

THE SYRIAN CONFLICT: ANALYSIS AND REFLECTIONS

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In September 2012, a delegation of citizens from various countries was constituted to promote 'Peace with Justice in Syria'. The basic idea, conceived by Leo Gabriel, a social anthropologist and journalist from Austria, was soon adopted by peace activists from Greece and Germany. They believed that, as neither of the two sides of the conflict could win this civil war militarily, there had to be a political dialogue, which could lead to some power sharing, as a result of negotiations.

Contacts were established in Syria with the Government and with various groups of the opposition as well as with the resistance in Lebanon, Turkey and elsewhere in Europe. Religious leaders, relief organizations and international bodies were encountered both inside and outside Syria. The 13 members of the delegation, from 9 European and Latin American countries, spent 2 to 8 June 2013 in Damascus and were received by various officials at all levels of the Government and several of the opposition parties tolerated by the Government, as well as by the Grand Mufti, head of the Sunnites in Damascus, and Christian groups. Some considerations about the situation, its causes and possible solutions are given below.

1. A dramatic situation

According to the United Nations office in Damascus, out of a population of 21,377,000, there are more than 8.8 million people in Syria who are in need of assistance and among them, 4.25 million are internally displaced. In April 2013 refugees abroad were estimated at 1.4 million people. But if the same rhythm of departure continues, the figure could reach 3,5 million by the end of 2013, particularly affecting neighboring countries like Lebanon (where more than half of the population is now composed of refugees from Palestine and Syria) Turkey and Jordan. At the same time there are still more than half a million Palestinian refugees in Syria for which the United Nations is asking an emergency aid of 200 million US dollars.

The number of deaths over a period of a little over two years is 93,000, 6,500 being children, according to a UN report dated 13 June 2013. There are 100,000 prisoners in Syrian jails and thousands of hostages held by armed opposition groups. The economy is seriously affected: inflation has gone up, unemployment risen 10.6 per cent to 34.9 per cent (although life is still much cheaper than in Lebanon). The Syrian pound has depreciated by 67 per cent. According to the UN, the economic sanctions have considerably affected the situation of the poorest sections of the population.

2. Proposals of the Peace Delegation

Broad political solutions cannot be found, except through negotiations between the different actors of the conflict and therefore the Geneva2 Conference has to be

encouraged. Because of the horrors of the present situation and the sufferings of so many innocent people, every possible effort has to be made. The delegation, convinced that the continuation of military action is no solution, made some suggestions to help create better conditions for broader political negotiations, in particular: the setting up of local non-violence zones around hospitals, schools, religious or historical places, with the help of the Red Crescent and the United Nations; liberation of certain categories of prisoners (by the Government) and of hostages (by the Opposition), such as old-age persons, minors, women, and finally the organization, in Vienna, of an international conference, giving Syrian 'civil society' an opportunity to articulate its demands, on the basis of a secular State, oriented to democratic processes and without external intervention. Direct contact with the appalling destruction of such a war, with the inhuman conditions of the refugee camps and with so many personal traumas caused by the conflict, make it a moral obligation to testify and to act.

3. Political evolution in Syria

The Baath party, founded in 1947, has been in power since 1963 (in coalition) and, since then, the country has been living under emergency law. Hafez al-Assad was elected President in 1971. The Baath party is mostly constituted by an urban middle class and in the early stages made an alliance with the socialist party. Because of this social composition, several Christians of the same class origin, have been active members and even leaders of the party. The Assad family is Alawite, a minority group that constitute 12 per cent of the population and is situated along the Mediterranean coast. Traditionally, it had been marginalized in Syrian society and it found a certain security in the Baath party. Indeed, the party's objectives were the creation of a secular State (even if the president must be a Muslim), the defense of Syrian unity and sovereignty on the basis of Arab nationalism, and the establishment of a system of social protection, generalized education and health, land reform and a modern administration. Syria has also been an active member of the Non-Aligned Movement.

It proclaimed itself socialist, but without class struggle, and therefore an Arab nationalist alternative to political Islam. Under the Baath Party, the country succeeded in not depending only on extractive activities (oil), but also in developing an industrial sector. The official secular character of the State has facilitated a relatively positive coexistence between the various religious groups: Sunnites (about 70 per cent), Shiites and Christians, even if, de facto, the actual functioning of society and politics largely followed sectarian lines.

