

A Time of Chaos

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The bombing of Syrian sites where chemical weapons are allegedly being manufactured or stocked, allegedly to be used by the Bashar al-Assad government against the rebels, has left citizens all over the world in a state of confusion, filled with a mixture of perplexity and skepticism. In spite of the bombing by the Western media (a particularly apt metaphor in this case), in their attempt to persuade public opinion of the latest atrocities committed by al-Assad's regime; in spite of the near unanimous opinion of political commentators that this was nothing but a humanitarian response, a fair punishment, and one more proof of the vitality of the "Western alliance"; in spite of all this, citizens in the West (and much more so in the rest of the world), whenever asked, expressed their doubts about this media narrative and for the most part spoke against the attacks. Why is that?

The consequences

Because citizens who possess at least a modicum of information have a better memory than commentators, and because, although they lack expertise on the causes of such acts of war, they have an expert knowledge of their consequences, which is something that said commentators always fail to notice. They remember that in 2003 the justification for the invasion of Iraq was the existence of weapons of mass destruction that turned out not to exist. They remember that the photos that were exhibited at the time had been tampered with so as to lend credibility to the big lie. They remember that then, as now, the attack occurred on the eve of the arrival of an independent commission of experts sent to investigate the existence of such weapons.

They remember that the lie left behind a million dead and a destroyed country, with fat reconstruction contracts being handed over to US companies (such as Halliburton) and oil exploration contracts given to Western oil companies. They remember that in 2011 the same coalition destroyed Libya, turning it into a den of terrorists and traffickers in refugees and emigrants, and yielding the same type of fat contracts. They remember that so far the war in Syria has caused 500,000 dead, 5 million refugees, and 6 million displaced within Syrian borders. Above all, thanks perhaps to that mysterious cunning of reason whereof Hegel spoke, they remember what the media does not tell them. They remember that two genocides are underway in the region.

They are being perpetrated by state terrorism but they are almost never mentioned because the aggressor states are "our" allies: one is the Yemeni genocide at the hands of Saudi Arabia, the other is Israel's genocide of the Palestinian people.

These are the more visible consequences. But there are other victims, of which the ordinary citizen is hardly aware, her suspicions sometimes not more than a vague discomfort. I will focus on three of those victims. The first is international law, which has once again been

violated, given that actions of war are legitimate only in case of self-defense or under a UN Security Council mandate. None of these conditions has been met. Bilateral and multilateral treaties are being thrown out one after another, as trade wars become increasingly fierce. Are we in the process of entering a new Cold War, with fewer rules and more innocent deaths? Are we heading toward a third world war? Where is the UN, to prevent it through diplomacy? What else can countries like Russia, China or Iran be expected to do but move further away from Western countries and their fake multilateralism, and come up with their own alternatives for cooperation? The second victim is human rights. Here the West reached a paroxysm of hypocrisy: the military destruction of entire countries and the killing of innocent populations has become the sole means of promoting human rights. It somehow seems that there is no other means of fostering human rights except by violating them, and Western-style democracy does not know how to flourish except among ruins. The third victim is the “war on terror”. No person of good will can accept the death of innocent victims in the name of some political or ideological goal, much less when perpetrated by the countries – the United States and its allies – that over the last twenty years have given full priority to the war on terrorism. So how can one comprehend the current financing and arming, by the Western powers, of groups of Syrian rebels that are known to be terrorist organizations and that, like Bashar al-Assad, have also used chemical weapons against innocent populations in the past? I allude in particular to the al-Nusra front, the extremist Salafist group also known as the Al Qaeda of Syria, which seeks to establish an Islamic state. In fact, the most frequent accusations, by US institutions, with regard to the financing of extremist and terrorist groups point the finger precisely at that most loyal of US allies, Saudi Arabia. What are the hidden goals of a war on terror that supports terrorists with money and arms?

