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Storm warnings over the Gulf

ABSTRACT

The American withdrawal from Iraq at the end of December last year brought radical change to the situation in the most fragile, strategic region in the world: the Gulf. Referred to as Arabian by some and Persian by others, for the world's oil-thirsty economy it really has become a vital life line. Over thirty years ago the USA and its allies, notably Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Bahrain, launched into a dangerous stand-off with the Islamic Republic of Iran. The coming months will be decisive and there is a real danger that this low-key confrontation will turn into outright conflict, as during the worst moments in the war between Iraq and Iran.

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1 – IRAQ: THE WAR IS OVER, BUT A RETURN TO NORMAL IS LONG IN COMING

After eight years of occupation the USA has brought its adventure in Mesopotamia to an end. Just before the end of 2011 the last soldiers took the road and left the country they invaded in March 2003. This operation, which led to the fall of Saddam Hussein, has proved to be extremely costly, both in human lives and wealth. Thousands of American soldiers were killed or injured. Tens of thousands of Iraqi civilians, even hundreds of thousands, according to the most pessimistic estimates, also lost their lives and two million chose to go into exile in neighbouring Syria and Jordan. The cost of the war has been astronomic, standing at \$800 billion for the time being, all paid for by the American taxpayer. Experts have made forecasts and the figures are dizzying: the Iraq war is due to bleed the American economy of more than \$3000 billion over the next few years - a tremendous drain that clearly has had its role to play in the present world crisis. This enormous amount of money has created wealth for businesses in the defence sector and for those in the new area of private security, but it comprises notoriously sterile investments. They are extremely political and speculative in aspect and have not been a factor in job creation in the USA, where an 8.5% unemployment rate persists at a record high.

In Iraq, in their wake, the Americans have left a landscape ravaged by the invasion itself and the ensuing conflict. As Jack Fairweather, author of a book on Britain's engagement in Iraq wrote in the Financial Times: "those who still defend the decision to go to war explain that getting rid of Saddam Hussein justifies everything that happened afterwards. This seems a high price to have paid, particularly in the light of the Arab Spring." Indeed 2011 showed that it was possible to bring about a change in regime in the Arab countries without having any major foreign intervention, a destructive war and an extended occupation.

Behind them the Americans are leaving a terrible legacy of multiple fractures: ethnic, religious and social, which were caused or worsened by the invasion. The 30 million Iraqis are divided between the Kurds in the north, who enjoy extended autonomy, the Sunnis, who hold the majority in the west, but who consider themselves marginalised nationally, and the Shi'a, who live more in the centre and south and who dominate the political situation at present.

The Shi'a who form 60% of the population are themselves divided into nationalist and populist and other more pro-Iranian and liberal factions. Moqtada Sadr, who the Americans wanted to eliminate, has notably positioned himself as an

inevitable protagonist on the political chess-board. His movement, the Mahdi Army, which is well established amongst the poorest classes, holds the key to social peace. His militia distinguished itself in the fight against the American occupant and is ready to challenge those in power, if the latter proves incapable of making rapid improvement to the Iraqis' living conditions. More than a quarter of the Iraqi population lives below the poverty line, and more than 20% are officially unemployed. The country, whose infrastructures and services have suffered greatly, needs major public investment. Oil production has risen to pre-war levels but it is below overly optimistic budgetary forecasts.

The government in Baghdad, under the leadership of Shi'a Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki – whom President George W Bush qualified as a "good guy" - has insisted on the USA withdrawing completely from Iraq. In spite of warnings from experts at the Pentagon, President Barack Obama finally decided to grant the Iraqis their request. But behind them the Americans have left the biggest embassy they have in the world. Built at high cost on the banks of the Tigris, within the grounds of the former master of Baghdad's presidential palace, it is said to employ one thousand diplomats. They are protected by a battalion of marines, but above all by thousands of mercenaries – the *contractors* – who, for the past eight years, have been tapping in to a real Eldorado in Iraq. The role to be played by this mission has been impeded from the start since it is impossible for its staff to travel without heavily armed escorts. The advisors who are supposed to work towards the country's recovery are unable to interact with those they are supposed to be helping, in other words with Iraqi citizens. And in peace time they find themselves just as isolated as their predecessors were, confined in the "green zone", the ultra-protected enclave, which was home to the Iraqi ministries and foreign legations during the war. Recently the Financial Times described the situation as follows:

On the rare occasions that they venture out of the secure embassy compound, the diplomats wear helmets and protective gear, making it even harder for ordinary Iraqis to tell the difference between the departed US military and the new civilian operation.

