The years go by and the counter continues to register an increasing number of casualties, wounded, displaced people and refugees. Statements with good intentions by the so-called ‘international community’ are accumulating. Initiatives are multiplying as well.

Is a pacific revolution turned armed confrontation finally giving way to the monster embodied by the Islamic State? Is this enough, as the international attitude seems to indicate, to forget the roots of the problem? To turn the page of the peoples and rally to the dictators?

A Forest of Concepts

Defining what is happening in Syria seems itself to provide an occasion for disagreement. Is it a revolution? A protest movement? A sectarian conflict? An armed crisis? Civil war? Something else? Every political analysis dealing with events in this country adopts one of these concepts in order to support an argument or a commitment. In reality, the Syrian slaughter, ‘in and of itself,’ can be associated with all of these concepts without a problem. And even more can be added.

The Syrians are beginning their fifth year of insecurity, uncertainty, terror, hope, disappointment, exodus and death. Millions have embarked on the road of national and international exodus, leaving a land devastated by relentless bombing carried out with all sorts of conventional and non-conventional weapons, by a dying regime whose survival is scrupulously maintained by a few acknowledged allies and many camouflaged ones. And all the while international solidarity is missing and universal conscience lies dormant.

At the onset of the Syrian revolution in March 2011, when the regime suppressed pacific protests with machine-gun fire, generating hundreds of casualties, it was rather obvious to observe that the mere mention of a number in the hundreds sufficed to shock public opinion on any platform where debate was being held on Syria. Recognised observers claimed without a shadow of a doubt that such slaughter, relatively ‘moderate,’ could not continue.

Clearly, and knowing the nature of the Syrian political system and its combination of complexity and opaqueness, serious specialists on the issue did not doubt for an instant that the atrocities would stop following an epiphany by the ’securocratic’ leadership. Possibly somewhat naively, they expected the so-called ‘international community’ – which in the 2000s had devised the concept of ‘Responsibility to Protect’ (RTP), i.e. the responsibility to protect civilians – to take a stand.

Selectiveness or Fatigue?

RTP, one of many concepts that have been but a pretext – with rare exceptions – to intervene where economic and strategic interests seem seriously threatened. The death of thousands of Syrians, however, has gone unheeded in the black boxes of the political and human consciences of the world’s ‘masters.’

It is cynically amusing to count the number of times the leaders of countries of the ‘free world’ have expressed their ‘concern’ regarding the human catastrophe taking place in Syria. The disappointment of the Syrian people, verging on disgust, was palpable
upon viewing dozens of conferences gathering what Syrians call the country’s ‘false friends.’

Insofar as international hypocrisy as seen by the victims, ‘Nobel Peace Laureate’ Barack Obama takes the prize for his famous statements concerning ‘red lines’ in the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian government. The Syrian regime has indeed used them, and they have certainly proven their ‘efficacy’ by killing hundreds of civilians in Damascus suburbs in August 2013. The international reaction, inspired by the American position: outcry, condemnation and concern!

Two main reasons have been advanced: the first is fatigue, mainly American, from foreign intervention after the Afghanistan and Iraq adventures. The second reason / pretext was fragmentation of the Syrian opposition forces.

Numerous studies have been drawn up to justify the moral void preventing political action vis-à-vis the humanitarian catastrophe in Syria. Two main reasons have been advanced: the first is fatigue, mainly American, from foreign intervention after the Afghanistan and Iraq adventures. The second reason / pretext was fragmentation of the Syrian opposition forces. Nonetheless, humanitarian action attempts to fill the void left by the non-existence of political action and save face for world leaders. Colossal figures have been announced without details of their allocation. Efforts remain limited, the victims of numerous constraints. Insofar as UN agencies, they have no mandate to work with non-state institutions and thus prefer to work with the regime in power. Hence, their aid is distributed in government-controlled areas, which are by no means those most affected by the slaughter and its repercussions.

