

HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES

Syria: will diplomacy put an end to the massacre?

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Sami Aoun engages here in a difficult exercise of geopolitical forecasting. First of all because in Syria, even more than in other contexts, facts speed up and multiple, sometimes secret, alliances, potentially volatile, can escape all expectations. Also because this conflict, loaded with a heavy emotional connotation, has some times displaced itself within the circle of its observers and researchers, ending up by provoking head on confrontations. But the exercise is compulsory if one wishes to dispose of elements on which to build a future reconstruction of the country and the region.

It is obviously a challenge to predict with any precision the direction which geopolitics in the Middle East will take, particularly given the dynamics of the stakes in Syria and current trends. The multi-centred conflict is simultaneously a proxy war, an anti-regime rebellion with economic and ethno-cultural dimensions (Kurds *vs* Arabs), and a civil war. It remains strongly defined by communitarian and sectarian fighting between, on the one hand, the Arab Sunni circles, and on the other, Alawite minorities and others. Added to this are tensions between urban and rural components and especially military, or paramilitary circles, led by both Syrian and non-Syrian non-State actors.

Transformation in the Middle East

To understand the direction of the strategic and geopolitical changes in Syria, as well as in the larger framework of the Middle East, it is important to understand that the regional order of the Middle East is moving further and further away from the order that was built under the name of *pax americana* as a result of the Camp David agreements of 1978-1979, following the expulsion of Soviet experts and military from Egypt.

The eclipse of this “American peace” took a new turn in the context of the options put forward by the Obama Administration, for whom the Middle East represented an area which was losing its strategic and geopolitical importance, faced with the rise of Asia. Hence the famous slogan of the United States – the “Pivot towards the East” – which explains Barack Obama’s choice to manage the Syrian question by “leading from behind” (*pull back*), an attitude which was seen as opting-out in favour of Moscow’s subcontracting of the situation...

This shift was accentuated by the disillusion and disappointment regarding the rapid demise of the euphoria surrounding the Arab Spring, which had been a vector for hopes of liberalisation and the advent of liberalism. An anti-modern, anti-democratic rhetoric, tinged with ultraconservative Islamic jargon, began to grow in importance, exacerbating the ongoing collapse of central states, authoritarian powers and local police, which led to unprecedented anarchy and barbarity in the societies concerned, particularly Libya, Yemen and Syria. In a number of countries, the crisis continues to strongly disrupt state order (multiple crises of displaced persons and refugees, with heavy consequences on national demographic balances), and to greatly weaken

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citizen and socio-cultural links. The crisis also exacerbated ethnic, sectarian and communitarian loyalties, liable to feed feelings of hatred and exclusion towards the centralised state, which struggles to ensure the loyalty of its citizens.

The return of Russia to the Great Game in the Middle East

The Syrian situation underwent a major turnaround following the forceful intervention of Russia in September 2015, led by Vladimir Putin, who declared his will to be recognised as an essential partner on the Middle Eastern stage. This new situation is one of the main stakes facing Donald Trump in his future policy choices. To what extent can his new administration proceed with a “reset” of American diplomacy in the Middle East? It seems that Russia’s return may mean a return – though limited – to Russian-American bipolarity in the Near East in the near future, which could imply forms of “subcontracting” and the dividing up by zones of influence, as well as limits assigned to the incursions of rival regional powers in Syrian territory.

Beyond the tragedy and wilful blindness of the world powers –including Muslim and Arab ones – regarding the ultra-violent and deadly total recapture of the city of Aleppo, it must be noted that this victory by regime loyalists and Shiite militiamen brought to an end the war in cities and urban centres in Syria. As the headquarters of the central State, the capital Damascus is increasingly protected from external assaults, a fact which consolidates the influence of the regime over what is commonly known as “useful Syria”. Whilst not a decisive battle, the fall of East Aleppo represented a crushing defeat for the Syrian rebellion, and holds high symbolic significance for all the parties involved. It may be the augur of a lasting pause, if not a truce to come, which all sides consider to be highly desirable. The difficult evacuation of the civilian population may be a signal of demographic recomposition which could precede a sharing or remodeling of the territory and of links between social components on the basis of faith or ethnicity. The Syrian population, in all regions, and across all social classes, needs to alleviate the pressures on its economy and end this trying ordeal.