2 – THE NEW REGIONAL SITUATION: THE SPECTRE OF IRAN

The American military withdrawal from Iraq and the drastic reduction of its diplomatic influence over this country's future has led to a radically new strategic situation in the region. In Washington, Riyadh and Qatar, as well as in Israel and Europe, leaders and experts fear that Teheran will be the grand beneficiary of the vacuum caused by America's disengagement.

N. al Maliki's links with Iran are well known: he spent several years in exile in Teheran, when he was on Saddam Hussein's "most wanted" list. His present relations with the Iranian political authorities are close. However it would be a mistake to present him as a "puppet" in the hands of Teheran's leaders. The dynamics between the two neighbours are other than a simple relation of subordination. Notably the increasing competition between the two Shiite centres of religious power established in Iran and Iraq has to be taken into account. Qom, the seat of the grand Iranian Ayatollahs, played an important role from the Islamic Revolution of 1979 until the fall of Saddam Hussein, who persecuted Shi'a elite and their followers. But the American intervention in Iraq had a paradoxical effect, and restored the two most holy Iraqi towns, Nadjaf and Kerbala – in the eyes of Shi'a, to their positions as places of pilgrimage, education and influence. The effects of this rivalry between Iraq and Iran in this area remain to be gauged in terms of the political cooperation between Baghdad and Teheran.

Although post-war Iraq's alignment with revolutionary Iran still has to be shown, its neutrality in what former Iraqi minister, Ali Allawi describes in an article in the New York Times as the Irano-American "cold war" seems to be established. Never again will Baghdad play the role of Arab champion in the face of the Persian threat. Never again will the Iraqi army be at the service of pro-Western monarchies in the Gulf to defend them against what was believed to be a revolutionary challenge to the dynastic powers, notably that of the al-Saud. And never again will a regime in Baghdad – which claimed to be secular but whose survival mainly depended on a closed Sunni "clique" – stand as the armed faction of religious orthodoxy against the claims

made by the schismatic trend – the Shi'a – which emerged in Iraq fourteen centuries ago.

In all, for the Gulf monarchies – primarily Saudi Arabia and Qatar– the American withdrawal from Iraq and the neutralisation of the latter places them first in terms of a possible fight with Iran. The buffer zone has been removed and the policeman guarding it has left.

3 –THE IRANIAN NUCLEAR ISSUE: THE WEST RAISES ITS VOICE

At the heart of the dispute between Iran and the West is the Islamic Republic's nuclear programme which was revived in the 90's. The parameters of this controversy are well known. For years the USA, the Europeans and Israel have suspected the Iranians of wanting to acquire nuclear military potential. Teheran denies having any intention of this nature and maintains that its work in this area is focused on the simple production of energy. Nuclear power, says Teheran, is necessary to satisfy the requirements of a nation with a population of 75 million and so that it can reserve oil and gas for export purposes. The Russians have provided ample aid to the Iranians in their nuclear programme and took part in the building and launch of the Bushehr power plant. Moscow, like Beijing, does not share the West's fears with regard to Iranian intentions, and these countries, both members of the UN Security Council, are against any escalation in tension.

Apart from the purely technical problem of Iranian nuclear activities the dispute is of a political and strategic nature of course. The USA, which as of the 1960's, replaced the British as the overlords in this region, on which the world's balance depends, have never been able to accept Teheran's independence in the wake of the Islamic revolution. Since then Iran, which considers that its future is as a regional power, believes itself aggressed, under siege and threatened, and as a result it seizes any opportunity to assert its autonomy and its inclination to take on any challenge – including those of a military nature. The danger of this confrontation is accentuated because – and this is unique in modern diplomatic history – for more than 30 years Washington and Teheran no longer entertain any direct rela-

tions or communication. The two countries on which peace depends do not speak with each other, whilst a "red telephone" existed between the USA and the USSR during the Cold War to warn of any misunderstanding between the two giants.