The Real ‘Friends’ of Power

Russia and Iran's unconditional diplomatic and military support for the Syrian regime maintains the continuity of the slaughter. With regard to Russia, this support has been above all accompanied by an ‘effective’ method that was used in Chechnya and got results: massive, indiscriminate bombing of civilian towns and rebel positions with TNT barrel bombs and ballistic missiles. The results: the capital city of Grozny was erased from the map while Moscow’s ‘jackbooted power’ was preserved. Syrian cities have been entirely or partially destroyed following this school. The past few years have also seen direct, effective Iranian engagement. By subcontracting human military involvement to ‘mercenary’ Lebanese, Iraqi and Afghan militia, Iran has effectively aided the Syrian regime, deploying these mercenaries on the fronts to counter the shortage of manpower in the government’s loyalist army. In addition, billions have been invested by Teheran in the Syrian war machine, despite Iran’s catastrophic economic situation.

The reasons advanced for Russian involvement revolve around its general confrontation with the West since the collapse of the Soviet Union in areas of strategic influence and has nothing whatsoever to do with the imagined place Damascus occupies in the ‘hearts’ of the masters of the Kremlin. For Iran, strategic interests are combined with a (political-confessional) ambition of regional scope, together with the possibility of retaining effective instruments of negotiation with Western ‘friends / enemies’. And finally, the desire to safeguard Iranian diplomacy’s armed branch in the region – Hizb Allah (the Party of God) – until it completes its mission.

Inevitable Radicalism?

The growing frustration of a large part of the population in the face of international indifference has opened the doors to a massive militarisation of the protest movement. In addition to the soldiers having decided to defect from the loyalist army in order to preserve human lives and stop killing their fellow countrymen, civilians have also taken up arms for various reasons: to defend their families and their towns and avenge their loved ones who were victims of indiscriminate abuse.

This militarisation has not been accompanied by the necessary, effective political framework. Its massive expansion has permitted regional powers to influence armed groups without allowing the latter to attain their initial goal: defending civilians and establishing rule of law for all citizens.
Like Russia and Iran, allies to the regime, not all the countries involved in arming the rebel groups in Syria adhere to democratic values. With the exception of Turkey, which has a democratic system, albeit questionable, democracy is missing in the Gulf States claiming to support the Syrian revolution. Support thus remains relative on all levels. Moreover, it is riddled with conditions, ranging from demands for ideological allegiance, often tending towards extremism, to political manoeuvring on the regional chessboard.

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The abandonment felt by the majority of Syrians has sent a good number of them to the ranks of the most radical groups among the rebels, not to mention the terrorist organisation, Daesh. It is therefore rather regrettable, if not ignoble, to hear recognised observers say that the Syrian revolution has been dominated by Islamists from early on.

The regime realised the benefits it could reap from the rise of radicalism by stoking the fires of ignorance and obscurantism. Everything was thus done by the regime or its regional ‘enemies’ to ensure that radicalism would pervade the arena. And with international neglect, the circle is complete.

Must We Choose Between a Rock and a Hard Place?

In the West, with Daesh’s astonishing advance on the ground, the discourse according to which the Bashar al-Assad regime would be the lesser evil is on the rise today. Among entire sectors of opinion, the Damascus dictator passes as the last bastion protecting minorities in general and the endangered Christian minority in particular.

This perception arises from a strategy that gets results; that of a regime that has always known how to skilfully play the cards of the divisions between the various components of Syrian society and use religion for purposes of domination. Far from protecting minorities, the regime has chained them to its own fate. In a society where freedom of expression is lacking and civic rights do not exist, leaders began by using all the pieces to create a religious hierarchy – both Christian and Muslim – that is under their thumb. The appointment of muftis and bishops was subject to approval by the all-powerful Syrian intelligence services.

Westerners are fixated on Daesh, on the one hand, and on Christian persecution on the other. Christians are indeed in danger, but no more than the rest of the population. By lending excessive media exposure to their persecution, they are separated from the other victims, contributing to reinforcing the feeling that they are set apart and constitute a privileged caste. In Syria, that was the government’s goal: to divide communities to better control them, even if it meant setting them against one another.

