You have to wake people up; to revolutionize their way of identifying things. You’ve got to create images they won’t accept; oblige them to express their outrage; force them to understand that they’re living in a pretty queer world, a world that’s not reassuring, a world that’s not what they think it is.” This quote by Pablo Picasso has a strange echo as the world prepares to tolerate the seventh year of the Syrian crisis. There is no need today to invent images that people will not accept: they are shown to us live. And this “un-reassuring” world is exposed through an excess of sordid illustrations.

Six years of war. Can it be seen as anything other than a tragic anniversary? We must certainly look for more than the sinister litany of figures in this “Syrian crisis”, a shameful conflict hidden behind minimising rhetoric – figures of the wounded, the dead, displaced, children out of school, security council veto, established and broken truces… Initially a regional crisis, the constant flux of refugees to bordering countries has turned the Syrian crisis into a crisis of the entire international system and its references to core values of humanism, solidarity and moderation. The blackness of the picture must not be allowed to dissimulate a number of awakenings. Foremost amongst Syrians, who – happily – did not wait for the illusory saviour of the international community to reinvent their own survival. Awakenings amongst actors of solidarity, too, who have had to renew their approaches.

The Vanity of Figures
Going back over six years of war and drawing up a balance sheet would make one’s head spin, since the data seems incredible. So many dead? So many displaced persons, so many refugees? So many futile debates? So many munitions dropped on inhabited areas in the name of a struggle against “terrorists”, who were driven out long ago? So many unbearable photos, abominable witness-accounts, terrifying stories? So much slyness, backtracking, inconsistency and false incredulity from the international community, which mainly manifests itself through individualistic torments? This war is not reasonable, if a conflict can ever be reasonable.

Which war are we accepting?
The political sphere seems to have given up trying to stem the madness. Since 2011, the United Nations Security Council has been falling behind on the consequences of a conflict unhindered by even the most daring resolutions, which were too few and came too late. On the other hand, we have witnessed a (re)birth and refinement of the most abject methods of war, in contradiction with the spirit and terms of International Humanitarian Law: the mass use of explosive weapons in inhabited zones, the use of chemical weapons, techniques of siege and revenge targeting the civilian population, unrighteous conditions imposed on the evacuation of civilians and wounded...

2 The following data can be found in the Humanitarian Needs Overview 2017/Syrian Arab Republic (OCHA, December 2016): 13.5 million people in need of assistance in Syria, of which 4.9 in inaccessible areas or areas under siege; 6.3 million displaced persons; 4.2 million refugees in neighbouring countries; 470 000 dead; nearly 2 million wounded...
people, the voluntary starvation of inhabitants, the booby-trapping of houses, toys and bodies…
The humanitarian imperative seems precisely never to have been an imperative in this war.
Before the two resolutions adopted in 2014 by the Security Council (resolution 2139 of February 22\textsuperscript{nd} and resolution 2165 of July 14\textsuperscript{th}), the question of access to aid across Syrian borders had remained blocked, like the majority of the aid itself. Three years of tergiversation and sovereign and legal quibbling, to establish whether it was legal or not to send help over the borders of a State whose population demonstrated the most pressing need. Between these two resolutions, 30-odd international legal practitioners, amongst the most reputed in the world, published their opinion in the press, confirming that there exists no legal barrier regarding the famous “cross-border”\textsuperscript{3}. This position had been defended by a number of NGOs for months or even years, the most daring of which had already decided to proceed despite the climate of suspicion of illegality which dominated almost unanimously at the time. Syrian organisations, understandably, were at a loss to understand these squabbles. Later, during the truce agreed in mid-September 2016, no rescue truck was able to penetrate the areas under siege which were listed as priorities, even though the ceasefire agreement specifically provided for it.

Kaleidoscope: what the Syrian crisis says about the world
Humanitarian law, and law in general, is supposed to be based on the “constant and repeated” practice of states, in order to establish and ensure legal custom. Since the Second World War, the international community has based itself on a corpus established by the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols, the 1951 Convention on Refugees, and common law. However, the major decisions regarding the Syrian conflict during five years, until the Turkey/EU agreement signed in 2016, seem to have been guided by issues of national sovereignty and unilateralism. The retreat of multilateralism manifested itself in the dysfunctioning of the UN system itself\textsuperscript{4}, confronted with the incoherencies of a system which, in a situation of internal conflict, must accommodate “legitimate” authorities which are nevertheless themselves parties to the conflict.