With regard to the Iranian issue, the nuclear policeman, the International Atomic Energy Agency (AIEA), based in Vienna, has been cautious for a very long time. It regularly publishes assessments whereby its inspectors maintain that they do not know enough to say whether or not Iran has military intentions. But in November 2011 a radical change occurred. New information given to the AIEA made it raise its voice: in the past Iran is said to have undertaken research linked to a military programme, say the AIEA experts and that it might even have continued them. AIEA Chief, Japanese Yukiya Amano, demanded explanations. Teheran answered that the information was untrue, based on reports that had been rigged by information services hostile to Teheran.

The services accused by the Iranians are divided about the way to deal with Iranian activities in the military nuclear area. Reality or fiction, they say nothing. The CIA has claimed for a long time that it was convinced that Teheran since 2003 had stopped all research in this area and that nothing proved that the mullahs' regime wanted to acquire atomic weapons. In a recent report by Langley, analysts repeat that they do not know whether the Iranian authorities have decided to pursue the development of an atomic weapon. And they add that they believe that the Iranians "were keeping an option open" to do it if they did take that decision. This is one way of saying that for the time being the American spies refuse to give an opinion which might be used to justify military action. As the official lies on the part of the Americans showed however in 2002 with regard to Saddam Hussein's programme of weapons of mass destruction, arguments can always be found once the political authorities have decided to take action.

4 – NEW SANCTIONS: FOR IRAN THIS IS A DECLARATION OF WAR

The November 2011 report does however herald a major turning point for the West in its strategy to put

pressure on Iran. And it was immediately used to justify further sanctions that the USA and the Europeans wanted to implement against the Teheran regime. In Washington, Congress and President Obama are notably planning to penalise foreign companies that trade with Iran. The focus of the measure taken is to identify and punish the entities that make payments into the Iranian Central Bank as part of their trade transactions. This measure will directly affect the main operators who purchase Iranian oil and gas. They will have to give up doing this, otherwise they will be subject to a fine or banned from working on other markets. If they are effectively implemented, these sanctions may have a major effect on the Teheran regime's financial resources. By making the trade of its oil more difficult the conditions for a type of embargo are being created. For the Iranians this is a real declaration of war, at least from an economic point of view. And these measures remind them of how the British organised a naval blockade of the refinery and oil terminal in Abadan in 1951 after the nationalisation of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company by Mohammed Mossadegh's government. The ensuing economic crisis was used as a backdrop to the coup d'état fomented by the British and Americans to remove Mossadegh and to bring the Shah back into power in 1953.

These sanctions are the strictest ever drawn up against Iran. Congress, which is still Israel's best ally within the American political machine, is determined that for them to be implemented with the utmost rigour. President Obama, who has given up his open policy towards Teheran, has to show that he is equal to the Iranian challenge as he bids to win a second term in office. He has the means to neutralising the effects of the measures against Teheran if he believes that they are endangering American national security. But his Republican adversaries would be only too pleased to denounce him as being dangerously irresponsible, unable to face the threat posed by the Ayatollahs. Barack Obama has until June 2012 to express his opinion on this.

5 – THE JUNE 2012 DEADLINE

The June deadline is therefore vital: because if at that time the measures taken or planned have not achieved any results "then you're at the end of the sanc-

tions road", notes American journalist John Vinocur. It is highly likely that it might be turn out like this: there has been no example in recent history of economic sanctions, even of a draconian nature, that have achieved the desired result. It also seems as difficult to stop Iranian oil exports, as it is to make Teheran give up its nuclear ambitions. And just four months from the American presidential election in November, President Obama will find himself in the difficult position of having to explain why he has been unable to silence the country which is threatening, according to the most pessimistic, American interests and the survival of Israel.

In June therefore the American President will be left with a series of options, all as problematic as each other in terms of his re-election: to do nothing, as his personality, as well as previous American interventions in the Middle East would suggest - instead of settling problems these have made matters worse. In order not to appear undecided and to be accused by the Republicans of letting Iran develop the atomic bomb he might order limited strikes against the installations of the Iranian nuclear complex. With regard to the example of President Clinton's action against Iraq in December 1998, we all know the outcome: in spite of a show of strength, Saddam Hussein stayed in power, he continued to counter American efforts to bring his country under its tutelage and finally the USA had to invade the country in 2003. Likewise Bill Clinton ordered strikes in 1998 against al Qaeda in Afghanistan and the Sudan. Again these strikes far from eliminated Osama Bin Laden's terrorist threat as the 9/11 2001 attacks illustrated. And then in October 2001 the USA launched into a war in Afghanistan which is still not over.

