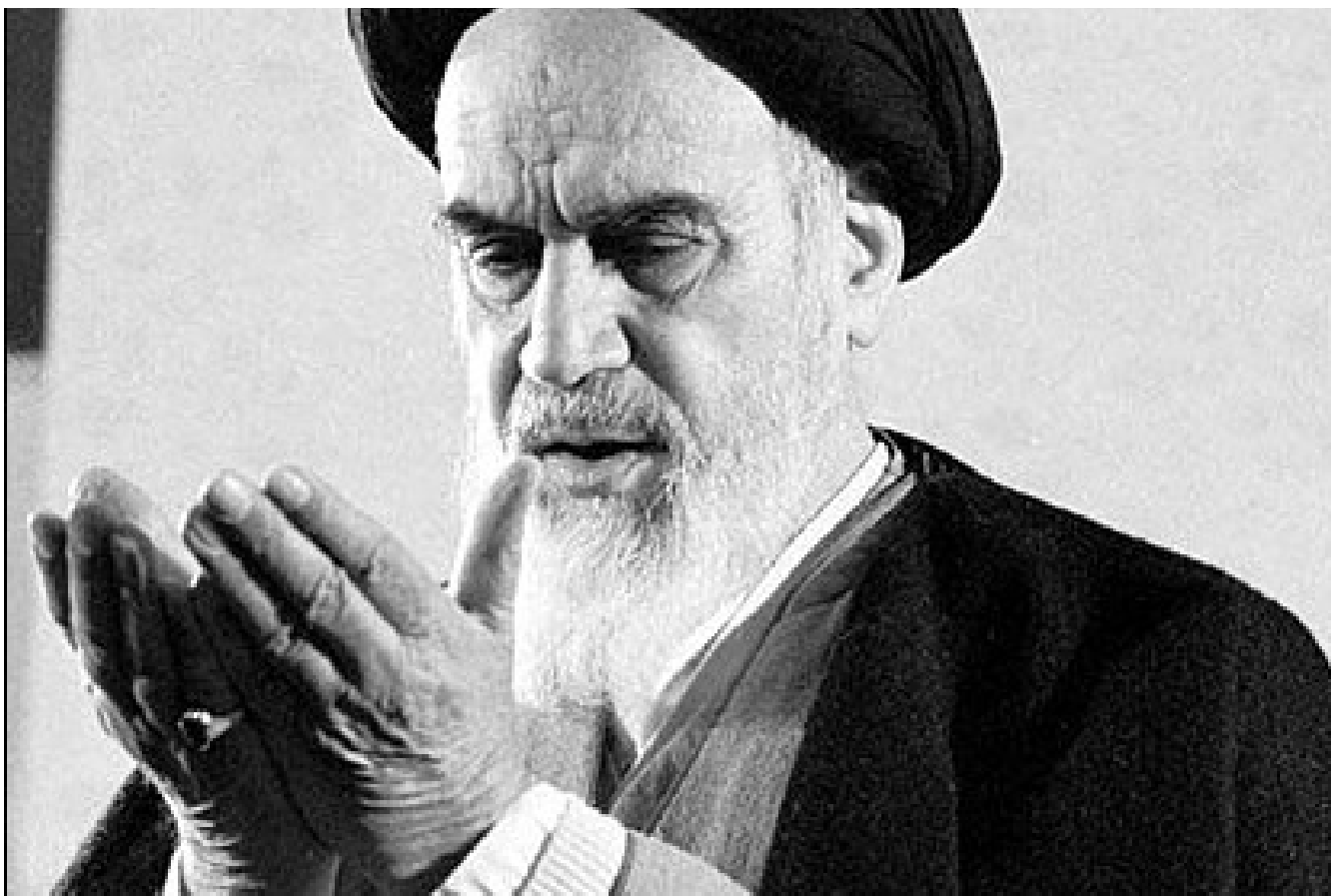
The Western stereotype of a ferocious and backward authoritarian system, monolithic and fanatically religious, is ever more in contrast with the image of a moderately developed country with a clear perception of its role and its ambitions and, above all, governed by a broad-based leadership that is quite diverse and often in conflict. Which demolishes over thirty years of views oriented towards the creation of an “ideal antagonist” and moving in the opposite direction, towards the re-admittance of Iran in international dynamics, and above all, in regional decision-making.

