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Confrontational politics in the Gulf and the surge of violence.

The Gulf is the security pivot of the Middle East. But the rising of interrelated layers of conflict and jihadi attacks are not a good omen for regional stability.

On June 5, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain and Egypt broke diplomatic relations with Qatar, blamed to finance terrorism: the point are Doha's political, economic and commercial relations with Iran (Riyadh's first source of concern), plus its support for the Muslim Brotherhood (Abu Dhabi's first source of concern). They withdrew diplomats, banned citizens to visit the Al-Thani's emirate, prohibited travels to and from Qatar and Saudi Arabia's land border was closed. This crisis is another, even though harsher chapter of the rift erupted in 2014, when the same Arab Gulf states and Egypt withdrew ambassadors from Doha, restoring full diplomatic relations only in 2015.

On June 7, Daesh claimed its first ever terrorist action in Iran: two coordinated commandos attacked the Parliament and ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's mausoleum, killing seventeen persons. The attack hit two highly-securitized and symbolic places, which define Iran's hybrid and dual regime (semi-presidential republic and theocracy). On June 23, Saudi security forces prevented a terrorist attack against Mecca's mosque: a kamikaze detonated himself leaving eleven persons injured. Three jihadi cells were dismantled in Mecca and Jedda.

Notwithstanding its pivotal role and stability, the Gulf has been all but a regional security-builder so far. After 2003 and especially from 2011 Arab uprisings on, Gulf's powers have "peripheralised", "exported" their contentions, as occurred in the Levant and in Egypt, empowering proxies in third countries to gain influence in a rapidly evolving scenario. Thus, two indirect power conflicts have emerged: the hegemonic regional fight covered by sectarianism (Saudi Arabia vs Iran), and the intra-Sunni rivalry (Saudi Arabia-UAE vs Qatar).

But the geography of the conflict and the targets of the conflict changes: and two new trends have been now emerging.

Regarding the geography of the power, one thing is evident: the struggle, political and/or armed, occurs more and more in the Gulf and not only on external battlefields, as when it started. In the same week, Saudis and Emiratis choose to stigmatize and isolate Qatar for its alternative, not Riyadh-aligned foreign policy, while Daesh attacked directly the Iranian soil.

As a matter of fact, the targets of the conflict also evolve. The States, and not only Gulf's powers supported non-state actors or proxies, become direct objects of the strife. Riyadh and Abu Dhabi sanctioned Qatar (politically and economically), not only the Muslim Brotherhood "client" as before.

At the same time, Daesh attacked directly Teheran, and not the Shia militias engaged abroad as it usually uses to do.

In the Gulf, “hawks” are on the rise, prioritizing confrontational policies vis-à-vis neighbours as well as internal opponents. The new Saudi crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman, has rejected prospects of de-escalation with Iran, challenging also Qatar’s autonomous regional policy. In Iran, Daesh-claimed attacks in Teheran, Saudi’s hostile stance and the anti-Iranian political discourse by the Trump administration are going to boost Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)’s rhetoric and political space, in spite of recent Hassan Rouhani’s re-election. In Bahrein, the crackdown against the Shia majority has escalated since 2016, while Sunni minorities in Iran (ethnically Kurds, Arabs and Baluchi) could be trapped into enhanced securitization and repression after July 7 terrorist attacks.

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