In spite of the limited effect illustrated by this type of operation, President Obama might be tempted to use them in order to avoid losing all of his chances of re-election. In the coming months he will be under severe pressure to act on this and an article in the American review, *Foreign Affairs*, has set the tone. "*It is time to attack Iran,*" declares the title of the article by Matthew Kreonig, a nuclear proliferation expert. And his article explains "*why a strike is the least bad option*". "Addressing the threat now will spare the united states

from confronting a far more dangerous situation in the future," concludes the specialist. This type of analysis feeds the formidable communication machine of the partisans of war, the military industry and the radical religious rightwing in the USA. They create a context, mix ignorance and ideological pre-conceptions that no candidate running in the American presidential election can afford to ignore. And this contributes to the slow descent towards taking an unjustified decision from a strategic point of view, but which is almost inevitable in context of an internal political battle dictated by the efficacy of simplistic declarations.

6 – ISRAEL, IN THE PERILOUS ROLE OF FIREBRAND

In this affair Israel plays both the victim and the electric prod. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government insists on the "existential threat" represented by a regime whose leader, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, has challenged the reality of the Holocaust and rejected the "Zionist State's" right to exist. Every now and again Israeli members of the military and experts take turns in talking of the possibility of preventive strikes by the Hebrew State against Iranian nuclear installations. This possibility is lent even greater credibility by the previous raids Israel made against similar targets in Iraq in 1981 and Syria in 2007.

In November Israeli Defence Minister Ehud Barak stepped up pressure on the Americans by revealing in the press how Israel would deal with Iran's defiance. He explained that Mossad analysts estimated that Iran was going to bring its nuclear programme into an "immunity zone" within nine months. By this he was referring to the precautionary measures taken by Teheran around its nuclear installations. Some have been built in mountainous areas which guarantee them an almost impenetrable natural protection. Ehud Barak also said that after neutralisation by foreign attacks, the Iranians had done everything possible immediately to replace parts of their nuclear programme with identical installations. He then intimated that this perspective was intolerable and that if someone did not do something to deprive Iran of this "immunity zone" then Israel would take care of it. Recently Teheran answered with one of its traditional provocations, announcing the

upcoming launch of a new underground reactor in a mountainside near Qom.

However a preventive strike by Israel against Iran would entail significant risks, which make it improbable. The Israeli air force would notably have to reckon with the fact that since the American withdrawal the Iraqis have taken control of their airspace again and that they would not let an intrusion by Israeli squadrons on a mission against Iran go unanswered. An Israeli raid would lead to an extremely embarrassing situation for both the USA and Europe. It would rather too obviously highlight the West's silence with regard to the Israeli nuclear arsenal, developed with French aid in the 1960's. The only atomic power in the region, Israel has more than 100 nuclear weapons of all kinds, which gives it a strategic advantage over all of its enemies in the event of conflict. According to Israeli leaders this arsenal is a vital dissuasion factor for the country's survival in the face of an Arab world that challenged its right to existence from the very first hours of its creation in 1948.

Moreover, as Bennett Ramberg, a former manager of politico-military affairs for the Department of State, commented in a recent analysis, Israeli nuclear power is a double edged weapon. In an article in the New York Times this expert suggested that if the Israelis attacked Bushehr the Iranians might riposte again the Dimona reactor. "But the risk of tit-for-tat attacks raises a specter few seem to recognize: the first radiological war in history", warns B Ramberg. In his analysis he underlines the terrible effects that strikes like this would have on the environment, the populations of the affected zones and on the economy of the region in general. "Given the dangers, Israel and Iran would do well to ask if opening a radiological Pandora's box serves either's interest", wonders the American expert.

7 – TEHERAN COUNTER ATTACKS AND THREATENS HORMUZ AND THE GULF

For the time being Teheran seems to fear further Western sanctions more than surgical strikes. These sanctions come after a series of incidents that have led the Islamic Republic's regime to believe that Washington has started an aggressive secret war against it to slow,

and even put a stop to, its nuclear activities. Responsibility for the Stuxnet virus attack in 2010 against the control systems of the Iranian centrifuges used for the enrichment of uranium was never claimed but the Iranians are quite right to suspect the Americans or the Israelis. In November 2011 a strange explosion destroyed an Iranian missile development site and killed fifteen people. Amongst the victims was General Hassan Moghadadam, the head of the Iranian ballistic missile production programme. Again the causes of the explosion are unclear and Iranian officials have spoken of an accident during the loading of fuel into a rocket, but the theory of sabotage cannot be ruled out. Prior to this some Iranian scientists were assassinated in the middle of Teheran.

