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Inaction can sometimes be more costly than action

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1 – In 2011, in the middle of the Arab Spring, the demonstrations against Bashar al-Assad’s regime turned into a blood bath and then to civil war. Five years on the conflict opposing the Free Syrian Army and the regime in Damascus has spread far beyond Syria’s borders. The Syrian desert has become a battlefield between Sunnites and Shiites, the proponents of moderate Islam and fundamentalists, Kurds and terrorist movements. Bomber planes of the international coalition led by the US are crossing paths with Russian and Turkish fighter planes. They do not necessarily share the same targets, nor the same interests. How can the internationalization of an initially local conflict be explained? Does the European Union, which is directly concerned by the terrorist threat from this region, have a role to play in the political process? If so, in what way?

In 2011 I explained that the refusal to listen to the Syrian population’s demand for democracy would simply lead both to the military and international spread of the crisis. The international escalation was systematically sought for by the Assad regime which, in order to quash contestation better, aimed to transform a domestic crisis into regional conflict. In this sense it was given substantial aid by Iran and Russia, which beyond their unconditional support to the Syrian despot, have not hesitated to engage directly in Syria, even against the rebelling population. The US however has remained passive and this has weighed on the European Union, which has been

unable to draw up an active policy to match this serious threat to the continent’s security. Five years of Western passivity are now being paid for today with jihadist terrorism and an unprecedented wave of refugees. The European Union, rather late in the day, is focusing on the symptoms rather than targeting its action against the main cause of this disaster – the Assad regime and its unpunished crimes. The solution in Syria can only be political and it can only be achieved with the departure of the dictator. Every day which delays this prospect increases the terrorist threat and swells the influx of refugees.

2 – Instability in the region has led to the deaths of nearly 250,000 people and to the displacement of nearly 4 million refugees. Most of these have been taken in by neighbouring countries. Turkey, the country to have received the most Syrian refugees (around 2 million people), seems to be the region’s mainstay. Several agreements were concluded at the end of 2015 between Ankara and Brussels for an improved management of migratory flows and support to refugees in Turkey. In exchange Ankara has demanded the relaunch of the EU membership process and financial aid of around 3 billion euro. However the Turkish authorities are playing an ambiguous game as they maintain the porosity of the Turkish-Syrian border for new recruits to Islamic State. How should we qualify Turkey’s attitude?

Again, the European Union is paying the price for its passivity and its own ambiguity. Turkey

is a vital partner in the fight to counter jihadism and the management of the refugees. But it was only in the summer and autumn of last year that the Europeans negotiated piecemeal Turkey's cooperation on these two issues in exchange for colossal financing. Rather than positioning itself as a supplicant before the Turkish authorities, who are engaged in a total war against the separatist guerrilla of the PKK (Workers' Party of Kurdistan), the European Union should have developed a relationship of trust with Ankara from the very beginning of the Syrian crisis in 2011. It should have supported Turkey's requests for Assad's departure, then for the establishment of security zones within Syrian territory, in order to make safe any refugees who were tempted by exodus. Especially, the European Union should have proactively supported the peace process between Ankara and the PKK – a process that was still very much alive just a year ago. The rising power of the Turkish ultra-nationalists, on the one hand, and the Kurdish militarists, on the other, is a disaster for Europe because this has led the former to spare the jihadists and the latter to cooperate with Assad, which has increased the terrorist threat and the flows of refugees.

3 – The Iraq-Syrian desert has become the world centre of jihadist proliferation. The Caliphate proclaimed by IS is attracting jihad candidates, including many Europeans. What is making this terrorist organisation attractive in the eyes of young people? How can it be remedied?

First we should remember that there is said to be thirty thousand foreign jihadists from the world over amongst the ranks of Daesh, the inappropriately named Islamic State. It is therefore a =global= problem even though it is so strongly affecting Europe, with some five thousand jihadists; but it is equally affecting Russia, with four thousand Russian-speakers within Daesh's ranks. Basically Daesh is attractive because it constantly seems to win, hence the importance of delivering it a significant blow, which to my mind can only be

brought by liberating Raqqa, Daesh's "capital" in Syria. Moreover, Daesh has integrated the mistakes made by al-Qaeda and is its own master, unlike the latter, which was dependent on the goodwill of the Taliban. In addition to this Syria can be easily accessed via Turkey, unlike the Afghan/Pakistan borders. Finally, the places where Daesh is fighting in Syria feature in doomsday prophecies, which have convinced a fanaticised fringe that it is fighting the battle of the end of times.

4 – Given the terrorist threat, the European Union has responded internally by stepping up police and anti-terrorist cooperation in the Schengen area. Beyond that, can we speak, from an external point of view of "convergence" on the part of the EU Member States, regarding the response to provide to Middle Eastern terrorism?