However, in implementing such aims, it proved incapable of avoiding various developments, due to the complexity of Syrian society and to the effects of the concentration of political power by one party. Even if the Alawite presence is important in some organs of power, it remains a minority. In the government there are 19 Sunnites, 6 Alawites, 2 Christians, 2 Shiites. The Prime Minister is Sunnite. Since 2006, the Vice-President has been a woman, the sister of a leader of the Muslim Brothers in exile. Sunnites are also the majority in the army and security forces. Some Alawite clans are opposed to the Assad family. Political

repression against opposing groups has been severe (for example, the massacre of several thousand people, many of them members of the Muslim Brotherhood, in Hama in 1982, after the killing of 80 Alawite cadres). Corruption also became a real plague.

During the presidency of Hafez al-Assad, the internal policy became more and more oriented to the right, while the left was eliminated politically. An alliance was forged with the Sunnite bourgeoisie. After the death of Hafez in 2001, his second son Bashar was designated and elected President, his first son having been killed in an automobile accident.

In 2005, 'market socialism' was officially adopted by the Xth Congress of the Baath party and State subsidies for fuel, food and other products were eliminated. The economy opened to foreign capital. Neoliberal measures favoured the development of a local capitalist class, which amassed great wealth. They also reduced social protection, re-concentrated land ownership, privatized public services, especially in education and health, and accentuated social differences. Youth unemployment reached 35 per cent and in general the lower classes were impoverished. At the same time, a severe drought affected agriculture over a four-year period.

This created the conditions for political Islamism to develop a social basis, especially in rural areas, which was encouraged and helped by the conservative Sunnite Arab countries (Saudi Arabia in particular). The forbidden Muslim Brotherhood returned slowly in the underground in Syria, participating at first in non-violent actions against Bashar al-Assad's government, which fought against corruption but did not open up politically. A number of opposition leaders were put in jail or left for exile.

Syria has oil. It is not of the same proportions as in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, Iraq, Kuwait and Iran, but it is more than in Jordan or Turkey. The Syrian national company exploits 60 per cent of it, but production has diminished since the 1990s. Offshore gas reserves are plentiful and there is interest on the part of foreign multinational corporations. In 2008, President Sarkozy of France obtained a research perimeter for Total from President Bashar al-Assad. Syria is also a strategic country for the transport of oil between the oil-producing countries of the region and the Mediterranean. A pipeline was constructed in 1952, but in 2003 it was bombed by the US air force and never rebuilt.

At the international political level, it must be recalled that the Syrian Government only weakly opposed the second US war against Iraq (in fact a war against Saddam Hussein and the Sunnite minority in power) and it received a large number of Iraqi refugees. It also accepted secret CIA prisoners on its territory. When, in 2011, the so-called Arab Spring exploded in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Bahrain, there were similar reactions in Syria, beginning in the cities, with demands for political democracy and for social justice.

4. The rise of the opposition

Today some members of the Baath party recognize that several of the 2011 demands were legitimate, especially in the social field. However the governmental authorities also affirm that, from the very beginning of the protests, there were other agendas present, linked with Islamic political forces (Muslim Brotherhood and Jihadists) and external interests (Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Western countries). For them, the demand for the departure of Bashar al-Assad, who had been re-elected in 2007, as a precondition for negotiations, is unacceptable. Understandably, they do not want to undergo similar experiences as in Iraq or Libya.

The conflict expanded with the intervention of more and more new actors to the point that a multi-faceted civil war developed, in which some internal forces were proxies of external powers. There was the presence of a growing number of foreign Islamic fighters on one hand and, on the other, some forces of the Hezbollah of Lebanon and Shiites from Iraq on the side of the Government.

- External opposition

The opposition groups are numerous, with different socio-cultural characteristics, aims and international connections. Two main currents prevail. One can be considered the heir of the first 2011 reactions, similar to those in other Arab countries. The other is of Wahhabi inspiration (the jihadists).

