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Middle East

Iran, Saudi Arabia, the Middle East: a highly explosive region

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YC: There is much talk of a sort of "cold war" between Iran and Saudi Arabia. How does it manifest itself concretely?

If by cold war we understand an acute antagonism, where Saudi Arabia and Iran are in military-political competition and involved in proxy wars through interposed countries, without going to war directly against each other, then that is indeed the case. Since its inception, the Iranian regime originating in the "Islamic revolution" of 1979 has been in permanent hostility with the Saudi kingdom. These are politically antithetical regimes, though both are based on Islamic fundamentalism. The Saudi kingdom is linked to the United States, while the Islamic Republic of Iran was born from the overthrow of a monarchy and is fiercely anti-American. What has made this cold war warm for some time now is the way that the invasion of Iraq led by the US in 2003 opened a Pandora's Box: it gave Iran the opportunity to extend and then consolidate its influence in Iraq, and thus set foot directly in an Arab country bordering the Saudi kingdom. Until then, Iran's main auxiliary in the region was the Lebanese Hezbollah, but this remained a relatively limited concern for the Saudis. On the other hand, the expansion of Iranian influence in Iraq became for them a source of great concern, which has since been reinforced, especially with the new surge of Iranian influence on the occasion of what has been called the "Arab Spring". Iran is profiting from the destabilization of the Arab Middle East: first, the destabilization brought by the US invasion of Iraq, then that caused by the "Arab Spring" a few years later. After Iraq, Iran intervened in Syria from 2013, with regional auxiliaries but also with Iranians on the ground. Then it was the turn of Yemen, where the Houthis are supported by Tehran, although the Iranian military role remains limited in this country compared to Iraq and Syria.

There is no shortage of commentators in the West to explain that what we have here is a new episode of the secular antagonism of Shiites and Sunnis. What do you think of this "analysis"?

It is a typically "orientalist" explanation in the pejorative sense of the term, which refers to a logic that always brings everything back to cultures that are supposed to be permanent. This does not make sense: the so-called Sunni-Shiite conflict was not a major aspect of regional politics until the invasion of Iraq and the ensuing civil war in 2006, which took a religious character, opposing Sunnis to Shiites in that country. It is a fact, however, that since the "Islamic revolution" in Iran, the Saudis - whose official ideology is fiercely anti-Shiite - have played the religious card to isolate the Iranian revolution, explaining that Khomeinism was an avatar of Shiism and contradictory with Sunnism. The leaders of the Islamic Republic, for their part, have of course used their Shiite religious leadership to expand their influence in the Arab world. They intervened in Lebanon in particular for the founding, arming, and financing of Hezbollah, but as a rule their declared official policy was more Pan-Islamic than Shiite. They have tried to appeal to Islam in general, and have forged rather strong links with the Muslim Brotherhood, who are Sunni, but fundamentalists like them. In particular, they boasted of supporting Hamas, the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, in a sort of binomial with Hezbollah. So there was a Pan-Islamic politics of Iran that embarrassed the Saudis and gave rise to an Islamic outbidding between them... What has happened, however, since the invasion of Iraq and especially since the civil war in that country, is that we have seen an escalation in the sectarian aspect of Iranian policy, which has become increasingly decisive. Tehran extended its influence in Iraq by playing the sectarian card, which then became a major element of its approach. This greatly contributed to poisoning the situation with the Saudis who, of course, have not ceased to spread their violent sectarian ideology. To say that today there is a sectarian dynamic on the ground is undeniable, but to explain this dynamic by the simple fact that there are Sunnis and Shiites explains nothing: it is a tautology. It is a political process that has given the conflict this sectarian aspect. Moreover, we can also say that of all historical survivals such as sectarianism or tribalism: they are not eternal cultural elements, but cultural elements that have been maintained or recovered, and used for political ends... Why are there no more wars between Catholics and Protestants in Europe, apart from the conflict in Northern Ireland, when Europe has experienced such conflicts, and more deadly ones, in the past? If this sectarian factor now plays such a role in the Middle East, it is for reasons of political history, and not for cultural or religious reasons. The source

of the conflict does not lie in religious differences, but in very profane conflicts of interest.

As regards the Iranian expansionism as denounced by the Saudis, the Egyptians, the Western governments... what is the reality? There have been these opportunities given to Iran to increase its influence in Iraq and Syria, but what are the limits of this influence, and how is it really a pressing threat to Saudi, Israeli or American interests?

There is a threat to the three countries you mentioned, insofar as the Iranian state has a policy that is fiercely hostile to them. But I would also like to emphasize that the expansionism of the Iranian regime is at the same time a threat to the populations of the region. Its exploitation of the religious factor is making the societies of the region explode, which is extremely serious. This expansionist policy is led in particular by the Guardians of the Revolution, which is a state within the state in Iran: they control a major sector of the economy of the country and are the armed expression of the expansionism of the regime, by their nature as a military-political force. It is they who intervene in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, where they supervise troops selected on a sectarian basis. You cannot be a member of Hezbollah, for example, without being Shiite: it is an organization based on sectarian affiliation. All of this introduces extremely dangerous cleavages in the societies concerned. The Saudis are no better, there is no doubt, but in this case Tehran's offensive policy of expansion contrasts with the conservatism of the Saudis. We do not see them building local armed tentacles as Iran does. Even in Syria, they financed and supported groups that they do not fully control. The Saudi kingdom is hyper-conservative and it fears this destabilization of the region, which does not scare Iran in the least!