The proxy war in Syria that various powers waged – and continue to wage – is testimony, for the moment, to the loss of impetus of all the regional and international actors involved. Russia is waiting patiently for a new agreement with Washington to avoid ground troop deployment in Syria, and a costly, high-risk stalemate. In the meantime, it will no doubt continue to apply its steam roller military approach to the end – as experienced in Grozny in Chechnya – to crush any opposition to the regime before subsequently inviting to political negotiations the components of the rebellion willing to resume an internal dialogue. At the regional level, Putin is looking for Sunni legitimisation, which he has already obtained from Algeria, Egypt and especially Turkey.

It’s also the ideal time for Russia to collect dividends: the relaxing or end to the sanctions imposed by the West in the context of the Ukrainian conflict, the settlement of the issue of the annexation of Crimea – in its favour – as well as the recognition of its return in the Near East as a key player in the face of the American retreat.

The Turkish eclipse

Turkey, for its part, has been bitterly experiencing the end, if not the eclipse, of its role as a reference model for the Arab Spring, and the eclipse, if not the end, of its neo-Ottoman dream. It is building its future on the return of a Turkish policy based on Islamic and less secular rhetoric and approaches.

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Erdogan's Turkey made an about-turn to Russia when President Obama was drawing a number of red lines against it: no exclusive zones on Syrian territory, no militarisation of the rebellion, no anti-aircraft missiles for factions of the opposition liable to change the power structure with Bashar el-Assad's regime, and no green light for the overthrowing of the latter by force. This forced Erdogan to make a pact with Vladimir Putin in order to finalise a domination of Syria, in the context of a new partnership with Iran, which is being drawn up calmly, though haltingly and with hesitation.

Nonetheless, Turkey is suffering from important security breaches, which came to light with the coup d'état in July 2016 and the purges that followed. Erdogan's authoritarianism has stated enemies: the Kurds, who remain an existential enemy – weakened, indeed, by the turn of events – the radical Islamists, who feel betrayed by the Turkish president, and a globally anti-authoritarian resistance, from both the secular left and from the brotherhood Hizmet ("The Service") led by the preacher Fethullah Gülen.

Incidentally, if Turkey is drawing closer to Russia, it is not only with a view to having a means of pressuring European democracies, who are very critical of its human rights and freedoms violations, but also, and perhaps foremost, in order to moderate Western support of the Kurds in Turkey.

Iranian manoeuvres

From this point on, we must monitor the stability of this triangle of alliances between Moscow, Ankara and Tehran in the face of the new Trump Administration. In the name of its extreme geopolitical importance, Turkish diplomacy may receive substantial support from the US, enabling it to get back some of its room for manoeuvre which had been lost under the Obama Administration.

Iran, for its part, which is highly influential in Syria, fears Donald Trump's aggressivity towards them and his expressed desire to review, if not do away with, the nuclear agreement concluded with the support of the Obama administration. Iranians are nevertheless expecting Realpolitik to catch up with Trump and for him to end up recognising the agreement, signed by Washington and five other powers, as well as the strength of their interests in the immediate vicinity.

Iran, through its determined and sustained battle to ensure regional domination, has effectively imposed itself by force in the destiny of four Arab capitals (Baghdad, Damascus, Sanaa and Beirut), by using its policy of empowerment of local Shi'ite communities, implying anti-American and anti-Israeli rhetoric.