The renewal of multilateralism therefore proved short-lived. We recall that on August 1\textsuperscript{st} 1990, Iraq invaded Kuwait. In response to the ambitions of the Iraqi head of state, 28 countries, led by the United States, launched an attack in January 1991\textsuperscript{5}. This new episode was the opportunity, for Western countries, to declare the advent of a “new world order”, to be founded on the promotion of democracy, international law and humanitarian intervention. In fact, the formula was quickly abandoned, but it was on the basis of this illusion that the UN found renewed dynamism. The Security Council placed humanitarian issues at the centre of peacekeeping operations at the beginning of the 1990s and the international organisation launched a cycle of major conferences with the ambition of developing a global plan of action to ensure the wellbeing of populations and protect human rights: the New York Conference on children’s rights (1990), the Earth Summit in Rio (1992), the Cairo Conference on Population and Development (1994), the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen (1995) and the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in the same year, the World Food Summit in

\textsuperscript{3} “There is no legal barrier to UN cross-border operations in Syria”, The Guardian, 28 April 2014, www.theguardian.com/world/2014/apr/28/no-legal-barrier-un-cross-border-syria See also the legal opinion developed in November 2013 by Dr Michael Bothe, Access for relief operations in Syria, Frankfurt University.


\textsuperscript{5} On this episode, see for example Charles Zorgbibe, « La guerre du Golfe : constats et perspectives », Revue politique et parlementaire, n° 93, February 1991, p. 11-22.
Rome (1996) At the same time, the movement towards disarmament and arms control begun in the 1960s picked up momentum again. The five Russian vetoes between 2011 and October 2016 showed the extent of the retreat of the “new international humanitarian order”. Gradually, after 9/11, the stakes of the struggle against terrorism and for security largely replaced the ambition of protecting populations. To the extent that in early October 2016, the United Nations themselves, represented by Zeid Raad Al-Hussein, the High-Commissioner for Human Rights, called for a limit on the use of vetoes in the event of suspicion of war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Solidarity otherwise
The Syrian crisis nevertheless also marks a redefinition of the spaces of solidarity, in which we can try to keep hope. Though tempted to close their borders, the neighbouring countries nonetheless massively welcomed the fleeing populations, and continue to do so whilst further-removed “asylum” countries, and Europe foremost, barricade themselves. In a country seemingly definitively sucked dry, local resources, temerity and tenacity continue to inspire respect. Aid organisations which sprang up in 2011 have become partners and essential actors of aid in the most inaccessible areas. There are, of course, ridiculous survival strategies which are unfavourable to the weakest and most vulnerable. There are obstacles, biases, a corrupt and predatory economic system based on the difficulties created by war, and discrimination. Yet we have also witnessed a capacity on behalf of the population to redefine certain social roles to face up to adversity, particularly by offering a more active role to women in a movement which perpetuates neighbourhood solidarity. Whilst recognising the failure of humanitarian principles in Syria (and elsewhere) in the implementation of international and systemic humanitarian response, we should also be able to see that the energy with which human beings support each other and survive demonstrates a kind of permanency of the principle of humanity. Syrians did not wait for Western humanitarian aid to react, happily. With the help of a certain number of daring international organisations, and Diaspora organisations, they have reinvented solidarity, and shown that humanitarian principles take on life through action rather than rhetoric which is contradicted by action. These humanitarian principles, which were nevertheless called “Western”, too Western… Perhaps a sign that the “culturalist” debate remains futile.

Of course, consciences must not be allowed to weaken. We recall a sage who said, some years ago: “Time for outrage!” We must preserve this capacity for exasperation, because this war, and others along with it, is disgraceful. The tacit acceptance that solidarity is a burden and that the main share should fall on those worst affected, implied by the attitude of certain big sponsors whose funds are being massively redirected towards aid that aims above all to contain, is equally disgraceful. Containing the flow of refugees, the flow of poverty, of despair. Confining,
Excluding. Rejecting. This is far removed from the humanitarian imperative. Far removed from the “ecosystem” announced at the World Humanitarian Summit in the spring of 2016.\(^{11}\)

*Translated from the French by Juliet Powys*

---