Do you mean that instability benefits Iran, not Saudi Arabia, which prefers the status quo?

Take Lebanon as an example: the Saudis have not set up and are not trying to establish a Sunni version of Hezbollah, even though Hezbollah has the monopoly of force in Lebanon. The Saudi regime is certainly more reactionary than the Iranian regime, socially and culturally, but Iran is much more aggressive and expansionist. It plays an even more dangerous role in giving a sectarian character to the conflicts in the region. This was an essential antidote against the revolutionary wave of the "Arab Spring". If this wave was not able to spread in Iraq despite attempts at social mobilization, it was mainly because of the sectarian cleavage. It was the same in Lebanon. If in Syria the regime has been able to resist the revolutionary wave and counter-attack, it is also by using the sectarian factor, but it is also and above all thanks to the support of Iran by means of sectarian militias coming from Iraq, Lebanon, and Iran itself (including troops made up of Afghan refugees in the latter country, often forcibly conscripted). These militias play a crucial role in maintaining the regime.

But what about the Iraqi state at present? It seems exaggerated to describe it as a vassal of Iran, but it is deeply connected to Iran while still receiving American support.

It is paradoxical, indeed. There has for a long time been competition combined with collaboration between the US and Iran in Iraq. The American invasion was from the outset undertaken with the complicity of Iran, which means that Sunni Arab nationalists, like the Baathists, regularly accuse Iran of being an accomplice of the United States, and present themselves as victims of an Iranian-American plot. It is an undeniable fact that, when US troops invaded Iraq, they brought with them the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, loyal to Iran, as well as the Dawa party, a Shiite party linked to Iran... The occupation even installed them in the government! We can discuss to what extent it was stupidity on the part of the Bush administration, but there was undeniably some stupidity involved... The Bush team even declared, one year after the invasion, that they had been fooled by an adventurer named Chalabi, who had been their main guide in their Iraqi adventure, and was later accused of being a double agent on behalf of Iran. The result, in any case, is that they installed Iran in power in Iraq, and they did so when American troops were still there. They installed Maliki as head of government, whereas he is the man who has significantly strengthened the links between the Iraqi state that was being rebuilt and Iran. When the United States evacuated Iraq in 2011, they

left a country that was far more subject to Tehran than to Washington. And when, three years later, ISIS made its breakthrough in Iraq, the United States made conditional on their intervention the resignation of Maliki, the man they had themselves put in charge of the government. They got him replaced by Abadi, who plays the card of neutralism, but on the ground, whatever the current prime minister wants, the forces directly linked to Iran are as powerful as the official army, which is itself controlled by Iran. The leader of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards strolls through the region, visits the troops, gives instructions, as in conquered territory...

How do you analyse American policy, or perhaps American policies, in view of the chaos that seems to reign at the moment at the top of the American state? Is it more of a tailending/opportunist policy towards Saudi Arabia's intrigues, or are the Americans themselves engaged in a manoeuvre? Do they have a coherent strategy today?

We have in fact never seen such cacophony in Washington. Even at the time of Watergate, there was no cacophony in foreign policy. Today, there is Trump, who would like to conduct a certain policy, and the establishment, the army, the Pentagon, who do not follow him on many things. To give just one example, Trump had promised Erdogan to stop supporting Kurdish forces in Syria, and the Pentagon said exactly the opposite a month later. Trump was betting on his rapprochement with Moscow, and wanted to develop a policy based on this rapprochement. He was counting on Russia to push Iran out of Syria, but it did not work. He saw many obstacles arising against his desire to come closer to Putin. On the other hand, there is the Pentagon which decided, from 2014-2015, to rely on the Syrian Kurds, on the People's Protection Units (YPG), and which is pleased to have made this choice: they are excellent fighters. Washington has pushed them to create a force including Arabs, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), so as to no longer appear as an exclusively Kurdish force. The SDF won the battle against ISIS on Syrian territory. We see all the complexity of this situation, where a certain campist "anti-imperialism" (which by the way is exclusively anti-American, and often even pro-Russian), as it has manifested itself on Syria or Libya, does not fit the situation. There are in fact cases, which are certainly exceptional, where the United States supports, as in Syria today, a progressive force in its fight against a reactionary enemy. The YPG are indisputably the most progressive force of the country in Syria, on the key issue of the condition of women in particular, in spite of all limits that they have and without sinking into the delirium of believing that the Paris Commune has been reinvented in the Syrian Kurdish regions. Now it turns out that these are the people the Pentagon has decided to support, which has caused turmoil in the minds of the campists, whom we have not seen demonstrating against the American intervention in Syria, since they could hardly condemn forces linked to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), an organization they had been supporting for many years. It is obvious that the Kurdish forces cannot be blamed for having accepted the support of the United States, without which they would have been crushed by ISIS. The city of Kobane could not have been saved without American air support and the weapons parachuted by the United States to the Kurdish forces, to the annoyance of Ankara. But at the same time the Kurdish forces would be very wrong to rely too much on the United States, which sooner or later will let them down; that is inevitable. There is a kind of reciprocal way that they use each other at this point in time; only a fool would, in the name of "anti-imperialism", blame them for it, which would be tantamount to recommending suicide to them. But this is obviously not reliable support: Washington uses the YPG for the moment as a bulwark not only against ISIS, but also against Iran. The Pentagon knows that if it dropped the Kurds now, the Iranians would probably gain control of the area east of the Euphrates.