- 1. The first current is constituted by two armed movements. The *Free Syrian Army*, with mainly secular and democratic demands, started as an armed struggle of a guerilla type, especially in Homs and Aleppo, and it also operates on the ground with small jihadist groups. It was founded on 27 July 2011 by deserters from the Syrian army. At the beginning it was poorly armed (with only small arms bought mainly on the black market). The number of fighters is estimated at some 10.000, although the movement claims many more. It has been helped by the Gulf countries, but also by the United States, the United Kingdom and France, especially by the provision of communication equipment. It has bases and training camps in Turkey and Jordan.**

The other group is the *Farouk Battalion*, mainly Muslim Brotherhood, who claim to have 10,000 fighters. It is financed from the same sources, especially by Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey.

- 2. The second current under radical Salafist influence, is not only fighting against the Syrian Government, but advocates the establishment of an Islamic State. Being Sunnites, they explicitly demand the expulsion of the Christians and the elimination of the Shiite minority. They are openly supported by Qatar which, according to US sources, has already spent several billions of dollars for this purpose, and together with Saudi Arabia it is recruiting volunteers from the whole Arab world.**

The leading armed movement is the *Jablat al Nusra*, considered to be a branch of Al Qaeda and therefore defined as terrorist by the US Government. A second

one, *Ahrar al Sham*, is not linked with Al Qaeda but it operates in alliance with Nusra on the ground. There was also a third one, the *Majis Shura al-Mujahedin*, which originated from Afghanistan but was dissolved after its leader was killed and its members joined the other two movements.

It is, of course, difficult to estimate the number of external recruits of these radical movements. A lawyer from Tunisia, trying to establish the contacts between the young Tunisian Islamists who have been arrested by the Syrian government and their respective families, estimates that from his country alone the number is around 2,000. They are generally young men, sometimes very young, and unemployed. Adding those from other Muslim Sunni countries (including from Lebanon and even from Russia and Europe), the figure of 20,000 fighters is given by different sources. Some other small groups are also in arms, representing local entities or clans, making it difficult to establish contacts.

In Damascus, from 2012 through to mid-2013, car bombs and suicide attacks have been carried out by jihadist groups against military and political objectives: the Ministry of Defense (killing the Minister), the security services, the Presidential Palace, the central offices of the Baath party, the international airport, but also against the university, the TV broadcasting office, Christian neighbourhoods, public squares. They have caused hundreds of victims.

3. There is a coordination body of the external opposition. The *National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (NCR)* was founded in Istanbul in December 2012 following a resolution of a conference held in Doha, called by the USA one month previously, in an effort to bring the various opposition forces together. The NCR is an enlargement of the *Syrian National Council (SNC)*, founded in Istanbul in September 2011 and is notably dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood, even if democratic and secular currents are also present.

Mid 2013, it had 114 members, an addition of 51 to the 63 existing ones, with 12 from secular oriented groups, 14 from revolutionary activists (1 for each province) and 15 from civilian groups backed by the *Free Syrian Army*. The jihadist organizations, *Jablat el Nusra*, *Ahrar al Sham* and the internal opposition are not represented in the *National Coalition*. Its position is clear: the fall of the Assad Government and it is in favour of an international intervention. They fear they are in too weak a position to be able to accept participating in the Geneva2 Conference.

The *National Coalition* was immediately recognized by the *Gulf Cooperation Council* (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the Emirates) and France, followed shortly afterwards by the United States and the United Kingdom. It created a relief organization, the *Assistance Coordination Unit*, which has great difficulty in operating as it has not been able to constitute a government in the liberated zones. In December 2012, also as a result of the Doha conference, was founded the *Friends of Syria* Group to coordinate foreign support. Already, in February 2012, Nicolas Sarkozy had taken the initiative of calling a meeting in Tunisia to

coordinate the external help for the opposition. The organization has now its seat, in Marrakesh (Morocco). Too many internal contradictions inside the NCR have prevented the definition of a real political project, apart from demanding the fall of the Assad regime and being in favour of an intervention as in Libya. Recently, in May 2013, it met for two weeks in Istanbul. An enlarged assembly of 114 delegates was constituted, with better connections with the *Free Syrian Army*, but it did not come up with many new proposals. Its president resigned the same month, being in favour of negotiations with the moderate sectors of the Government and protesting against too much external pressure.¹

Any analysis of these groups has also to take the class dimension into consideration. Urban resistance is more of middle-class origin (this is also true of the tolerated internal political opposition). There is virtually no political expression of the working class, the trade unions and other worker organizations having been weakened, if not eliminated by the neoliberal orientation of the economy and the social and political hegemony of the Baath party. As already mentioned the impoverished people, especially the poor peasant class, constitutes a social basis for the Muslim Brotherhood and also for the radical Islamist groups, even if the leadership comes from religious organizations or young intellectuals. The local capitalist class has favoured neoliberal policies and is still, in its majority, supporting the Baath party.