The causes

Image on the right: Destroyed Syrian tanks



Given that the causes elude all the news noise, it is more difficult for ordinary citizens to identify them. Convention has it that one can distinguish between proximate and structural causes. Among the proximate causes, the dispute over the natural gas pipeline is the one most frequently mentioned. The large natural gas reserves in the Qatar and Iran region can take two alternative routes to reach the wealthy, voracious consumer called Europe: the Qatar pipeline, going through Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria and Turkey, and the Iranian pipeline, across Iran, Iraq and Syria. For geopolitical reasons, the US favors the former route while Russia prefers the latter. Bashar al-Assad was also in favor of the latter, as it benefitted Shiite governments only. From that moment on, the West viewed him as a target to be taken down. Major Rob Taylor, a professor at the US Army's Command and General

Staff College, wrote in the Armed Forces Journal of March 21, 2014:

“Viewed through a geopolitical and economic lens, the conflict in Syria is not a civil war, but the result of larger international players positioning themselves on the geopolitical chessboard in preparation for the opening of the pipeline in 2016”.

The structural causes are perhaps more convincing. It has been my contention that we are at a transitional moment between capitalism’s globalizations. The first globalization took place from 1860 to 1914 and was dominated by England. The second took place from 1944 to 1971 and was dominated by the US. The third began in 1989 and is now coming to an end. It was dominated by the US, but with the growing multilateral participation of Europe and China. In between globalizations, rivalry between would-be dominant countries tends to increase and can give rise to wars between them or their respective allies. At this point in time, the rivalry is between the US, an empire in decline, and China, a rising empire. In a study titled “Global Trends, 2030”, the US National Intelligence Council – an institution that could hardly be viewed as biased – states that in the year 2030 “Asia is going to be the center of world economy just as it was until 1500,” and China could become the world’s first economy.

The rivalry escalates but cannot lead to head-on confrontation because China already has a major influence in the domestic economy of the US and is a major creditor of its public debt. Trade wars are critical and they spread to the high-tech areas, because whoever gets to dominate those areas (namely automation or robotics) will be poised to dominate the next globalization. The US will only enter treaties that are likely to isolate China. Since China is already too strong as it is, it has to be confronted through its allies. The most prominent among them is Russia, and recent agreements between the two countries provide for non-dollar denominated transactions, especially oil-related, which poses a fatal threat to the international reserve currency. Russia couldn’t possibly be permitted to boast about a victory in Syria, a victory, let it be said, against terrorist extremists, and one that Russia has been on the verge of obtaining, thanks supposedly to President Obama’s lack of direction when he left Syria out of his list of priorities. It was therefore necessary to find a pretext for returning to Syria to resume the war for a few more years, as is the case with Iraq and Afghanistan. North Korea is also an ally and must be treated with hostility so as to embarrass China. Finally, there is the fact that China, like all rising empires, is pursuing (fake) multilateralisms and therefore is responding to the trade war by fostering open trade.



BRICS

But it has also pursued limited multilateral agreements aimed at creating alternatives to US economic and financial dominance. The most salient of these agreements was the BRICS, formed by Russia, India, South Africa and Brazil, besides China. The BRICS even created an alternative world bank. They had to be neutralized. Since Modi's rise to power, India has lost interest in the agreement. Brazil was a particularly strategic partner because of the country's articulation – albeit a reluctant one – with a more radical alternative that had emerged in Latin America at the initiative of a number of progressive governments, notably Hugo Chávez's Venezuela. Mention should be made, in this regard, to ALBA, UNASUR and CELAC, a set of political and trade agreements aimed at freeing Latin America and the Caribbean from US century-old tutelage. The most vulnerable of the BRICS countries was Brazil, perhaps because it was also the most democratic. The process whereby it was neutralized began with the institutional coup against President Dilma Rousseff and was taken further with the illegal imprisonment of Lula da Silva and the dismantling of every single nationalist policy undertaken by the PT governments. Curiously enough, South Africa's Jacob Zuma, no doubt a corrupt leader and a BRICS enthusiast, has been replaced by Cyril Ramaphosa, one of the richest men in Africa (not as corrupt as Zuma?) and a staunch advocate of global neoliberalism. The Summit of the Americas, which took place in Lima on 13-14 April and was virtually ignored by the European media, was a most relevant geopolitical piece in this context. Venezuela's participation was vetoed, and according to *El Pais* of 15 April (Brazilian edition), the meeting signaled the demise of Bolivarian America. The strengthening of US influence in the region has become very clear, judging from the way in which the US delegation criticized China's growing influence on the continent.

For all these reasons, the war in Syria is part of a much broader geopolitical game, whose future looks very uncertain.

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