Do you think the "cold war" can get hot? The conflicts between Iran and Saudi Arabia are getting more heated, and what is perplexing is the complexity of the actors, the tensions, and therefore the risk of things getting out of hand.

The Saudis have had their fingers burnt: their expedition to Yemen has failed; all it has managed to produce is a gigantic humanitarian disaster. I do not really see the kingdom embarking on a military adventure against Iran, contrary to others, like Israel or the United States, especially with a Trump administration that is so fiercely anti-Iranian. From them, nothing can be excluded. Take, for example, the recent US bombing of Syrian troops that killed about a hundred people. This is a way of saying: do not approach the regions where we are present. The

situation may escalate between Iranians and Americans. What blocks things is the presence of Russia, which would not wish to be dragged by Tehran and even less by the Syrian regime into a clash with the United States. But it is certainly an explosive situation.

Is there a connection between these warlike noises and the revolts of the 2011 Arab Spring? We can also add now the Iranian Spring, because although the demonstrations at the beginning of the year have quickly ended, they are still symptomatic. Is there a link between each other's foreign policy and the domestic problems they face?

Of course. There is already an objective link: these military adventures are costly, and Iran in particular, far more than the Saudis, faces serious economic problems, which are the product of sanctions and oil prices, on the one hand, but also of this policy of expansion that the government is now trying to finance on the backs of the population, by applying the recipes of the IMF. Indeed it is the IMF that has been called to the rescue to define a new economic policy in Iran. And it was its recipes that sparked the beginning of the popular uprising that we saw. One of the strong themes in this uprising was the rejection by part of the population of this regional expansion policy. People are well aware that the regime's adventures in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon cost them dearly and are being conducted at their expense. As for the Saudis, their economic problem is linked to the drop in oil prices, but it is a decline that they themselves deliberately triggered in 2014. The kingdom is, of course, much richer than Iran.

Mohamed Ben Salman, known as MBS, the new Saudi "strongman", is making the transition from the reign of an extended family, the size of a clan in the tribal sense, to the reign of a single restricted family, more in line with the monarchical tradition. In other words, and in a way, it is the passage from the participation in state property of a few thousand people, members of the offspring of the founder of the kingdom, to a dynasty founded on the offspring of King Salman, which is much smaller, and the passage from the transmission of the throne from brother to brother to a transmission from father to son. It is a palace revolution, in every sense of the formula. If MBS is shaking the coconut tree (he has arrested several members of the extended ruling family in order to force them to return to the state some of the fortunes they have accumulated by exploiting their privileges), he is not at all doing so from moral rectitude, since he himself has done worse. What is allowed for some is no longer allowed to others, and it is also a convenient way to replenish the coffers of the state.

How could the situation degenerate? Even if both do not want a real frontal war... You also said something that may sound surprising: the Saudis are fearful and conservative. But seen from afar it is they who are sowing disorder today by abducting the Lebanese Prime Minister, blockading Qatar, intervening militarily in Yemen. However, you say "unlike Israel and Iran". Do you see Netanyahu's policy as adventurist?

Israeli policy has been adventurist for a long time, since the invasion of Lebanon in 1982 in particular. The policy that Netanyahu conducts with his far-right cabinet is a policy teetering on the edge of the precipice, an extremist policy that only adds fuel to the fire. This policy has now found an ally in the person of Trump, as shown by his position on Jerusalem, which is a provocation. On the military side, including in view of the internal situation in Israel, it is unlikely that the country will embark on a major operation in the immediate future. But the frequency of articles in the Israeli press of articles on "the coming war", however, suggests something. There is in Israel a worry about Iran's progress in Syria. Iran is present on the Israeli-Lebanese border through Hezbollah, and it is now more and more so on the border with Syria. This is indeed a problem for Israel and, sooner or later, the Israeli government will have to take the bull by the horns, unless the United States manages to get Iran out of Syria. For now, they rely on Russia: Netanyahu (a great friend of Putin) and Trump are in agreement about that. But whenever there are Iranian manoeuvres that they consider to be potentially dangerous for them, the Israeli military conducts air strikes. And this is necessarily with the agreement of the Russians, since they have installed a powerful anti-aircraft system in Syria, which spares the Israeli air force. For the moment, the Israeli generals are marking their territory, they are drawing red lines. But everything will depend on what will happen with the Iranian presence in Syria in the coming period. In any case all parties are on the alert in this highly explosive region.