Various defections have taken place within the governmental group, up to the ministerial level and they are now active outside the country, in Lebanon, Turkey, Egypt, Jordan and Europe. Members of the army have also defected, officers (two dozen generals) and soldiers, and most of them joined the *Free Syrian Army*, where many of them occupy high ranking military positions.

In mid-2013, the country was almost divided into two, as it was during the French mandate (the State of Aleppo and the State of Damascus)². Sixty to seventy percent of the north is in the hands of the Opposition, with regional councils in several towns. The rebels occupy the centers of the cities surrounded by positions of the Syrian army. The south is under the control of the Government. However, pockets of both exist in all regions and fighting is going on in the whole territory.

- Internal political opposition

There is also an internal political opposition. They are political organizations with various tendencies: liberal, social-democrat, communist, which are allowed by the Government. A new party has been created lately by a group of Christian professionals and entrepreneurs, integrating also Sunnite Muslims, for the promotion of a secular State with democracy. Seven of these parties are represented in parliament since the constitutional reform of 2012. Several of their leaders had previously been imprisoned and some even tortured. They hope

¹ The *Syrian Democratic Forum* is a discussion group based in Cairo and opposed to external military intervention

² The French also created the Alawite State, the Druze *Djebel* and the *Sandjak* of Alexandretta, which is now in the Turkish province of Hatay (inhabited mostly by Alawites) and called Iskenderun. It was given to Turkey in exchange for its neutrality during the Second World War

however to be part of the political process, especially if there are elections with international supervision, as proposed by the Government for the presidential elections of 2014.

In June 2011, some of the opposition parties also formed also a coordination body: the *National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change*, with its seat in Damascus. Its platform is against external military intervention and for a secular State as well as a demilitarization of political life. This body coordinates 13 left-wing parties, 3 Kurd parties and some youth organizations. What brings them together is concern for a political solution to the conflict through dialogue with the Government, and the fear of the dominant influence of the Muslim Brotherhood in the external opposition.

4. The reaction of the Syrian Government

When faced with the mostly urban revolt of 2011, the Government of Bashar al-Assad proposed some reforms, in both the economic and political fields. New economic measures were implemented in favour of the vulnerable sectors of the population and anti-corruption action was taken. The emergency law of 1963 was abolished, more space was given to communication media and hundreds of prisoners were released. But it was probably too little and too late.

Very rapidly, because of the extension of the opposition, there was a change of policy. The Government's response was to crush the rebels, especially those helped from outside. The reaction of the political authorities, according to governmental sources, relatively mild at the beginning, became increasingly violent and even brutal. Not only were the police involved, but also the army and militia (the *Shabihas*, civil defense groups, according to the Government, paramilitaries tied to the secret services, say the opposition) and, since the end of 2011, there has been aerial bombing of rebel-controlled zones in various towns.

Real massacres have occurred, as in Hama in 2011 and in Houba in 2012, which was unanimously condemned by the UN Security Council (also by Russia and China). Month after month, thousands of people are being killed and hundreds of thousands displaced. It would of course be wrong to blame only the Government, as the armed opposition is also greatly responsible, especially the jihadist groups with their terrorist actions and repugnant ways of conducting the war, not to mention the foreign powers arming them. Between them all a real civil war is going on.

The use of lethal gas by the Syrian army, as affirmed by the United States, the United Kingdom and France, has not been confirmed by the United Nations, which even attributed the possibility of its use to the rebels (as stated by Carla del Ponte, Head of the UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria). The Government denies any

responsibility. The precedent of the USA and the UK announcing Iraq's possession of arms of massive destruction, a false affirmation made to justify their intended intervention, makes it necessary to exercise great prudence on this subject.