Today, Iran is undergoing a slow and sometimes problematic transition from one generation to another, with what remains of the clerical component that rode the wave of revolution and shortly thereafter successfully channeled it into the form of an Islamic Republic having shown themselves unable to give rise to a political succession from within their ranks. Consequently, the only alternative is the generation that fought in the Sepah Pasdaran, and established their network of alliances within the military and what the armed forces have progressively developed into after the war with Iraq.

Despite Western perceptions, the Leader has never wielded absolute power and authority, and with the passing of the years

has instead moved in the opposite direction, acting as moderator in a heterogeneous and often bitterly contested scenario. The first generation to come to power – the clerics – may have been divided by different and often strident ideological positions, but they were an expression of a homogenous context, numerically limited and politically astute, which was always able to contain the excesses of the more irrepressible groups and negotiate consensus on positions of mutual interest. The Leader, Ali Khomeini, and the Imam Ruhollah Khomeini before him, were forced to manage a highly articulated and exuberant political system, which had arisen from the recent revolution and was thus characterized by excesses and the recurrent problems of new institutions, which had abruptly and traumatically replaced the old ones. They did not, therefore, govern the Islamic Republic in a solitary, authoritarian manner, but managed to contain the constant radical impetus that threatened to create internal rifts and promoted continuity and consolidation.

However, the Iranian clerics have never expressed a unified and clear position with respect to the revolution and the subsequent constitutional reform, promulgating a system based on the principle of *velayat-e faqih* (government by jurisconsult) and thus of leadership, a system that has shown itself little suited to the formation of a class of political clerics that can regenerate itself over the long term.



Ruhollah Khomeini was an Iranian Shia Muslim religious Leader, the founder of the Islamic Republic in Iran

This means that today, purely due to the passing of the years, after more than three decades of political rule by the clergy, today it is impossible to identify a genuine line of succession that will perpetuate the model and design of Khomeini, and the door is open to an entirely different second generation of political figures.

The roots of this second generation go back to their military service in the Iran-Iraq war, especially among the former Sepah Pasdaran, battalions whose sacrifice and blood spilled legitimize their representing and governing Iran. It was there and then that the alliances and groups formed, and today they make up the equally heterogeneous secular faction. Creating a system that is only outwardly cohesive and homogeneous, characterized, like that of the first generation, by widely different ideological stances, and often in open conflict with one another.

For many years, the second generation has understood its role within the institutions

of the Islamic Republic, never expressing a line of open dissent with their predecessors. However, as the numbers of active components of the first generation dwindle and their own institutional roles become progressively more important, the second generation has begun to express more and more distinct and well-defined positions, replicating the size and structure of the national ideological spectrum and in this way reinforcing the sense of identity of those who can, in every way, be considered the true heirs of the revolutionary experiment that led to the formation of the new Islamic State.

It follows that the political and strategic attitudes of the Islamic Republic of Iran are the expression of a process that is not only in constant evolution, but also and above all founded on ideological and perceptual differences that are often in contrast with one another. This in turn results in a multitude of currents and positions that must be carefully evaluated and defined within the intri-



cate labyrinth of the dynamics of national politics, so as to understand which should be considered emergent and which instead will have little or no influence.

### **Social perception of the institutional structure**

Another old Western cliché about Iran is that a new revolutionary surge is imminent, catalyzed by the youngest generation, who will rise up and defenestrate the country's political and religious authorities. This view, which dovetails perfectly with the position of those who have always – and in vain – held that regime change was the only possible solution to the hostile relationship with Iran, is periodically supported by the moments of tension between civil society and political authorities, as during the student protests that broke out during the second phase of the presidency of Mohammad Khatami, or in 2009, during the controversial elections that led to the re-election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

While it is true that in Iran, the third and youngest generation is quite numerous – about 70% of the population is under 35/40 years of age – and it is also completely distinct from the other two, it is also true that this third generation presents characteristics and peculiarities that are in every way similar to those of the two preceding ones. Therefore, thinking of this enormous mass of young people as antagonistic to the national system and the institutional structure established by the Islamic Revolution is a blatant misperception and highly misleading, mostly functional to those proposing regime change and convinced that the Iranian political and social system must inevitably collapse.

The third Iranian generation, to whom we can indubitably attribute the role of representing the entire society, is also ideologi-

cally multifaceted and complex, exactly like their parents' generation.

Scarcely anyone in the third generation shares the ideological views of those who participated in the revolution or those who fought in the war, with the criteria of belonging or opposition defined on entirely different bases. The main drivers for the third generation are grounded in daily life and basic needs, especially work and housing, factors that make the life of young Iranians increasingly difficult.