In the face of what seems like a challenge to its security Iran has chosen to increase tension on the very front where the most recent Western sanctions aim to strike: oil. In December Iranian officials threatened to close Hormuz, which links the Gulf to the Oman Sea, and then the Indian Ocean. More than one third of the world's oil exports travels in tankers, which use this narrow 50km-wide strait. The Iranian army, which has recently undertaken manoeuvres in the Gulf, say that they would be able to prevent the transit of crude oil sold by the various countries on its banks. The USA has answered that their warships, notably the Fifth Fleet based in Bahrain was mandated to guarantee the free movement of ships in this area. With dozens of units and notably a naval air force, the most powerful navy in the world certainly has the means to harm the Iranian fleet.

Experts stress however that Iran has purchased naval mines and air-sea missiles from the Chinese which could threaten the traffic in the Strait of Hormuz. Their activation would comprise an extremely dangerous escalation, recalling the darkest hours of the war between Iran and Iraq. Baghdad and Teheran attacked each other's oil installations and in 1984 started to target crossing merchant ships in the Gulf. The "oil tanker war" lasted three years and nearly 550 merchant ships were hit. "Teheran's latest threat to block global oil shipping should leave no doubt about its recklessness and its contempt for international law", comments an edito-

rial in the New York Times. "This is not a government any country should want to see acquire nuclear weapons.", concluded the American daily, clearly referring to Moscow's reticence to put pressure on Iran. The same applies to Beijing, a rising power, which refuses to accept questions about its right to trade with whom it wants and above all its right to acquire what its soaring economic growth so badly needs: oil from the Gulf and notably, that of the two countries with whom it has created close links: Iraq and Iran.

8 – SAUDI ARABIA'S MAIN FEAR

The tension with Iran and the loss of the Iraqi shield are of concern to the Gulf monarchies, particularly Saudi Arabia. The kingdom that totals some 28 million inhabitants has the biggest proven oil reserves in the world, it is home to Islam's most holy sites, Mecca and Medina, and stands as the guardian of Sunnite orthodoxy. The Al Saud monarchy also wants to play a decisive role in the region and relies on its vast liquidity reserves to do this. King Abdullah, who returned home in February 2011 after a long absence due to ill health, was able, within the space of just one month, to distribute more than \$100 billion to his subjects in order to quell calls for political reform. Fervently against change, the Al Saud, supreme sovereigns, have watched with concern the fall of Arab regimes which seemed guaranteed in places like Tunisia and Egypt. They intervened rapidly to put a halt to any protest movement in the neighbouring emirates, Bahrain and Oman.

But when Riyadh sees an interest for itself, Saudi diplomacy is prepared to ensure Arab approbation of international action. It clearly did this in 1990 when the then king, King Fahd, authorised the USA to deploy an expeditionary corps into the Saudi desert to chase Saddam Hussein out of Kuwait. And in 2011 the Saudis were swift to provide their approval of NATO' operations launched against Colonel Muammar Qaddafi, who had done everything in his power to achieve the Saudi royal family's condemnation. Riyadh, the last heavyweight in the Arab world, after the collapse of Egypt and Iraq agreed to calls by the Gulf Cooperation Council, then the Arab League for international action against the Libyan regime. This Arab absolution

opened the way to condemnation on the part of the UN and to NATO's operations.

Even though the Arab Spring has lost its momentum and is not threatening the kingdom's stability, the Al Saud dynasty faces a series of challenges and wants to rise to them without having to fear that the Iranians will take advantage of the situation. The monarchy is facing protest movements within the Shi'a community, which is an important minority in the country's eastern provinces, at the heart of the oil fields. The Shi'a say they are marginalised in a society in which they are considered as heretics. The Riyadh regime, like the royal family in Bahrain, regularly accuses the Iranian secret services of fomenting trouble in these areas and of wanting to weaken the Sunnite monarchy. In 2011 the Saudi rulers also accused the Teheran regime of having plotted to kill its ambassador in the USA.