On 7 May 2012, elections were organized in Syria. Participation was 51.26 per cent. Seven opposition parties went to the polls. Out of the 250 seats, 134 went to the Baath party (Arab Socialist Party of Renaissance), 39 to other parties (18 to the All Arab Socialist party, an old dissident movement from the Baath party; 11 to the two Communist parties) and 77 to non-party candidates. The six parties that, with the Baath party, form the *National Progressive Front*, gained 160 seats altogether, a result that gives them a majority.

The response of the Government has been to implement a mixture of political and military actions. There are clearly two trends among the political authorities of the country, one wanting to pursue a military solution, on the basis of the superiority of the Syrian armed forces and justified by growing external intervention, and another which is open to a political solution and the possibility of dialogue. At all events, the Government has decided to participate to the Geneva2 Conference if it is invited and the minister designated to represent Syria has declared that the Government is open to discussion.

Whether we like it or not, we must recognize that the Israeli bombing in Syria, the worsening social consequences of the Western embargo, the atrocities committed by the jihadists, the intervention of the Gulf countries and the announcement of the further supply of arms to rebel groups by the United States and some European countries: all these contribute to reinforcing the political position of Bashar al-Assad.

3. Religious and ethnic dimensions

It is important to realize that the Syrian conflict is not primarily a religious one, even if it has a religious dimension. Sunnites constitute the majority (80 per cent). Among them are not only Arabs, but also Kurds and Turkmens. Shiites are in a minority, some of them Lebanese and others Alawites. Christians, representing between 5 and 10 per cent of the population, are Syriac Christians (the majority), Greek Orthodox, Armenians, Assyrians, Levantines and Latins.

There is no doubt that, for the Salafists of Sunnite origin, the religious aspect is fundamental, but they are a minority and many of their fighters in the present conflict come from outside. The Alawites constitute about 3 million people: theirs is a very ancient syncretic religious group, influenced by both Shiite and Christian beliefs. Their worship of Ali and opposition to the legitimacy of the Caliphate (the Sunnite monarchies) stem from the Shiite tradition, whereas their Trinitarian beliefs come from Christianity. They also reject the *sharia*. For these reasons they have long been marginalized in the Muslim world. However, during the 20th century, they were first recognized as Muslims by the Sunnites and later on as Shiites by this specific group. Most of them are poor. They see the proclamation of a secular State as a guarantee, because they fear the establishment of an Islamic Republic. The fact that President Bashar al-Assad is an Alawite may create some

problems, but it is not central to political life. The Druzes are another syncretic group within Islam.

It is clear that only a secular State can assure religious liberty, as well as a pacific coexistence between the various religious groups. The Sunnite Grand Mufti of Damascus affirms that religion must be separated from the State and that harmony between religious groups is a condition for peace in the country, which must be assured by the neutrality of the State.

Coexistence between various ethnic and religious groups in the country: Kurds, next to the Turkish border, Druses next to Jordan, Alawites on the Mediterranean coast, should be protected by some autonomy within the unity of the Syrian State and this is already the case, legally or in practice in some cases. For example, the Kurds have reached de facto relative autonomy within the Syrian State. They have also their own militia that assures a minimum of order in their territories. As in all these countries, the official political and social institutions, which are inspired by Western State structures, do in fact function according to other non-formal principles that correspond to traditional usages and norms. This is the case of the clans, but also of religious allegiance. The future reconstruction of society and nation in Syria will have also to take this reality into consideration. Of course the full integrity of the country has to be defended against separation trends in the present stage of the conflict.

5. External interests and interventions

- The Middle East

Within the region, *Qatar and Saudi Arabia* are openly supporting the jihadists groups, as in other parts of the world. In the Syrian case, this is also related to their opposition to Iran (a Shiite country). These states have long been allied with the Western countries for the exploitation of petroleum. *Turkey and Jordan*, also allies of the USA, are supporting all sectors of the opposition, allowing the training of fighters in their territory.

Iran, a non-Arab Shiite country, is an important oil producer and is the world's fifth producer of natural gas. It has established links in the region, an alliance with Syria and also privileged contacts with the Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza, to whom it is supplying arms. It is one way of compensating for its isolation in the region, facing Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain and the Emirate States, the US military and naval bases in the Gulf, and Israel. Since the beginning of the conflict, Iran has intensified its support to the Syrian Government.