The political and institutional model of the Islamic Republic pose an interpretative paradox that often confounds the third generation, bringing it to the ultimate limits of contradiction. Because while on one hand the political system is seen as suffocating and obsessive in its manifestations of control and the repression of some basic individual freedoms – although more and more flexible and less invasive – on the other it is seen as the guarantor of political stability and the territorial integrity of the country, which is located squarely in the middle of one of the most turbulent and problem-ridden regions on the planet. At the same time, it is the Islamic Republic that provided homes for Iranians, wiping out the memory of the brutal living conditions in the shanty-towns that were still present on the fringes of the cities in the last period of the reign of the Pahlavis, offering even the lowest classes a chance for social improvement and participation in public and institutional life, thus securing the loyal support of many of the third generation, young and not so young. The political thrust of the young Iranians is not oriented towards a new revolution or the subversion of the institutional order, but instead at the reform and modernization of the existing structure.

“Reformism” is therefore the expression of a political movement that in reality has no subversive and revolutionary aims, but which

instead wants to reform the structure of the Islamic Republic from the inside, without profoundly altering its nature or eliminating it. Hand in hand with nationalist sentiment, extraordinarily strong among the youngest generation, reformism thus intends to make the existing system meet the economic and social demands of the third generation, not to restructure the state's institutional model. This is an important difference, and overlooking it has often generated significant errors of interpretation in the West, especially among those who have historically interpreted every political phenomenon in Iran as the precursor of an imminent new revolution.

In fact, in Iran, the relationship between society and the institutions is not particularly different from that in other countries in the region, or even in the West, and it was extraordinarily strengthened by the recent diplomatic triumph, securing what is widely perceived as an extremely positive result in the talks with the so-called group of 5+1 regarding the solution of the long and heated debate over the Iranian nuclear program.

### **Regional policy and security**

Today more than ever, Iran is working to define and consolidate its regional sphere of interest, for the first time – after many years of political isolation – taking into consideration a geographical area much more ample than that delimited by its own borders. However, this new push to establish solid and long-lasting strongholds in defense of its regional role and interests is not the fruit of a new or increased political or military capacity on Iran's part, but the consequence of the vacuum left by over fifteen years of repeated failures of Western policies in the Middle East. The disastrous outcome of the wars that deposed the regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq and repulsed the Taliban in

Afghanistan, the collapse of Syria and the growing instability of the Gulf monarchies, the war in Yemen and the enduring political crisis in Lebanon have allowed Iran, for the first time in its post-revolutionary history, to pursue a strategy of regional consolidation of its interests, enormously reinforcing its ability to influence and manage local political and social dynamics. An unprecedented and unhoped-for success for Iran, in addition accompanied by the West's progressive acknowledgement of the difficulty of promoting reforms and democracy in much of the Arab world, resulting in a sudden turnaround in its perception of the Shia world and its role in the Middle East. However, in Iran's strategic plans, the projection of its interests on a geographic scale so far beyond its national borders is intended to serve a defensive and protective purpose, establishing outlying frontiers to guarantee the territorial integrity and economic well-being of the Islamic Republic. In fact, although many of the Arab countries see Iran as a hegemonic power with expansionist dreams, in Tehran it is considered extremely dangerous engage in destabilizing actions towards the larger and always hostile Sunni Arab world, and the road taken – without much success, it's true – tries to balance the protection of its national interests against the perception of its regional adversaries.

Perception is the element that most deeply distinguishes Iran from its Sunni antagonists. While Iran sees Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and some other countries in the region as political, economic and military competitors they, in turn, see Iran as an existential threat, which must be obliterated to ensure the survival of the ruling dynasties and their systems. A significant and fundamental difference, which also explains their different approaches to military conflict against one another. Tehran's political and strategic goal is maintaining the status quo,

not eliminating other regional states, whose animosity and fears it nevertheless perceives and with whom it vainly tries to establish contact in order to prevent hostilities from suddenly flaring up into open conflict.

Insofar as the situation in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon, Iran relies on regional proxies as the only concrete guarantee against the threat of a future attack by the United States— seen as highly improbable at present – Israel or the other Arab states, pinning its hopes more on asymmetrical war than on conventional conflict. For this reason, it has pragmatically developed an awareness of the necessity of a transition after Bashar al-Assad, although it has no intention of delegating the choice of his successor to third parties. Russia's entry into the Syrian conflict is seen in a positive light by Tehran, although it does not trust Moscow unconditionally, suspecting that its intention is not to re-establish Syria's territorial integrity, but only to "sanitize" a part of it, abandoning the rest to the jihadists.