The monarchy also has to prepare for a future succession. King Abdullah is nearly 88 years old and his health was a source of concern last year. On his return from convalescence he appointed his half-brother, Prince Nayef, the powerful Interior Minister, as his successor. But in the opaque system of power and influence of this absolute monarchy, succession to the throne can give rise to re-alignments in interests. Prince Nayef is known for having a more conservative political vision than Abdullah and close links with the Wahhabi authorities, who enabled the Al Saud family to take power and stay there. Nayef is also known for entertaining difficult relations with the USA and for having openly called on Washington for greater firmness with regard to Iran.

The battle for influence between the Sunnite kingdom and the Shi'a theocracy could so easily destabilise the region that former Iraqi Defence Minister Ali Allawi, perceives a serious danger for his country in this: "In the regional struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran, Iraq must stand on the side of justice and equity by pushing for free and fair elections, representative government, minority rights and the rule of law in places like Bahrain, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen". In other words, by laying equal blame on the two conflicting powers in the Gulf, the former Iraqi leader stresses the

impotence of other regional players to prevent escalation, if it were to happen.

9 – LITTLE QATAR'S DIFFICULT BALANCING ACT

Another country in the region also occupies a delicate position between the Saudis and Iran: Qatar. In just a decade the little emirate has become an inevitable protagonist in the Arab world and in the West. Its television channel *al Jazeera* revealed it to the world and since then this has become a powerful instrument in its diplomacy. The channel was created in 1996 and developed in a spectacular manner after 11th September 2001 and in 2006, via its English channel it, opened up in the West. Al Jazeera played a decisive role in the orchestration of the revolutions that led to the overthrow of the dictators in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. Its challenge to the secular, autocratic republics did not spread in such an aggressive manner to the monarchies reigning in the Gulf, which mainly comprise strong religious elements. In this it can claim the role of having promoted change, but not of defending a system of government that matches the criteria of Western democracy.

Al Jazeera is a factor that makes Qatar a unique player on the Arab stage. But there are others which all equally point to the complexity of its both geographic and political position. A peninsula, Qatar appears as an annex to Saudi Arabia, with the waters of the Gulf lapping on its shores. Its relations with its grand neighbour have not always been calm and it was only in 1991 i.e. 20 years after Qatar's independence from the British Empire – that their common borders were finally confirmed. The ruling Al Thani family holds absolute power, but since Emir Hamad ben Khalifa came to power – who evinced his father in 1995 – it has tried to provide Qatar with the image of a progressive monarchy. Evidently the Al Thani have been helped by their emirate's

immense wealth; a major producer of oil and gas, it can boast the highest income per inhabitant in the world.

The country became an advanced platform for the American military presence in the Gulf, notably after the construction of a vast air base in the desert west of

Doha. The little emirate was one of the first Arab countries to open commercial interest offices with Israel. Trade was however broken off after the Israeli attack on Gaza at the end of 2008. Qatar also maintains close links with Iran. The two countries are even linked by the mysteries of geology: they both have a vast reservoir of natural gas that has formed under the waters of the Gulf. They have to coordinate work to tap into this fabulous gas field, the South Pars-North Dome. This reservoir, believed to be the biggest in the world embodies the joint future of both shores of the Gulf and is a pertinent reminder of the damage that conflict in this region could cause.

The little emirate has also shown its ambition to be a player other than just providing media coverage in the Arab world. It has not simply stopped at providing Al Jazeera with the means to preach the credo of change in the dictatorships in North Africa. Acts and words have been combined and Qatari planes and special army units actively took part in the battles against the forces loyal to Colonel Qaddafi. According to Qatar's Chief of Staff, General Hamad bin Ali al-Atiya, hundreds of Qatari soldiers were dispatched in aid of the Libyan rebel fighters, who were badly disciplined, disorganised and clearly lacking any command structure.