In *Lebanon*, the Hezbollah, the main military force in the south of the country and the backbone of resistance against Israel, has been an ally of Syria. The movement is of Shiite composition, and has been helped essentially by Iran, through Syria. The Hezbollah has justified its intervention in the Syrian territory since 2013 by the need to defend the Shiite minority (especially that of Lebanese origin) who are being attacked by rebel groups. It also wants also to support the Baath regime which helped them in their struggle against Israeli invasions.

Palestine is of course a central issue in the region. The continuous expansion and racist policy of Israel has been, and still is, a source of the regional conflicts. Palestinian refugees in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria are important factors of economic and sometimes political destabilization. Solidarity and support of the Palestinian resistance has been a continuous issue. Hamas, a long-term ally of the Syrian Government, has closed its representation in Damascus and now supports the rebels. It is probably the price to be paid for receiving help from Qatar.

Israel pretends to be neutral in the Syrian conflict. In actual fact it is not dissatisfied to see an internal conflict within the Arab world. In 1967, during the Six Day War, it occupied the Golan Heights, expelling 150,000 Syrians. In 1973, Syria and Egypt launched an offensive to regain the Sinai and the Golan. Today, Israel still occupies the Golan Heights, which are part of Syrian territory and which now provides water to Israel. It has tried to negotiate some agreement with Syria on the matter, but so far without success. On several occasions Israel has bombed Syrian territory and in 2013, it has twice bombed Damascus, causing a number of victims. The intention was to destroy arms destined for Hezbollah. This is also seen as proof that Israel controls the air space of the region. So far, the reaction of Syria has been only verbal.

Egypt, under the leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood broke diplomatic relations with Syria in 2013, probably because the country, facing a severe economic crisis, needed capital inversions from Qatar and Saudi Arabia. *Tunisia*, also with the Muslim Brotherhood in power, has expressed its disagreement with the Syrian Government. *Morocco*, as we have said, is now the base for the Friends of Syria Group.

As already mentioned, in 1939 *Turkey* received from France the Hatay province, which had been one of the main centers of anti-colonial resistance. It is today the site of several US bases. The present Turkish Government and the AKP party in power are supporting the external Syrian opposition, even the radicals, increasingly using the arguments of Sunnite Islamism.

The *Arab League* took up a position against the Syrian government very early on, with the exception of Libya (under Gaddafi at the time) and Iraq. The *Gulf Cooperation Council* has been formed to help the Opposition: Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, the Emirates, plus Morocco and Jordan. The TV channels of *Al Jazeera* (Qatar) and *Al Arabiya* (Saudi Arabia) adopted the positions of their respective countries. All this reflects the isolation of the Syrian Government in the Arab world.

- The Western countries

The Western powers, the USA, the European Union, and in particular France, which bombed Damascus in 1945 before according independence to Syria in 1946, and

the UK, are all actors in the conflict. The historical role of colonial powers in the region, played by the French and the British after the dismantlement of the Ottoman Empire, is well known (the Sykes-Picot Agreement). They distributed this huge territory between themselves, which is why Syria came under French rule and Iraq was attributed to the British. They joined together to fight against Arabic nationalism. After the Second World War, they attacked Egypt which had nationalized the Suez canal.

The USA came in later with its economic interests. For a long period now, the oil corporations have been in competition for oil and gas extraction in the region. Syria has been strategically important for the control of the Middle East and for the transport of oil and gas to the West. Since the end of the Second World War, Arab (and Persian) nationalism has been considered by the Western countries as a major danger for their hegemony in the region, hence their support for Islamist groups. This increased during the cold war against the Soviet Union, as is evident in the case of Afghanistan and the US backing of Bin Laden, founder of Al Qaeda. However the drastic change in the situation, after the terrorist attacks in the United States and Europe, makes it difficult for Western countries openly to support radical Islamic rebel forces in Syria.

It is also important to bear in mind the role of several US foundations that have, at different periods in recent history, acted inside and outside Syria, like the *National Endowment for Democracy*, founded by Ronald Reagan; *Freedom House* (Zbigniew Brzezinski, Steve Forbes, Samuel Huntington, Paul Wolfowitz); the *Council on Foreign Relations* (Henry Kissinger, Colin Powell); the *Albert Einstein Institute* (Robert Helvey); the *Open Society Institute* (George Soros); *Otpor*, etc. Several of them are directly or indirectly financed by US public funds.