Westerners are thus gradually sliding towards a ‘reasonable’ rapprochement in order to eventually collaborate with the regime against terrorism. A trend that reveals a terrible ignorance of the real situation on the ground and the complexity of the regional socio-political arena. Taking advantage of this atmosphere, elected officials of the French Republic have broken the wall of shame and visited the dictator in Damascus. Some, certainly very weak in historical knowledge, have even evoked the alliance with Stalin to fight Hitler!

The ‘neither Assad nor Daesh’ advocates, extolled by French diplomacy, seem to inconvenience these elected officials and another sector of the European political class who have lucrative interests in the regime or its supporters. After thousands of victims, they advocate resuming contact with a regime whose entire body of work has been nothing but conducive to the development of numerous terrorist groups in the region since the 1970s. At the very moment when Western journalists, politicians or diplomats are meeting with Bashar al-Assad, barrel bombs continue to take the lives of Syrians just a few steps away from them.
**Daesh as ‘Saviour!’**

With the rise of the Islamic State, i.e. Daesh, we are experiencing a new phenomenon consisting of a false Western involvement embodied by a military coalition. Spectacular, ‘Hollywood-style’ air strikes have been made against positions of this terrorist group in Iraq and Syria; an intervention that appears colossal, done by a number of powerful countries with highly sophisticated military equipment. The results, however, fall short of expectations. For instance, they took four months to overcome Daesh terrorists in Kobane, a small Syrian town on the border with Turkey.

Hence the spirit of conspiracy, highly developed in the East, cannot but flourish in the face of this unsatisfying and ‘unprofitable’ military operation. Add to that the successive defeats of Iraqi forces in the face of terrorist advances in Iraq. Simple observers question the billions invested in the training and equipment of these forces.

It is thus relatively legitimate for certain observers to consider this military involvement simply as a way of clearing themselves for having attempted nothing. These strikes, above all when they cause the death of dozens of civilians, only bolster the terrorists. Their advances on several fronts attest to the failure of the operation and reveal a complete absence of any strategy whatsoever, whether military or political, on all fronts and more specifically in the Syrian arena.

Unwittingly, of course, Daesh benefits a number of actors in the Syrian arena: first of all, the regime, despite its consecutive defeats, alleges to be the lesser evil and the only one capable of handling this terrorism arising from its policies. By the same token, it is the Western champions of indifference who find in Daesh’s existence an excuse to continue doing nothing. They hide behind their perpetual hesitation, attributing their non-support to moderate Syrian rebels to the ruthless terrorist danger. The third parties benefiting from the situation are regional forces that continue to use the Syrian arena as a site for confrontation by proxy between them.

Sometimes there is a hint of colonial discourse in the analysis of the Arab Revolutions. Many imply that our mindset is incompatible with democracy. And that it is thus better to leave dictators in place to govern. What contempt for the Other!

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**In the Face of Terrorism and Indifference, Civil Society**

With the media focusing on the recognised terror of terrorist groups and nearly systematically concealing the real life of Syrians and their daily suffering under the bombings and sieges by the regime, the image of the Syrian situation remains distorted after all these years.

Violence shocks consciences more and raises network’s audience ratings. On the television set, the actions of Daesh and threatened minorities are discussed, but never the struggles of the new civil society representing the ensemble of citizens without distinction.

The media also have a tendency to downplay the importance of actions by young Syrians (citizen journalists) who, on a shoestring and risking their lives for their war-torn country, continue to inform the world on the situation of the Syrian people, caught between the loyalist army assisted by the death squads, and the ISIL jihadists. Thus, local councils have been established in various towns that escape the control of the regime and operate on extremely limited resources but great willpower. These councils organise municipal services, education, the management of citizen’s everyday lives and medical services. It is no coincidence that their centres are the most targeted by loyalist air strikes.