Let's be honest about this: the European Union has undertaken the minimum of what we might be entitled to expect of it, even after the barbaric attacks committed in France in January and November 2015. Brussels' administrative sluggishness cannot explain everything; unfortunately, a situation as revolutionary as the one experienced by the Arab world since 2011, appears to be beyond our political grasp. We are witnessing a strategic collapse, which is just as crucial for the security of Europe and its future as was the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. But what means are being mobilised? What vision is there of the future? What is our collective approach? These are still being sought after in a Europe that is petrified at Russia's aggressiveness and America's passivity, to the backdrop of rising xenophobic populism. All of this reminds the historian in me some of the darkest hours in our continent's history. I take every opportunity I have to drive home the point that a challenge like this calls for more Europe, contrary to the present withdrawal.

5 – The use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime in the suburbs of Damascus in August 2013 almost led to military

intervention under a triple initiative by the US, France and the UK. Given the hostility of their parliaments, Washington and London withdrew. Since the attacks on 13th November 2015 the Syrian regime no longer appears to be the focus of the foreign policies of these three countries. The international coalition is mainly undertaking bombing operations against Islamic State. Several diplomatic representatives like John Kerry and Laurent Fabius are no longer demanding the departure of the Syrian President as a pre-condition to political transition. What do you think of this development?

The climb-down of August 2013 heralded the beginning of a dramatic rise in jihadist recruitment. We must never forget the link between Assad's consolidation and the rise of the terrorist threat. Obama-style non-intervention can be as costly – at least in the long term- as over-intervention was by Bush Jr, itself the direct cause of the jihadists' establishment in the very heart of the Middle East in the wake of the 2003 American invasion of Iraq. Today France remains terribly alone in the priority it is giving to the fight against Daesh and its conviction that this battle can only be won as part of a post-Assad transition in Syria. France, deserted by its American ally in August 2013, did not receive either the support it was counting on from the USA after the tragedy of November 2015. Raqqa, the centre of terrorist planning, has to be liberated as quickly as possible and the only forces capable of this are Syrian, revolutionary, Arab and Sunni. Right now though, they are being bombed by Russia and abandoned by the US. The vital question of the moment lies in this, much more than it does in the fate of Assad.

6 – Russia is the last significant player to enter directly into the field and with Iran, it is the strongest support yet to the Assad regime. Russian interests are both economic (Syria is one of the main outlets for its arms sales) and strategic, since the military port of Tartous, the main projection base for the

Russian army in the Middle East, lies in Syria. Although it maintains that it wants to drive back Islamic State it seems that the Russian airstrikes are targeting the rebels of the Free Syrian Army, Bashar al-Assad's prime enemy. At the same time the US has trained and financed the same rebels to fight Islamic State as a priority? Do you see the signs of a new "Cold War" between the East and the West in this clash of interests?

In Syria, Putin finds himself in an ideal situation in which he has been playing at "Cold War" alone since 2011, due to America's withdrawal. He can therefore but win this parody of "Cold War", whilst weaving stories around this, which beguiles a large share of his public opinion and paralyzes European politicians. But let's make no mistake here – it was the American climb-down in Syria in August 2013 that convinced Putin that he could annex Crimea some months later, whilst the West has never believed that these two crises were inextricably linked. Since September last the Kremlin has been committed, as was George W. Bush, to a "global war on terror", which will be just as disastrous for European security. But a certain intellectual sloth is leading to the belief that "imperialism" can only be American, whilst Russia, Iran and even Assad seem to be clad in the apparel of "anti-imperialism." I hope that it is not too late to consider that the Russian imperialism now raging in Syria is just as serious a threat to peace, both to the region and the world.

7 – Considering the complex nature of the present situation, how in your opinion might the situation develop over the next few months, from a diplomatic point of view and also in the field?

At the risk of repeating myself I would like to recall that no solution to the Syrian crisis is possible without the departure of Assad. The depth and intensity of Russia and Iran's commitment to the Syrian despot prevents any prospect like this in the short term. Hence we must work, as a matter

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of urgency, on a local level, rather than in the diplomatic stratosphere. Local ceasefires can be achieved, and even relatively safe areas can be established, but this would entail the unconditional halt of Russian and government bombing. A rebel offensive against Raqqa might then be promoted from the pacified region of Aleppo. Europe would

benefit from a weakening in the jihadist threat and relief from migratory pressure. But it has to provide the means for a beneficial reversal in trend such as this. Otherwise you do not have to be a genius to see that there will be further waves of attacks and refugees. Inaction can sometimes be more costly than action.

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