The Iranian manoeuvre in Syria surpassed the others up until Russia's entry by force. The "Shi'ite Crescent" was then being drawn up, with the right to claim victory on two major points: the survival of the Assad regime and the battles won in the field by pro-Iranian Shi'ite militias. So the Iranians will not leave Syria without an agreement regarding the protection of the regime and of the Shi'ite and Alawite communities. Iran has also consolidated a strong influence in Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen. Bahrain, as a Sunni monarchy with a strong Shi'ite component, is also holding its breath in the face of pressure from Iran. From this perspective, Turkish-Iranian relations remain thanks to the prevalence of common interests, fed by Turkish disapproval of the sanctions imposed on Iran by Washington, like those imposed on Turkey (such as Erdogan's own son being accused of money laundering in Italy).

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In its traditional struggle, Turkey fears the progressive autonomy of Syrian Kurds, which may prove contagious amongst the ranks of its “own” Kurdish population, and could represent a platform for attacks against its interests. It has therefore been redirecting its approach, from an “anti-Assad” position to one of a mediator between the Russians and the different opposition factions.

The Kurds, for their part, have succeeded in dominating a vast territory of Syrian zones under their control, in carving out a role for themselves and in attracting substantial American support, as well as support from Russia and Iran. They have fulfilled their role as a “buffer zone” which has been choosing its battles, sometimes in collusion with the regime in place, and in facing up to both the Free Syrian Army and to the Islamic State. The Kurds have incidentally hinted at agreements underway and backed down on the project of making Rojava, the Syrian Kurdistan in the north of the country, an independent Kurdish state. In doing so, they have laid down the groundwork for their project of a “federal region”, equipped with a “social contract” which attenuates the ethical dimension of their representation, by basing themselves on the equality of languages (Assyrian, Arabic and Kurdish), within a Constitution intended to determine the new “autonomous region”. In any event, generally speaking, the demographic balance is not in favour of minorities, particularly those in search of areas where they could represent an ethnocultural majority. The Kurds therefore continue to call for a federal regime, and a democracy which recognises their ethnic particularism.

A new regional equation

The Moscow-sponsored agreement with Turkey and Iran is further proof of the collapse of the Arab world. Other regional powers have a certain influence in Syria, to differing degrees. Firstly, Saudi Arabia, disappointed by the Obama administration, has taken cautious steps towards the Russian president and his policies in Syria. The Saudis are expecting Russia to impose limits on Iran’s designs on its neighbours, particularly with regard to its plans to reinforce doctrinal and political Shiism in the Near East by means of the demographic “Shiiteisation” of Syria and more widely, in Syrian-Iraqi territory. For the Saudis, Russia remains less threatening than Iran. Certainly, the Russians have ambitions for power, but the Iranians have pretensions of doctrinal propaganda which do not agree well with Sunni rigorists. They are therefore watching the triangular rapprochement between Russia, Iran and Turkey with interest, three countries which are imposing themselves as the masters of Syria’s destiny. The keenest hope of the Saudis remains that Russia and Turkey will attempt to counter the Iranian influence, with its Iraqi and Lebanese Shiite militias, and to weaken if not chase them out of Syrian territory. The Saudis are also counting on the fact that Trump and Putin will join forces to weaken Iran in Syria, and that the new American president will seek to contain Iran’s expansion amongst neighbouring Arab countries and will stop threatening anti-Iranian Sunnis.

Egypt, for its part, which is discreetly engaged in support of the Assad regime, is trying to take on a pan-Arabic role with a view to countering any possible Islamist success in Syria and Libya. The fact remains that its involvement is a source of irritation for the Gulf countries of Islamic ideology (Salafists and the Muslim Brotherhood), such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar. With regards to Turkey, field marshal Abdel Fattah al-Sissi’s Egypt is suspicious of Erdogan’s ambitions, caliphal aspirations and support of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Finally, in spite of the military aid received from the Obama Administration, the Israeli government was profoundly irritated by the nuclear agreement with Iran and especially by the American abstention on vetoing the adoption of the anti-colonisation resolution n°2334. On the

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other hand, Israel is not worried about the Russians' arrival in Syria, since Putin has managed to calm both Israeli and Hezbollah aggression by imposing a division of zones of influence so that Israel keeps the right of attack in Syrian territory without there being retaliation by Hezbollah.