This scenario has a direct influence on Iraq, where Tehran is well aware of the impossibility of militarily re-conquering Anbar province, inhabited mostly by Sunnis, and fears the consolidation of the jihadist forces in a

stronghold in the territory that straddles the border between the two nations.

However, while on one hand Iran believes it strategically necessary to re-establish the historical borders of Iraq, on the other it played an active part in undermining the government of national unity, turning a deaf ear to the repeated complaints of Iraq's Sunnis and unfailingly supporting the Shia majority's exercise of power. In this way, at first it supported the al Maliki government, blind to its devastating impact on social cohesion, abandoning it only after a third of the country had fallen into the hands of the Islamic State, without a shot being fired and with the jihadists acclaimed as liberators by the Sunni inhabitants of al-Anbar province. The belated intervention of General Soleimani and the Quds Force prevented the worst from occurring in some villages on the outskirts of Baghdad and in Iraqi Kurdistan, but was helpless to prevent the consolidation of the forces of the Islamic State in most of the country. For Tehran, the dilemma in Iraq is related to the sectarian variable, fueled for far too long and in part by Iran itself, and today definitely out of control, with reconciliation through a



Hassan Rouhani President of Iran



process of national negotiations a very faint possibility.

Attempts at a dialogue with Saudi Arabia, actively sought by a part of the Iranian establishment – particularly through Ali Akhbar Hashemi Rafsanjani – have been of little use, being systematically rejected by Riyadh, which fears Iran's ulterior consolidation.

Relations between Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates then definitively deteriorated because of the worsening of the situation in Yemen, where Shia Houti rebels have mounted a powerful offensive against the Saudi allies in the Sana'a government, forcing president Abdi Rabbo Mansour Hadi to flee the capital precipitously and make his way to Saudi Arabia, not without mishap.

The Saudi sovereign, Salman, openly accuses Iran of having fomented and financed the revolt of the Houti, in order to open a new front and thus create a new locus of violence in the Arabian Peninsula. Tehran denies this firmly and in turn accuses the

Emirates and Saudi Arabia, not without reason, of being the prime causes of regional instability.

In general, European and Western media have blown the role of the Houti and Iran out of proportion, considering the real capacities of both players. In fact, while Tehran is in fact interested in and pleased with the ongoing crisis in Yemen, because it weakens and distracts the Saudis and the Emirates, it also fears the repercussions that the conflict could have on the entire region.

The Houti are a minority and are Shia, though quite different from the Iranian Imamiyyahs, with whom they share very little religiously, historically or politically. Iran has shown a highly ambiguous attitude in managing its relations with the Houti, opening some channels intended to financially and militarily support their revolt, although without any real hope of transforming them into a new regional proxy, and further worsening its already poor relations with Saudi Arabia. It would seem that recent developments in regional dynamics are evolving in



Anniversary of the Revolution in Iran



A Map of Iran

a direction favorable to Iran and its consolidated political and military stability, but Tehran's greatest fear today is that of a widespread collapse of local political and social equilibriums in the near future. The possibility of the consolidation of the Islamic State in the territory that includes eastern Syria and western Iraq is preoccupying, as is the uncertainty about the Saudi monarchy's ability to protect itself and ensure its continuity in the face of increasingly open internal dissent and opposition to the sprawling house of al-Saud, and also to contrast the growth of militant domestic jihadism.

Lebanon is a fundamental pillar in Tehran's national security strategy, but despite its solid and effective ongoing relations with Hezbollah, Lebanon's political and social dynamics – and those of the eastern Mediterranean in general – threaten to flare up into concrete and potentially devastating conflicts for a complex and fragile system such as Lebanon's.

The already delicate local security situation is further menaced, from the Iranian standpoint, by the distinct deterioration of the situation in Afghanistan, threatening the return of large numbers of Taliban fighters just across its borders and putting an end to

the happy circumstance – for Iran – of over a decade of tranquility on its eastern border, courtesy of the United States.

Taken together, then, these possible causes of crisis generate more misgivings than hope in Tehran with respect to growth of its role in the region. Future scenarios may once again leave the Islamic Republic isolated within an increasingly hostile region, ever more dominated by non-state forces with whom it could become difficult, if not impossible, to establish rational and constructive relations.









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