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We had a lively and also quite pessimistic discussion on the Middle East on Friday. Bernardino León Gross is just back from the Middle East. Can you share your views on the situation and add to the discussion we had on Friday?

Bernardino LEON GROSS

My thanks to Thierry de Montbrial, and to the whole IFRI team for inviting me. As was stated, I just came from Bahrain. Yesterday, I was at the Gulf Security Conference. I sensed a climate of concern. Everyone is convinced that there is an earthquake in progress. All the emergency protocols are enabled. I would say that, in general, these are emergency protocols for aftershocks. Our friends in the Gulf, currently, are still waiting for the earthquake, for further earthquakes, but aftershocks. According to their impressions, the worst has already passed, it is already behind them. But there will be more. To organise my thoughts a little bit, I will structure my talk into three main ideas: first, Saudi Arabia; then, the Gulf; and lastly, the international community's relations with the Gulf countries.

1. Saudi Arabia

A few ideas about Saudi Arabia, first. The first idea I found very powerful – perhaps many people will be surprised here – is that I sense a very strong impression from the Gulf countries that Mohammed ben Salmane is not the mind behind Khashoggi's murder. They say: "You, in the West, have a very caricatured impression of the figure, and a very caricatured impression of Saudi Arabia. But if you want to assassinate an enemy, or a dissident, you don't send a plane with 15 people to a country like Turkey, which is not exactly the most important ally Saudi Arabia has in the world". They think – and let me re-emphasise that I am passing on to you what I saw yesterday in Bahrain – that even if the Saudis are not the most sophisticated people in the world, they would not do such a thing. Imagining an operation with 15 people, planes, such an unfurling of force in Turkey, simply is not in their thinking. From the perspective of the Gulf countries, this cannot happen. This first idea – I found it with different players from the Gulf countries – is very compelling.

The second idea which I could sense very strongly is: there is no alternative. That is to say: the alternative to Mohammed ben Salmane 1.0 is Mohammed ben Salmane 2.0. When you ask people in the Gulf the question as to whether someone else could take up power, they do not see it as a matter of one person versus another. Obviously, they do have an experience of the personal way in which he exercises power, but it is above all the energy, all the power he has accumulated in a situation that has no precedent in the country and, probably, in the Gulf. That is not the way politics is done, traditionally, in the Gulf. They find that once things have changed in this way, even if he has made huge mistakes, he is not considered directly responsible for what happened, but they consider him responsible for the climate that allowed a group of murderers to travel to Turkey to do such a thing. This is probably the result of a climate he personally created politically.

Another concern that I found was very strongly present is: the reforms are coming to a halt. In other words, the conservatives in Saudi Arabia are using this situation to impose a conservative agenda against reforms. This is a major concern. In the Gulf – it has nothing directly to do with Mohammed ben Salmane – everyone agrees that returning to radical Wahhabism is destructive for Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries.

Another very powerful idea too is the concern for possible internal shifts in the royal family. Even if we consider that there is no alternative, I also found that some of the people with whom I discussed were concerned about the possible shifts we might be seeing. I believe that these would be aftershocks and not further earthquakes, not major new shifts. But still, situations that could be destabilising for Saudi Arabia and the Gulf.



I would also say that there is a concern towards the allies of the West. The friends of the Gulf say it without any cynicism: "We respect this vision you have in the West. Of course, the people behind this totally heinous assassination must pay and we understand full well the West's concern. But be careful, because there are international players who do not share this concern and who will use this situation, this possible problem between Western countries and Saudi Arabia to try to play these cards again in the Gulf".

2. The Gulf

We turn away from Saudi Arabia now to hear the viewpoint in the Gulf. Here, we can see that Turkey is using this situation to send a very strong signal to the international community: "We do not accept this situation. We are democrats. We believe that journalists and dissidents cannot be treated like that". We see a message from Turkey which, of course, also responds to an internal situation in Turkey, with which we are very familiar. For the Gulf countries, however, this is nothing but an operation by Turkey to curb Saudi Arabia's power or influence, and, of course, to play a more important role in the Gulf. What I sensed yesterday in Bahrain and what I sense with my counterparts in the Gulf is that this will only rally and strengthen the alliance of the Gulf countries. Which means that this is awakening concerns.

There is always an Iranian dimension. They see Iran everywhere. Maybe they're right, maybe they're wrong. But the obsession with Iran remains very strong. The Bahrain meeting was more in the field of security, in the military field. The idea of an Arab NATO, of this military alliance of the Gulf countries with Egypt and Jordan, is stronger than ever. I don't know if they will be able to pull it off: during the two or three years, I didn't see any intensity. Perhaps Turkey, with this pressure, is pushing in that direction.

3. The international community

A few comments now on the international community's point of view. I think that General Mattis' speech was interesting. He said two things. On the question of Saudi Arabia, it is the Congress and the Senate that will play the most important part. That makes sense. Two weeks before the elections, they do not want, I think, to take on the most important role in this crisis. They are leaving this to the Congress and the Senate. They also know that the credibility of any response whatsoever in Congress and the Senate will be stronger than that of the Presidency. This is an important message about what awaits President Trump and which will work out in favour of Saudi Arabia. For the moment, I see he is letting things happen. There were some American senators there. They talked openly about sanctions. I think the climate in the Senate is very negative towards Saudi Arabia.

The other interesting question is that Mattis spoke very intensely about the need to reach a peace agreement, to stop the war in Yemen. He said very clearly: "On the agenda for the coming weeks, there is Yemen. The war in Yemen will be central". He even listed some parameters: respect for borders, autonomy, a political role for the Houthis in Yemen, withdrawal from Iran, concern for the weapons that Iran is allegedly exporting to Yemen, a central role as well for the United Nations. Which, coming from an administration that has not been exactly pro United Nations and pro global governance, is an interesting message.

Thomas GOMART

Thank you very much for that overview, which gives us some sense of what you heard in Bahrain. You did not make any reference to Russia, which has been a very important player since its involvement in Syria. This gives me an opportunity to turn to the Franco-Russian tandem gathered here, with Ambassador Pierre Morel and Artem Malgin. Ambassador, I will give you the floor and then we will listen to Artem. I don't know if Artem will talk to me about Syria. I think you'll say a word about it. If he does not, I think we will broach the topic during the discussion.