Perspectives for Syrian geopolitics

Bashar el-Assad's Syrian regime unquestionably feels that it has come a long way and ensured its survival. It has resumed its upward path, though the price to pay has been considerable. It has the unconditional support of Iran and its militias, namely Hezbollah, the Russian ambitions of return on the Mediterranean coast, and the American non-will to overthrow it. The Israelis are therefore happy to stay out of the conflict and accept the survival of the Assad regime as an anti-Islamist guarantee at its borders.

If President Trump, with Putin's approval, allowed for the creation of exclusion zones, it would be an indication that the division of Syria was underway. The current divisions would be reinforced and would gravitate from the psychosocial to the territorial level, which would provoke even more suffering. On the other hand, the demographic situation in what is known as "useful Syria" will remain in the favour of the Sunni.

Meanwhile, Turkey will ensure the building of hermetic borders against the Kurds throughout the Al-Bab region, over some 900 km², according to the objectives of the Operation Euphrates Shield: a Russian guarantee in exchange for the fall of East Aleppo. The anger amongst Sunnis is clear, but Turkey has attempted to weaken and marginalise the opposition's civil representatives, and to cooperate with the military. A similar geopolitical situation is unfolding in the south of Syria and towards the border-region with Jordan, which overlooks Israel, with the ongoing establishment of a protected zone free from either an Islamic or a pro-regime presence.

In the war against terror, the Russian-American alliance is gaining in efficiency. The trend is also pointing towards a weakening of radical Islamic groups like Daesh and an-Nusra. Whilst the struggle remains sporadic, it must be noted that this war against terror, and especially against Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, has been strongly instrumentalised to stifle the popular mobilisation of the Arab Spring, even at the price of derailing important political reforms.

The future of Hezbollah in Syria will depend on developments in the Iranian strategy, which is aimed at ensuring a strong presence on the Mediterranean, as well as in useful Syria: a zone of influence could be organised between the Shi'ite community in Lebanon in the direction of the Alawite mountain, before spreading to the Iraqi Shi'ite majority. Yet, supported by Turkey, Russia could press for a retreat of Shi'ite militias in exchange for Turkish pressure on Sunni factions, to make the latter accept a cease-fire and the continuation of Assad's mandate.

The Iranians are also watching Trump's verbal rapprochement with Putin with concern. Russian diplomacy has been very active since the Moscow Declaration of December 20th 2016, which included a schedule for a political solution, implying the end of military operations by Iran, and Turkish acceptance of the Assad regime until 2021. The Moscow Declaration was followed by the Ankara Agreement, on December 29th 2016, which called for negotiations between the regime and its opponents. Finally, the resolution 2336 of the Security Council (December 31st 2016) approved the ceasefire and rekindled the Geneva negotiations (June 1st 2012), which now include resolution 2254.

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Six years in, the war in Syria reveals the fragility of modernity's conquests, of modernisation, and the stumbling blocks of liberal democracy. The *al-fitna al-kubrâ*, or The Great Upheaval, between Sunnis and Shiites has dissipated the meagre achievements of republican regimes. Discord within the opposition forces and their militarisation have provoked the retreat of moderate factions, and a loss of credibility in the face of the rise of Islamic terrorist groups, at least in Western and United Nations rhetoric.

It will be crucial to see whether the Turkish-Iranian rapprochement will lead to a new division by zones of influence, and to assess whether the solidity of the agreement between the Russians, the Iranians and the Turks will downgrade the Syrian conflict from high to low intensity. The arrival of Trump at the White House could very well be a game-changer for the Syrian and Middle-Eastern situation.

Translated from the French by Juliet Powys

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