The European Union has decided to lift the embargo on arms for the rebels as from August 2013. Germany was not in agreement, believing that this would only prolong the war and that it was difficult to distinguish in the field between the democratic and the radical Islamist opposition. Laurent Fabius, the French Foreign Minister, declared that if the Syrian governmental army pursued its offensive toward the north, the Geneva2 conference could not take place. The decision of the United States to send arms to the rebels, aims to re-establish the military equilibrium, after the recapture of the strategic town of Qusayr in the center of the country. In May 2013, military maneuvers were organized in Jordan, with 8,000 men from the USA, Europe and Arab countries "for possible future fighting in Syria".

The *Friends of Syria* group met again in June 2013 in Doha and decided to channel military aid through the *Supreme Military Council* of the opposition forces. However, for the actual implementation, this has resulted in a kind of 'division of labour', the Gulf countries helping the radical groups, the other Arab countries, the Muslim Brotherhood, and the West, the democratic opposition.

- Russia and China

Russia and China, also being actors in the region, are opposed, as members of the Security Council with veto power, to any foreign military intervention in Syria. It is true that they had approved the establishment of a no-fly zone in Libya for humanitarian purposes. But the use of this measure by NATO forces to destroy the Libyan regime led them to oppose the same process in Syria. Their interests, however, lie beyond this consideration. Russia, heir of the former USSR, has a friendship treaty with Syria, which was signed in 1979 and implies military cooperation. It has a naval support base in Syria, enabling its presence in the Mediterranean Sea, as a counterweight to the US presence there. For China, oil from Iran is vital and Syria is a key to the stability of the region.

4. Dangers and hopes for the future

There are three major logical processes at work in the Syrian conflict, which are often of course intertwined, and they are also the source of three main dangers. One is the *international* one, involving geostrategic considerations and economic interests. This is the confrontation for the control of the Middle East between the West (USA and EU, through NATO and Israel) on one hand, and Russia and China on the other. Here Syria is a crucial element. The submission of the country could also mean the possibility of controlling Iran, with the collaboration of the Gulf States, thus allowing complete hegemony in the region.

The second one is *regional*. Sunnite Islamist states and Muslim Brotherhood administered states fear the constitution of a 'Shiite' axis composed of Iran, South Iraq and Hezbollah in Lebanon, with the support of Syria, as a secular state, in between. A real religious war could develop, even if this has not been the origin of the conflict.

The third one is the internal *Syrian conflict*, between a secular project (Government or Opposition) and an Islamic one. Within the latter, there are the two currents in competition, the Muslim Brotherhood and the radical Islamists (a minority but with strong external support). This could even result in an armed confrontation between the opposition groups in Syria (Muslim Brotherhood and radical Islamists), linked with the regional dimension.

The only hope for Syria's future lies in a political solution. Some steps have been accomplished. The Geneva1 Conference elaborated the basis for a resolution of the conflict by means other than military, with a transition period. The moderate wing of the Government accepts negotiations, although the radical one (probably dominant at the moment) is in favour of a military solution. At all events, the Syrian Government has agreed to participate in the Geneva2 Conference, if invited.

Part of the Syrian opposition is in favour of a political solution, even though the majority demands a military intervention to suppress the present regime. Divergences exist also between the two conveners of the Conference about the participation of Iran. However the G8 has given its unanimous support to Geneva2.

It is also proposed to organize a conference of 'civil society' for the reconciliation and the reconstruction of the country. Some immediate humanitarian measures are on the agenda. All this may seem very tenuous signs of hope, but they exist.

Everything has to be done to stop the killings and the sufferings of the Syrian peoples and this is really urgent. A political solution is the only one and this position seems to be making some progress.

Interviews

In Lebanon with the Minister of Foreign Affairs, representatives of Hezbollah, Caritas Lebanon, Communist Party of Lebanon, the president of the Arab Council, UN responsible, a former minister of the Syrian government, Lebanese Christian journalist. In Syria, with members of the presidency, the Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Vice-Prime Minister for Economic Affairs, the Information Minister, the President of the Parliament, the Grand Mufti of Syria, representatives of three political parties of the internal opposition (including one of the Communist parties). Some members of the delegation had previously had encounters with members of the National Coalition in Turkey, the Free Syrian Army in Aleppo and representative of the Kurds.

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