



Syria. Can We Remain Indifferent?



1. Syria's civil war has occurred in two phases. The first phase, roughly from January 2011 until March 2012, was largely an internal affair. When the Arab Spring erupted in Tunisia and Egypt in January 2011, protests erupted in Syria as well. In addition to the usual grievances under a brutal regime, Syrians were reeling from a massive drought and soaring food prices. The protests became a military rebellion when parts of the Syrian army broke with the regime (in the hands of the Army and the Services) and established the Free Syrian Army. Neighbouring Turkey was probably the first outside country to support the rebellion on the ground, giving sanctuary to rebel forces along its border with Syria. Although the violence was escalating, the death toll was still in the thousands, not tens of thousands.

2. The second phase began on 1 April 2012 when a group of 83 countries, led by the United States, recognized the Syrian National Council (SNC) and deemed it the main opposition interlocutor with the international community. A few days prior, Assad had accepted former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan's peace plan calling for a ceasefire followed by a negotiated political transition, but he did not implement the ceasefire. Then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared: "We think Assad must go".[1] In practice, also by setting a short timeline, this declaration put the US in effective opposition to the United Nations. Russia and China, aside from seeking to defend their own interests in the region, rejected the idea of US-led regime change in Syria. Russia argued that America's insistence on Assad's immediate departure was an impediment to peace. In this, perhaps Russia was right. On the one hand, Russia sought a pragmatic approach that would protect its commercial interests in Syria and its naval base at the port of Tartus, while bringing an end to the bloodletting. Whereas Russia had been supplying arms to the Syrian

government, in September 2013 it became clear that the US had begun to provide lethal arms to the opposition Supreme Military Council.

3. Besides the international forces involved, the dispute became a civil war which might cause not only a regional war but, according to certain analysts, even the beginning of the third world war. The conflict is between a regime that is primarily Alawite, but also includes some Druze, Sunnis, Shi'a and Christians, versus an opposition that is largely Sunni, but also includes some Alawites, Druze and Christians. Shi'i Iran, which fears the expansionism of Sunni Wahhabism (a form of extremist Sunni Islam) throughout the region, Russia – that wants to maintain its presence in Tartus – and the Hezbollah in Lebanon support Bashar Hafiz al-Assad. Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States fear the creation of a “Shi'i crescent” (Syria-Iran, Hezbollah) and finance Jihadism (al-Qaeda) against the regime.

4. With the use of chemical weapons, probably by the Syrian government (and possibly by both sides), the US again ratcheted up the stakes. Bypassing the UN, the US declared its intention to intervene directly by bombing Syria to deter the future use of chemical weapons.

5. This is why in September Pope Francis used all possible channels to keep the war from escalating. “It is regrettable that, from the very beginning of the conflict in Syria – he affirmed in his letter to Vladimir Putin, the rotating president of the G20 – one-sided interests have prevailed and in fact hindered the search for a solution that would have avoided the senseless massacre now unfolding”. “The leaders of the G20” – urged Francis – cannot remain indifferent to the dramatic situation of the beloved Syrian people which has lasted far too long, and even risks bringing greater suffering to a region bitterly tested by strife and needful of peace. To the leaders present, to each and every one, I make a heartfelt appeal for them to help find ways to overcome the conflicting positions and to lay aside the futile pursuit of a military solution”, because “all governments have the moral duty to do everything possible to ensure humanitarian assistance to those suffering because of the conflict, both within and beyond the country's borders”. Meanwhile, Pope Francis announced and carried out an important day of fasting (a practice shared by the three monotheistic religions), which was also an indirect sign towards all the religious Iranians and Syrians involved in the conflict, inviting them to concentrate on prayer and peace (the real consequence of prayer), and suggesting that everyone, governments included, should reflect on the profound meaning of peace. Pope Francis wants to help make us aware that if the various religions aren't at peace with one another, there will be no peace in the Middle East. At the same time, Pope Francis mobilized his nuncios all over the world while his “foreign minister”, Msgr Mamberti, convened the Ambassadors to the Holy See not only to encourage a diplomatic solution, but also to severely condemn chemical weapons and question any party responsible for their use.

6. Putin managed to convince Obama not to go ahead with the bombing after a Framework Agreement was hammered out in which Syria committed to eliminating its chemical weapons

program. The decision of surrendering all chemical weapons was taken and the international conference called Geneva-II was confirmed. This action was particularly appreciated in the UK, where the Parliament had turned its back on the government, refusing to let Britain take part in the military strike. In these circumstances, the UN accused Assad for the first time: “He authorized war crimes against humanity”. “We will go to Geneva with a mission of hope”, said the spokesperson for UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon. The presence of Russia and the US, two key states in the negotiations, is confirmed. The list of invitees was determined on Dec. 20 at a trilateral meeting held among the Russian Federation, the United States and the United Nations. U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov will meet on Jan. 13 to reach an agreement on Iran's participation. The Syrian opposition has not yet named members of its delegation.

7. In Geneva Assad's regime and the opposition rebels will negotiate the formation of a transitional government responsible for the military sector and for security. The possibility of holding elections and the drafting of a new constitution will also be discussed. It has also become apparent in the last few weeks that the rebel groups themselves are trying to marginalize those extremist factions, such as ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), that intend to jeopardize the peace process. The resumption of the UN peace process, this time with the US and Russia on the same side to prevent violence, might succeed in keeping al-Qaeda at bay (a shared interest) and finding a pragmatic long-term solution for Syria's complex internal divisions. And the search might resume for a modus vivendi of the USA and Iran – where a new President suggests a change of course in foreign policy – and among the various religions.

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[1] Hillary Rodham Clinton, Secretary of State, interview With Clarissa Ward of CBS News, Istanbul Congress Center, Istanbul, Turkey, April 1, 2012
<http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2012/04/187304.htm>