10 – RIYADH AND QATAR, THE ISLAMISTS' WEALTHY SPONSORS

Qatar's role and Saudi Arabia's influence were therefore extensive in the Libyan affair. Changes in regime along the entire Mediterranean coast of Africa are opening up new perspectives for them to assert their influence over this zone that lies on Europe's doorstep. The elections have revealed the new role that the Islamist parties are going to play in countries like Tunisia and Egypt and also Morocco. In Libya, the new leaders also have close, avowed links with Islam. Across this entire region, which is so strategic for Europe, the Muslim Brotherhood or its followers have integrated the political landscape. For decades they had been brushed aside by pro-Western, pseudo-democratic regimes. The popular and middle classes that had been deprived of the benefits of fake growth have appointed them as their representatives. The entry of the Islamists into the race is occurring, under in the watchful eye of the army, in Tunisia, Egypt and also in Morocco. The process might prove to be more chaotic in Libya where tribal militia are not ready to submit easily to a central power. But in all of these

countries one factor will play a decisive role in guiding new experiences in this unprecedented political revival towards stability: the capability to fund vital economic revival, which alone can prevent political collapse.

"Soaring demography is what has driven the Arab Spring along," writes Patrick Seale, one of the best experts of the Arab world. He adds "youth unemployment was the spark that put fire to the Arab uprising." "When economic frustration takes a political turn, authoritarian regimes start to collapse," concludes this expert. P. Seale is right and simply notes the terrible economic reality of this region that has been shaken by the Arab upheaval. Notably Egypt, a poor giant with a population of 90 million, half of whom live on less than \$2 per day and where 40% of adults are illiterate. The tale of a revolution being pushed along by cohorts of young graduates armed with mobile phones and Twitter accounts gives way to the hard reality of underdevelopment. Of course, Libya with its energy resources and small population, will serve as a lung for its two neighbours. It will be the Tunisians and the Egyptians who will come to rebuild the country, restore and develop the gas and oil sectors. But this will not be enough. Only a rapid injection of significant funds will help prevent both Tunisia and Egypt from experiencing the same fate as Somalia.

11 – THE PROSPECT OF A "CONTREPARTIE"

At present Europe and the USA, preoccupied by their own economic crisis, do not have the means to fund the stabilisation of the regimes born of the Arab Spring. Only countries like Saudi Arabia and Qatar can do this. With a crude oil price resolutely set at around \$100 per barrel, these two countries have accumulated impressive reserves, which provide them with unquestionable power.

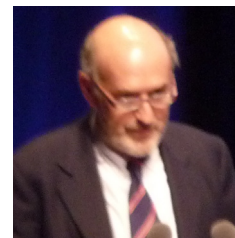
The use that this wealth can be put to, to stabilise a strategic area that extends from Morocco to Egypt represents a tremendous advantage for Riyadh and Doha over the USA and Europe. The two monarchies have also split their tasks quite precisely. Qatar has taken on Libya and is responsible for managing this problem which, all in all, is quite minor. With regard to the far more explosive situation in Egypt, which borders with Israel, and linked to the Hebrew State via a separate peace agreement, Riyadh is in charge. The most active elements in the Saudi kingdom have already started work, financing the Salafist movement and its Nour party, which was so successful in the general elections. With

one quarter of the seats, this party, which has only just been founded, diminished the Muslim Brotherhoods' victory and will be able to assert its more demanding claims. This acute rise in political Islam offers the Saudis fertile ground for the addition of specific political and social demands to their possible financial generosity. Of course they will not make the mistake of demanding total submission, but we should expect to see in regard to subjects as sensitive as relations between Egypt and Israel, Christian minority rights, civil and political freedom and policies towards women, that they will try to make their voice heard in exchange for their generosity.

CONCLUSION

So the question at the beginning of 2012 is to see just how far this "contrepartie" can go? What can the wealthy Arab nations on whom the West rely to stabilise these tumultuous countries on the shores of the Mediterranean and on Israel's threshold, demand? The Saudis will be greatly tempted to show that they are ready to open their purses, if what they see as an Iranian threat, can be removed. They do not care about the method but they will find it more difficult to rejoice if the Israelis were to launch themselves into this adventure alone. Undoubtedly Riyadh, who has signed a massive arms contract totalling \$60 billion with the USA, is expecting its historic protector to show a bit more courage with regard to the Islamic republic. But Washington, which is only just

emerging from two wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, can only envisage starting another conflict with limited energy. In the absence of a diplomatic miracle, presidential candidate Obama will however have think about this seriously. What is the best answer to Iranian defiance: strikes of uncertain outcome or an oil blockade that is difficult to set in place? He still has a few months to hesitate but time is running out, and in a region as explosive as this, the slightest incident may force the clocks to make a dramatic move forwards.



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