On the television set, the actions of Daesh and threatened minorities are discussed, but never the struggles of the new civil society representing the ensemble of citizens without distinction

These past years of suffering have seen the emergence of a ‘genuine’ civil society – a positive element that has developed over the course of this lethal wait. Four decades of dictatorship had nearly wiped out the concept of civil society. The public space was entirely taken over by the regime. The power in Damascus had replaced civil society organisations with ‘popular’ organisations in the manner of North Korea in order to supervise all segments of society.
By way of example, in March 2011, on the eve of the revolt, there were some hundred civil society organisations active, most of them controlled by the regime. Today, as we enter the fifth year of the revolution, there are nearly 5,000. Though a good many of them operate from abroad for reasons of security and feasibility, they contribute moral and material support to those who remain in the country. Thus, for instance, the cultural scene is experiencing a significant burst of creativity. The number of artists, writers, cartoonists and creators in general placing their art at the service of this new civil society has soared. A democratic movement is certainly underway, despite its shortcomings. The Syrian people, after decades of dictatorship, are learning the art of political debate. The international community should demonstrate courage and support this movement.

**Religious Dictatorship is the Legitimate Child of Political Dictatorship**

Although Daesh is more frightening, with its decapitation of hostages and kidnappings of minorities, it is important to emphasise that the majority of victims in the Syrian arena are caused by the regime’s air strikes, the famine due to sieges of cities and villages, and the torture suffered by tens of thousands of political prisoners. The Daesh terrorists have indeed grasped the ‘art’ of communication and have succeeded in disseminating their images to spread terror. Paradoxically, the Syrian regime has likewise grasped the same ‘art’ from the outset of the revolt, but in the opposite sense. By preventing media coverage of the first demonstrations and then targeting the lives of citizen journalists, it has consistently tried to camouflage its repressive action. Religious obscurantism has prospered under the control of a regime that some continue to consider secular. When protesters attacked the Danish embassy in Damascus after the publication of the cartoons depicting the Prophet in early 2006, it was clear that the incident was orchestrated by the government. At the time, gatherings of more than five people were prohibited, yet the protesters managed to scale the embassy walls and set fire to it! A solidarity orchestrated by regimes to divert the inhabitants’ attention from their suffering and the corruption and despotism of the system in which they lived. The authorities prohibited any informed intellectual debate. It was also the regime that developed jihadi networks to fight in neighbouring countries. These organisations were deprived of all national references. On the other hand, their religious references were strengthened. Today, however, religion is used by criminals of all persuasions, whether secular or religious.

Assad contributed to the creation of Daesh by releasing jihadists from prison that he had previously sent to Iraq to fight the Americans in 2000. In September 2011, he negotiated with them. Some of them, who were sentenced to death, testified that the regime had asked them to infiltrate the revolution and lend it a confessional and radical aspect. Daesh has always fought against those fighting the Syrian regime. The regime, moreover, left the organisation alone until 11 September 2014, when Daesh invaded Mosul, in Iraq. Then Syrian aviation bombed them to show the international community that the regime was fighting them too.

The period of Assad junior, since 2000, has shown a false will to modernise and develop, multiplying promises and raising hopes among young people. Years have gone by without the Syrians seeing any changes, neither in their standard of living nor their freedoms. Many initiatives by intellectuals, both collective and individual, have been curtailed by intimidation and arrests. ‘Undermining the resolve of the nation’ is an accusation frequently used by the courts to incarcerate opponents.

Syrians, in their complex diversity, never dreamed of violence or radical change. Their demands were ‘simple’ and they dreamed of the universally recognised principles of a decent life: lifting of the state of emergency, free elections, a multiparty system, a free civil society, the release of political prisoners, freedom of the press and the struggle against the prevailing endemic corruption. It would seem this is too much to ask and the cost is in human lives too high while the ‘free’ world ponders how many angels can dance on the head of a pin.